

Tarheel Footprints in Healthcare

Recognizing unusual and often unsung contributions of individual citizens who have made healthcare for North Carolinians more accessible and of higher quality

Recognizing Tom Vitaglione, MPH **Senior Fellow, Action for Children North Carolina** *(formerly known as the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute)*



Tom Vitaglione, MPH

Anyone who has worked on statewide issues related to child health in North Carolina over the past thirty-five years could not have gone without some contact or communication with Tom Vitaglione. He has played a key role in shaping a host of programs that have made a tremendous impact on the health and well being of North Carolina's children and youth.

Tom chose to start his professional career in North Carolina after receiving his master's degree in public health from Columbia University and spending time in Malawi with the Peace Corps. Over his more than three decades of state service through the Children and Youth Section in the Division of Public Health, his leadership and accomplishments are widely recognized. For example, he was a principal architect of North Carolina's Children's Health Insurance Program (NC Health Choice) and helped to assemble a task force of 75 leading experts with the North Carolina Institute of Medicine to prepare an outline of the proposed program. The result was legislation eventually enacted to extend coverage to over 75,000 previously uninsured children. This number has since been extended by the North Carolina General Assembly to include more than 125,000 children.

Tom was also one of the leaders whose vision created the North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force. He continues to play a strong role as Co-Chair, a position to which he was appointed by Governor Michael Easley. In this role he has brought public, media, and legislative attention to a number of child mortality issues. The Child Fatality Task Force compiles annual statistics on a wide spectrum of risks to child health and safety, then partners with the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and Action for Children North Carolina to release them each year. The *North Carolina Child Health Report Card*, a visual measure of our progress on key health indicators, has been released for a decade thanks to Tom's leadership.

Further, Tom has been a tireless advocate for stricter automobile child restraint laws, for the regulation of child safety in the operation of all terrain vehicles, for graduated driver's licenses, the dangers of home fires for children and infants, the reduction of child exposure to lead, programs to address the problems of child maltreatment and abuse, and the active role of state government in the collection, analysis and publication of child health, injury, and fatality statistics.

Leah Devlin, North Carolina State Health Director, comments that "Tom Vitaglione has always been a fearless champion for improving children's health and well being. He has been a strong leader for many years from within the public health system and he brings that same energy and advocacy in his current role in the private sector. Generations of children and their families in North Carolina continue to be well served by the passionate and committed Tom V."

Since his retirement from state government, Tom Vitaglione has been a Senior Fellow at Action for Children North Carolina. In addition to his role as a Fellow and as Co-Chair of the Child Fatality Task Force, Tom and his wife have found time to invest their energy and talents in developing (and fundraising for) the Malawi Children's Village, a multifaceted program serving more than 3,500 AIDS orphans in 37 villages in the southern region of this small country in East Africa.

Dr. Jonathan Sher, former President of the NC Child Advocacy Institute, had this to say about him: "Tom is the most universally respected and beloved person that I ever have known personally (having only met the Dalai Lama in passing). This is even more impressive given that, as an Italian Catholic from New York City, he started with three strikes against him in the North Carolina of three decades ago. When I grow up, I'd be delighted to turn out just like the real-life Tom Terrific!"

The *North Carolina Medical Journal* is proud to recognize the career and continuing accomplishments of this tireless child health leader in our state. We celebrate our good fortune that Tom Vitaglione chose North Carolina as "home" and thank him for his ongoing efforts on the part of the children of our state.