

# Healthy Communities Create Healthy Citizens

Collaborating to Improve Community Health

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Jersey City Medical Center hosts a Happy Hearts Dance Competition.

**E**very municipality in New Jersey has its own style, its own local culture, and its own way of doing things. The Mayors Wellness Campaign works with nearly 380 New Jersey municipalities, and while we have certainly found that no two towns are the same, we have also seen that towns—whether in Sussex or Salem, Hudson or Cumberland—face very similar challenges and can learn from one another when working to tackle them.



Inspira Health Network hosts a Family Fun Day.

Recognizing these common challenges and building on successful collaboration with the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute (NJHCQI), United Health Foundation, established by UnitedHealth Group in 1999 as a not-for-profit, private foundation dedicated to improving health and health care, has funded the Healthy Communities Create Healthy Citizens (HCHC) projects in Jersey City, Trenton, and Cumberland County to help address pressing health challenges in these communities.

These common challenges are apparent when examining the Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs) conducted by hospitals and health departments

across the state. As a direct result of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, tax-exempt hospitals are required to complete CHNAs every three years. Not only do CHNAs provide detailed information about community health and identify key areas of concern, they are also useful tools for quantifying a community's progress in meeting their unique health care goals and for laying out strategies for health improvement. Though they span the state, Jersey City, Trenton, and Cumberland County identified similar key health priorities in their most recent CHNAs. The need for improved health literacy and chronic disease management, and the need for increased access to healthy lifestyle initiatives, stood out in all three CHNAs.

**MAKING STRIDES** Jersey City, Trenton, and Cumberland County have developed and implemented innovative programs that are making great strides in addressing the most pressing health challenges in their communities, but with limited staffing and financial resources their sustainability was questionable. The United Health Foundation-funded HCHC project will financially assist the three communities in making their limited staff time stretch further through collaborative community calendars and technology solutions that connect individuals to social services in their vicinity.

## Healthier Ranking

The patterns that emerged from the Jersey City, Trenton, and Cumberland County CHNAs were reinforced by the United Health Foundation's 2015 America's Health Rankings® Annual Report, which shows that national rates of diabetes and obesity are still rising, and that many premature deaths are preventable through lifestyle modifications.

Yet the report shows that in New Jersey, like in other states, local efforts to improve health are gradually having a positive impact on residents. For instance, in the past year physical activity has increased among adults, and premature death rates have decreased. Overall, New Jersey ranks as the 11th healthiest state in the nation.

Addressing the health of a town can present major challenges, especially when large and diverse populations have poor access to high-quality food and health care. Collaboration between community leaders and health care providers is a first step on the road toward improving wellness—and maybe even breaking into the top 10 healthiest states in the country. It is this type of passionate involvement in community health initiatives that helps ensure program sustainability.

The project also seeks to support educational opportunities for residents of Jersey City, Trenton, and Cumberland County by funding educational materials in languages unique to each community's populations, and by promoting the availability of actionable health information to support lifelong learning about good health practices and behaviors.

Partners from both the health care and public sectors in Jersey City, Trenton, and Cumberland County have come together to develop strategies to tackle these health issues. To enhance and complement their efforts, the three-year HCHC project funded by United Health Foundation will work with Jersey City, Trenton, and Cumberland County to develop sustainable programs that address the common challenges identified in their CHNAs.

• **EXPAND ACCESS TO HEALTHY LIFESTYLE INITIATIVES** Opportunities for residents to exercise and cook with healthy ingredients can be hard to come by when parents feel it is unsafe for their children to play outdoors, and when the cost of produce is too high. One of Jersey City's top priorities is increasing access to healthy food. The city conducts several creative and successful programs to achieve this goal, including Cooking Matters at the Store, which is a supermarket tour hosted by the Jersey City Department of Health and Human Services. The Cooking Matters at the Store program teaches participants how to purchase healthy food at a reasonable price and to better understand the nutritional difference between canned and fresh produce. Participants receive a \$10 gift card upon completion of the program to purchase healthy foods. Nearly 2,000 residents have participated to date.

• **IMPROVE HEALTH LITERACY** The more knowledgeable NJ residents are about the health care system and their own health conditions, the easier it is for them to ask health care professionals relevant questions and manage their lifestyle. The city of Trenton makes a multi-pronged effort to improve health literacy by holding health literacy and cultural competency workshops,

## Healthy Communities

lunchtime cooking demonstrations, and health fairs in residential buildings. The city holds weekly farmers markets and recently re-opened a walking trail at Trinity Cathedral in the city's West Ward.

• **IMPROVE CHRONIC DISEASE MANAGEMENT** Chronic disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S. Yet the prevention of chronic diseases, like diabetes and



Capital Health hosts a health fair showcasing healthy foods.

heart disease, can prove a monumental challenge without access to preventive

care and healthy lifestyle initiatives. In 2011, Cumberland County was ranked 21st out of 21 counties in NJ on the Robert Wood Johnson County Health Rankings and Roadmap. This sparked the development of the Cumberland-Salem-Gloucester Health Alliance whose mission is to improve health outcomes, including chronic disease outcomes, throughout the region. The Alliance runs highly coordinated programs like Live Healthy Vineland and Healthy Cumberland, which address health and wellness issues where people are the workplace, school, corner store, and home.

**HEALTHY PARTNERSHIP** “UnitedHealth Group is grateful for the opportunity to partner with the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute to improve the health and health care of the communities we serve,” said Scott Waulters, CEO of UnitedHealthcare Community Plan in New Jersey, a UnitedHealth Group company. “We look forward to seeing the positive impact NJHCQI programs will have on Jersey City, Trenton, and Cumberland County residents’ health and quality of life.”

Not only can municipalities around the state harness the results of their CHNAs to create strategies for community improvement, CHNAs can also be referenced for grant opportunities. NJHCQI hopes to add long-term support to community health improvement efforts already underway in Jersey City, Trenton, and Cumberland County by harnessing partnerships between municipal leaders and community providers, and making essential health resources available to residents in the communities that need it most. 💡

@ To learn more about Healthy Communities create Healthy Citizens, contact Janan Dave or Deborah Brodsky at 609-452-5980. For the full report, visit [americashealthrankings.org/reports/Annual](http://americashealthrankings.org/reports/Annual)

# The Power of Collaboration



## SUMMERTIME IS FUN TIME FOR CHILDREN AND SAFETY MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Children eager to enjoy summer are enrolling in day camps and recreation programs run by towns throughout New Jersey.

“A great way to open the summer season is to make certain everyone is trained properly. And MEL has great training available,” said Carol Byrne, Tenafly Tax Assessor, who serves as Chair of the MEL Safety & Education Committee.

Registration is easy. Courses can be taken online at any time and address important safety issues: prevention of sexual abuse and bullying, safety on the playground, on trips, during transportation and in aquatics programs – and for professional lifeguards, a focus on responsibilities and skills needed on the pool deck.

“The MEL Safety Institute training is so convenient and really covers the key issues so well. I use it to make certain all our camp counselors understand their responsibility for making safety their top priority,” said Sheri Silversmith, Acting Director, Recreation and Senior Services, Jackson Township, a member of the Ocean County Municipal JIF.

The training programs are available at no charge to MEL/JIF members from the MEL Safety Institute at [www.njmel.org](http://www.njmel.org).

*The power of collaboration: ensuring accountable, quality efforts to promote safety throughout New Jersey.*

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