

Virginia Establishes a Public Health Institute

Site Profile

In the mid-1990s, signs of trouble had emerged in Virginia's health care system:

- The state's overall health status had fallen from 10th in the nation to 19th.
- The state was losing \$2.8 billion annually in direct medical costs and indirect costs related to diabetes and spending \$300 million per year to cover treatment for preventable injuries.
- More than one million Virginians did not have basic health insurance.

In order to strengthen the state's public health infrastructure, the Virginia Department of Health and the Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association partnered to manage Virginia *Turning Point*. The Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association acted as the fiscal agent. "Having the fiscal agent outside government gave us a certain amount of agility," said Christopher Bailey, senior vice president of the Hospital & Healthcare Association. "We didn't have to go by government purchasing rules and regulations. When we needed something, we could go get it."

Assembling community partners was the first step in Virginia *Turning Point*. Key partners included:

- Baptist General Convention of Virginia
- Virginia Chamber of Commerce
- Virginia Health Care Foundation.

Other community partners represented academia, the business community, the faith community, the health care delivery system, state and local agencies and nonprofit organizations.

The Kellogg community partnerships were:

- New Century *Turning Point* Partnership, Roanoke, Va.
- Norfolk *Turning Point* Partnership, Norfolk, Va.
- Prince William Partnerships for Health, Woodbridge, Va.

Representatives of all the partners formed a steering committee to develop the state's public health improvement plan. The plan included an assessment of the economics of disease prevention, a community health needs assessment and strategies to enhance public awareness.

To implement the plan and institutionalize Virginia *Turning Point*, project staff established the Virginia Center for Healthy Communities, in 2001 as an independent, nonprofit public health institute dedicated to improving the health of Virginia's communities. The center fosters collaboration and partnership among public health entities, health care providers and community stakeholders. Members of the Virginia *Turning Point* steering committee became the board of directors for the new organization.

During *Turning Point*, the Virginia Center for Healthy Communities focused on creating a new community health data tool and reaching out to the business community.

Projects included:

• *Virginia Atlas of Community Health:* This free Web-based tool is designed to help communities write grants, assess needs and evaluate programs.

The *Atlas* provides local data on population demographics, economics and health status, including numbers of births and deaths, hospitalization rates and health insurance coverage. Users can quickly generate reports and maps to evaluate the health of their communities at the local and ZIP code levels.

"The *Virginia Atlas of Community Health* has changed the way individuals and organizations in Virginia look at health data," said Jeff Wilson, the former strategic planning coordinator for Virginia *Turning Point* and director of the Virginia Center for Healthy Communities.

"Before *Turning Point*, many small, not-for-profit organizations did not have access to data about the health of their communities. Contracting with a consulting firm to develop the reports and maps was beyond their ability financially. Now, these organizations can effectively assess community health and justify why resources are needed to address a community health concern."

- A Web-based health improvement program planning guide, including conducting a needs assessment, and designing, implementing and evaluating programs.
- Health improvement activities in partnership with the business community. The Virginia Center for Healthy Communities sponsored three health-related roundtables to discuss employee wellness, rising health insurance rates and future trends in workplace-based prevention programs. About 100 people attended each roundtable, including business leaders, public health officials, health care providers, insurers, elected officials and representatives of local government agencies.

The center also worked with a local Chamber of Commerce to initiate workplace diabetes screenings.

The Virginia Center for Healthy Communities has maintained the *Virginia Atlas of Community Health* and other resources on health improvement planning on its Web site since Virginia *Turning Point* ended in 2004. Center staff continued to add data to the *Atlas* with funding from the Virginia Consortium for Health Philanthropy through mid-2007.

The *Atlas* served as a prototype for Virginia Performs, a statewide performance accountability system that creates a framework for state agencies to establish and measure objectives for programs and services. Virginia Performs began in 2006.

As of September 2007, the Virginia Department of Health was working with local communities and health departments to reduce infant deaths and chronic disease. Other projects were underway with funding from the National Governors Association, and in partnership with the Virginia Department of Education and school districts, to promote physical fitness in low-income neighborhoods.