

VIEWPOINTS

Addressing Social Determinants of Health

North Carolina Medical Society: Leading on Health

For more than a decade, The Physicians Foundation has been in the vanguard of recognizing and acting on the challenges presented by social determinants of health (SDOH). As noted in The Physicians Foundation's [overview](#) of the topic, SDOH include patients' socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood and physical environment, employment, nutrition/food security, access to health care and social support networks, all of which have a major influence on individuals' health and therefore, the cost of health care in America. The Foundation supports the work of numerous organizations and encourages collaborations between stakeholders when possible to address SDOH. Among the groups that have taken a leadership position in addressing SDOH is the North Carolina Medical Society (NCMS)—a current Board Member of The Physicians Foundation as well as an original supporter to the creation of the Foundation. The following case study showcases how the NCMS is "leading on health" by integrating SDOH into its approach to health care.

For more information on the Foundation's work on SDOH, [click here](#).



NCMS is North Carolina's oldest professional organization, now counting nearly 12,000 members and a network of influential partners and relationships extending from county medical societies and specialty societies across the state, to the state legislature and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The organization's mission, "to provide leadership in medicine by uniting, serving and representing physicians and their health care teams to enhance the health of North Carolinians" reflects the Society's firm commitment to its physicians and their patients.

As health care increasingly moves toward value-based care, physicians and other stakeholders are recognizing that SDOH – socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood and physical environment, employment, nutrition/food security and social support networks – directly impact health outcomes and health care costs.

NORTH CAROLINA'S FOCUS ON SDOH:

- North Carolina is incorporating SDOH as a central pillar to the State's Medicaid reform efforts through **Medicaid managed care** (including quality measures and financial incentives in a phased approach).
- North Carolina's 1115 Medicaid waiver enables the State to implement a five-year \$650M **Healthy Opportunities Pilot program**, which will test the impact of using Medicaid dollars to pay for evidence-based, non-medical interventions related to housing, food, transportation and interpersonal safety to Medicaid enrollees.



Through intensive strategy sessions with its Board and senior leadership, NCMS identified embedding SDOH within financial incentives and quality measures as a critical focus area against which to deploy its assets and operationalize its leadership moving forward.

In recent years, this realization accelerated in North Carolina with the State's move to Medicaid Managed Care, which precipitated a significant focus on addressing SDOH (referred to as "healthy opportunities").

From "Fighting for Doctors" to "Leading on Health"

Concurrent with the DHHS move to Medicaid Managed Care, physicians and NCMS' leaders began to recognize that the presence of SDOH were fueling physician burnout, creating economic risk for physician practices under value-based payment models and driving poor health outcomes for North Carolinians.

By embracing a directional shift from "fighting for doctors" to "leading on health" throughout the organization – and leveraging all its assets, efforts and relationships to achieve this agenda – NCMS is making improving health core to its identity. While SDOH are gaining currency across the health care sector, few public or private entities have made improving health the fundamental lens through which they view all their efforts. In this regard, NCMS is leading the way.

As a result of this enhanced mission, and in conjunction with **The Health Initiative** (THI)—a long-time partner of The Physicians Foundation, NCMS is operationalizing this fundamental shift from "fighting for doctors" to "leading on health" through:

MEDICAID MANAGED CARE LEADERSHIP

Recognizing North Carolina's shift to Medicaid Managed Care will have significant economic and care delivery implications for practicing physicians, the NCMS made the case to DHHS and the General Assembly that Medicaid transformation must be designed to address the impact of SDOH on outcomes and costs in order to support physicians in delivering high-quality care.

In early 2019, after partnering with Centene – a leading national Medicaid Managed Care Organization (MCO) – and the North Carolina Community Health Center Association, the NCMS joint venture, Carolina Complete Health, was selected to be the only physician-led MCO in North Carolina. By incorporating a targeted focus on addressing SDOH for Medicaid patients into its bid and planning, Carolina Complete Health is now positioned to be a leader in the State's implementation of Medicaid Managed Care for years to come.

PHYSICIAN & PATIENT VOICES

The NCMS partnered with THI to conduct several focus groups with their physician members to collect data on the physicians' perspectives of SDOH. This initial research found that 100% of physician participants indicated that some, many, or all of their patients are affected by social conditions. As NCMS updated its Leadership College and Health Care Leadership and Management courses, and mindful of the comments it received from physicians about SDOH, the NCMS is now providing ongoing education and support for physicians to lead in population health and accountable care models. This continues to increase the number of physicians implementing projects focused on SDOH in their practices.

PARTNERSHIPS & INVESTMENTS

NCMS leadership is also reflected in its efforts to partner with stakeholders throughout North Carolina on integrating SDOH and a broader notion of health into the fundamentals of health



system reform. This work includes leading a **consortium of accountable care organizations (ACOs)** and key institutional partnerships, which provides an opportunity to advance the development of quality measures and financial incentives to address SDOH in value-based payment models. The NCMS directs a coalition focused on linking community-based organizations and health care practitioners, and it was an early funder of the first statewide coordinated care network, which electronically connects patients to community resources and enables feedback to care providers.

Moving Forward: A Model for State Medical Society Leadership on Health

While the importance of SDOH is gaining currency across health care, the national health care debate still focuses on mechanisms to expand coverage, as opposed to discussions that focus on improving health as the fundamental lens through which efforts are viewed.

North Carolina's physicians, like those from across the country, bear the burden through worse quality outcomes and associated financial penalties, physician burnout and market

consolidation when SDOH are not addressed. By making SDOH a focus of its work and through conversations with the region's dominant payers, NCMS is driving recognition that SDOH are a critical focus area against which all stakeholders must unite if North Carolina is going to be able to deliver care in a manner that helps patients, efficiently maximize resources and achieve a healthier state.

While longitudinal data showing the success of NCMS' efforts will take time, initial feedback from physicians and other stakeholders indicates they are on the correct path. As part of its work on SDOH, The Physicians Foundation and its partners are committed to sharing the success of the NCMS with other state medical societies.

State medical societies interested in learning more, please contact: PFmedia@jpa.com.

