

# Spotlight on the Safety Net

*A Community Collaboration*

## Wayne Initiative for School Health

The Wayne Initiative for School Health (WISH) seeks to improve adolescent health in Wayne County by offering comprehensive health services to middle and high school students at onsite school-based health centers. Some parents bring their children to the pediatrician for all recommended health services; however, for a variety of psychosocial and economic reasons, some school-aged children do not often come to the pediatrician for regular health supervision visits [1]. In 1997, The Duke Endowment approached Wayne Memorial Hospital about a grant opportunity aimed to provide children with health care services regardless of whether they had insurance and to help enroll eligible children into Medicaid or Health Choice. At this time, Wayne County had the 9th highest number of uninsured school-aged children in North Carolina [1].

The community's solution was to offer user-friendly comprehensive health services for school-aged children through the Wayne Initiative for School Health (WISH) program, which established school-based health centers in Wayne County Public Schools. Prior to establishing this program, a planning team gathered community input, considered the available community resources, and sought additional funding opportunities; the WISH program was then established as a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. With funding from both The Duke Endowment and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the WISH program began with 2 school-based health centers at Brogden Middle School and Wayne Middle High Academy.

The school-based health centers are open during school hours and are staffed by nurses, physician's assistants, and nurse practitioners who provide on-site comprehensive primary care to enrolled students. At the schools with WISH centers, 93% of students have obtained the parental consent necessary to receive services from WISH staff, and 88% of students use the center in a given year. No students are turned away due to lack of health insurance or lack of ability to pay, and stu-

dents' families are given the opportunity to meet with North Carolina Department of Social Services (DSS) eligibility specialists at the school in order to help eligible students enroll in Medicaid or Health Choice.

The WISH centers' staff members are able to provide many of the recommended services for adolescent health supervision as recommended by the 3rd edition of the Bright Futures guidelines. In addition to offering health assessments, immunizations, and dental screenings, partnering organizations such as Wayne County Health Department provide counselors and health educators to discuss relevant issues such as nutrition, physical activity, substance use, and sexual health. Any services recommended by the Bright Futures guidelines that staff members cannot provide are available via referral. For example, mental health services are provided by a handful of local mental health agencies that send counselors to the center.

Between 2000 and 2006, the WISH program opened 4 additional centers at Dillard Middle School, Mt. Olive Middle School, Goldsboro High School, and Southern Wayne High School. The WISH centers now serve 6 of the 31 public schools in Wayne County. All 6 WISH centers are credentialed by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

In order to most effectively reach and serve uninsured adolescents, schools are selected for the program based on determined need for a school-based health center. A combination of middle and high schools has been selected to best address the needs of the early adolescent population and to allow for continuity of treatment. Wayne County

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also has a school nurse program, which concentrates staff in elementary schools. Although school nurses are more limited in the services they can provide, the school nurse program and the WISH program together help to provide health care to Wayne County youth between kindergarten and grade 12.

The WISH program is an exemplary demonstration of how community collaboration can improve accessibility and quality of child health services in a community. The WISH program has an impressive number of partners including Wayne Memorial Hospital, Wayne County Schools, the Wayne County Health Department, Goldsboro Pediatrics, Eastpointe Mental Health, Wayne Department of Social Services, Communities in Schools, Wayne County Commissioners, and the Goldsboro City Council. The collaboration includes both funding support and in-kind contributions. Wayne County Schools provide the space for the centers, as well as ongoing maintenance of the facilities. The centers' staff members are employed through Wayne Memorial Hospital in order to provide them with affordable benefits. Local pediatricians provide medical oversight and on-call services to students 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Shared electronic

medical records enable continuity of care for students seen in either the school health centers or Goldsboro Pediatrics' offices. And, as previously mentioned, the local DSS and the Wayne County Health Department both regularly offer the services of their staff.

Schools with WISH clinics have seen increased insurance enrollment, decreased teen pregnancy, decreased absentee rates, higher end-of-grade test scores, and better management of students' diabetes and asthma. The successful results achieved by the WISH centers would not have been possible without this strong collaborative effort on behalf of Wayne County's adolescents. With the goal of keeping their kids healthy, Wayne County has united to make WISH school-based health centers a community success. **NCMJ**

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#### **Acknowledgment**

Potential conflicts of interest. A.M.W. has no relevant conflicts of interest.

#### **References**

1. Tayloe D Jr. The role of the primary care physician in school health: the Wayne County experience. *N C Med J.* 2008; 69(6): 487-489.