

# NC DHHS COVID-19 Secretary Cohen Legislative Update

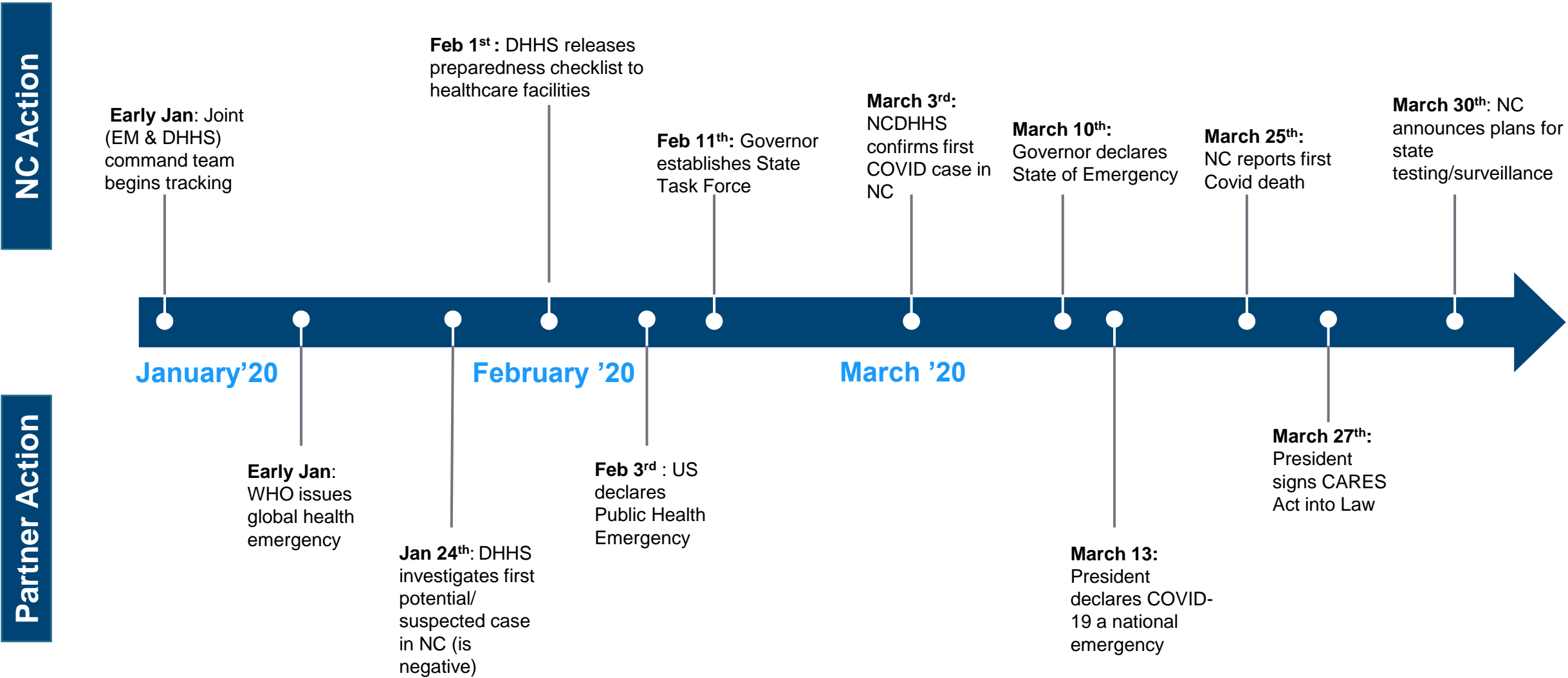
December 7, 2021



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
**HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES**



# LOOKING BACK: DEALING WITH THE THREAT OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC



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## Strengths as We Faced the Threat

- NC had a strong **flu surveillance and communicable disease systems** to leverage
- Focus on **whole-person health** allowed us to address the range of impacts on people
- **Consolidated state-level HHS** agency positioned us to provide the support needed
- Strong working partnerships with **Emergency Management** (hurricane response)
- Strong relationships with major **hospital systems**


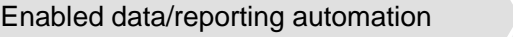
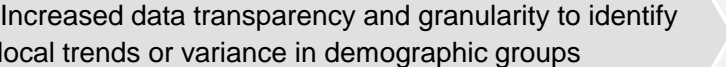

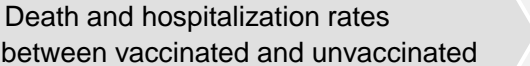

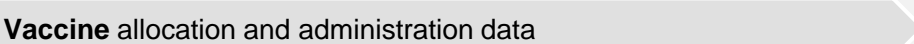
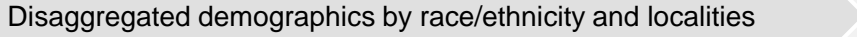


## Challenges as We Faced the Threat

- **Data infrastructure** not equipped for handling massive increase in facilities reporting to public health (faxed lab results)
- **New virus** with limited scientific information and tools
- No coordinated **federal response**
- **Supply constraints** of ventilators, PPE, and testing supplies
- Less healthy population (64.7% of population with risk factors for severe illness)
- High rate of uninsurance (9<sup>th</sup> in nation)\*
- **Underinvestment** in public health
- Limited healthcare **access in rural areas**

# HOW WE GOT TO PRESENT DAY

Over time, NCDHHS developed new ways of measuring the effectiveness of COVID prevention efforts and viral spread

Widespread Availability?	Pre-Pandemic Winter 2020	Limited Tools Spring 2020	Pre-Vaccine Summer-Fall 2020	Vaccine Winter 2020 – Spring 2021	Delta Variant Summer-Fall 2021
PPE	X	X	✓	✓	✓
Testing	X	X	✓	✓	✓
Vaccines	X	X	X	✓	✓
Treatment	X	X	X	X	✓
<div>  Manual collection for high level case and hospitalization data           <div>  Enabled data/reporting automation           <div>  Increased data transparency and granularity to identify local trends or variance in demographic groups           <div>  <div>  Death and hospitalization rates between vaccinated and unvaccinated           <div>  <div>  Vaccine allocation and administration data           <div>  Disaggregated demographics by race/ethnicity and localities           </div> </div> </div> </div> </div> </div> </div></div>					
<p><b>As the pandemic evolved, new tools, infrastructure and policy were developed and operationalized.</b></p>					
Prevention and Treatment Tools		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stay at home</li> <li>COVID-like illness surveillance</li> <li>Hospital capacity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Testing case data</li> <li>3 W's: Wear, Wait, Wash</li> <li>Remdesivir and Monoclonal Antibody (mAbs) Treatments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited initial vaccine supply</li> <li>Increased eligibility and treatment options for mAbs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong vaccine supply</li> <li>Increased treatment availability and supply</li> </ul>
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong partnership between EM and DHHS</li> <li>Hurricane Preparedness Experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PPE bidding wars</li> <li>Ventilator supply concerns</li> <li>Data collected manually</li> <li>Regularly convening of industry sectors</li> <li>Emergency system to keep child care open</li> <li>Food access (P-EBT)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Launched public Dashboard</li> <li>Built easily accessible statewide testing infrastructure</li> <li>Made PPE easily accessible, especially for child care and K12</li> <li>Optimized data systems</li> <li>Technical assistance teams for high-risk settings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Built vaccine management system (CVMS)</li> <li>Recruit and onboard providers</li> <li>Ensure vaccine easily accessible for historically marginalized populations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Treatment access system created</li> <li>Extensive provider network for vaccine access</li> <li>Utilized FEMA support to ease healthcare system burden for EMS and Monoclonal Antibody treatment</li> </ul>
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Governor's Novel Coronavirus Task Force</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NC State of Emergency</li> <li>Stay-at-Home</li> <li>Standing order for testing</li> <li>Hold on non-essential surgery</li> <li>NCDHHS Testing Surge Workgroup</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Statewide mask requirement</li> <li>Dimmer switch</li> <li>Restrictions eased</li> <li>NCIOM Vaccine Prioritization Task Force</li> <li>StrongSchools Toolkit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Standing order for vaccines</li> <li>Supplemented StrongSchools Toolkit to support in person learning statewide</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Standing order for Monoclonal Antibodies</li> <li>Vaccine/Testing EO for state employees</li> <li>Localizing decision making whenever possible</li> </ul>

# COVID PREVENTION (PRE-VACCINE)

Even before vaccines, the NC DHHS team has been a national leader in COVID prevention strategies.

## Through our response efforts, we:

- ▶ Expanded access to care by rapidly modifying telehealth policies for Medicaid and telehealth policies for state-funded services, making us a national leader. **Processed claims for more than 1.1 million telehealth visits**
- ▶ Increased Medicaid base rate changes to shore up vulnerable providers (press release 2)
- ▶ Vetted over **1,200 PPE providers and industrial hygienists**. Examined all products purchased for quality assurance
- ▶ Established a **historically marginalized populations working group** to co-create solutions to prevent and mitigate COVID-19 among communities hit hardest by the pandemic

### Rapidly distributed Resources

- ▶ **Distributed over 65 million pieces of PPE** across the state to health care providers, K-12 employees and students, and childcare teachers
- ▶ Partnered with local health departments to create prevention control teams that **initiated contact with 3,273 long-term care facilities and conducted 1,274 infection prevention visits**

### Lead with clear public and partner communications

- ▶ Launched a nationally recognized **3Ws prevention** campaign
- ▶ **Developed StrongSchoolsNC Toolkit**, which ABC Science Collaborative found effectively allowed children to re-enter classrooms with limited exposure risk

### Leveraged and built upon strong partnerships

- ▶ Engaged with partners to **promote prevention**, including faith, school, and business leaders
- ▶ Regularly convened business affinity groups to inform guidance, including restaurant, hospitality, large venue, higher education, and retail leaders
- ▶ Performed industrial hygiene consultations in food processing plants in partnership with DOL/DACS to move needle on outbreaks
- ▶ **Developed set of best practices to protect staff and detainees** in correctional settings in partnership with DPS
- ▶ Partnered with North Carolina businesses to **produce PPE**

# TESTING, CONTACT TRACING, ISOLATION & QUARANTINE

NC DHHS' efforts identified cases and outbreaks early, preventing more severe spread across the state.

## Through our response efforts, we:

- ▶ Stood up **1,925 vendor testing sites** which administered **1,373,910 tests** across the state
- ▶ Increased **electronic reporting** of laboratory results to **99% of COVID-19 PCR tests**
- ▶ Distributed 40,720 at-home testing kits to North Carolinians to date ([press release](#))

Leveraged existing infrastructure to expand capabilities

- ▶ Launched wastewater monitoring program
- ▶ Built a **statewide testing and tracing system**
- ▶ Created an innovative universal testing strategy within skilled nursing facilities that has been cited as a national model by the Rockefeller Foundation ([press release](#))

Developed robust isolation and quarantine guidance

- ▶ Ensured access to non-congregate shelters for people who need to isolate – **76 counties with NCS have sheltered over 10,794 people**
- ▶ Improved timeliness of isolation and quarantine notification by deploying automated text and email solution; >80% of people diagnosed with COVID-19 are notified immediately after to report to public health via text or email
- ▶ **Delivered services such as food, relief payments, or primary medical care to over 41,000 households** who needed to isolate or quarantine ([press release](#))

Distributed materials & resources quickly and equitably

- ▶ **Distributed 2,312,180 Abbott BinaxNOW antigen tests** to partners such as Health Departments, colleges, universities and K-12 schools
- ▶ Implemented community testing to identify **most underserved communities** and **deployed 16,658 tests**
- ▶ Hired a total of **3,657 contact tracers (currently at 1,400)** maintained average of **39% bilingual staff** over 18 months



# MEETING CRITICAL INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

NC is a national leader in coordinating resources for whole-person care and providing resources and social supports.

## Through our response efforts, we:

- ▶ Were one of the first states to launch Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) to buy groceries for children out of school
- ▶ **Provided emergency child care subsidies to over 20,000 children** of essential workers and school-age subsidies to 7,700 children (\$34M)
- ▶ Expanded and increased SNAP benefits to provide families in need further access to food

### Ensured food security

- ▶ **Provided more than \$1.7 billion of groceries** to over 1.3 million children at risk of hunger through P-EBT
- ▶ Increased food and nutrition services to approximately 360K households
- ▶ **Expanded online EBT services** with Publix, Food Lion, BJ's Wholesale Food Club, ALDI, Amazon, Carly C's, and Walmart
  - ▶ NC was one of the first states to offer online grocery shopping
- ▶ **Expanded eligibility for food assistance** to help college students
- ▶ Developed texting tool to help parents find food for their children

### Supported childcare facilities

- ▶ **Stabilized 4,200 child care facilities** with operational grants and PPE (\$124M) in April 2020
- ▶ Supported 30,000 childcare teachers/staff with bonuses (\$38M)
- ▶ Stood up hotline to help critical workers find childcare
- ▶ **Kept child care open** from day 1
- ▶ Critical worker program provided **pandemic child care payments for 36,247 children**

### Expanded mental health services

- ▶ Nearly **10,000 callers to Hope4NC & Hope4Healers** combined receiving crisis counseling and behavioral health resource referrals
- ▶ Expanded **LME/MCO telehealth policies** to allow for a broad array of behavioral services to be offered by telephone and two-way audio/video

# MAINTAIN HEALTHCARE SYSTEM CAPACITY

Even in the midst of large COVID surges, we have managed hospital capacity across the state.

## Through our response efforts, we:

- ▶ Provided **over 47,000,000 pieces of personal protective equipment** to healthcare partners
- ▶ Monitored **hospital capacity in real-time** and reduced reporting burden for health care settings by developing **OpenBeds Critical Resource Tracker**
- ▶ Provided hospital-to-hospital patient coordination to support hospital capacity across entire state and support critical access hospitals
- ▶ **Avoided hospital capacity crises** akin to those experienced in our neighboring states, allowing us to help other states **by sending additional ventilators** across state borders and **accepting out-of-state patients**

Established processes in response to a new pandemic environment

- ▶ Created a pathway for temporary nursing home staff during the pandemic to receive higher credentialing ([press release](#))
- ▶ Provided flexibilities to **increase the number of beds to take critically ill patients and allow an ambulatory surgical facility to operate as a temporary hospital** ([press release](#))

Built strong relationships with health systems

- ▶ Frequent communications with health systems in order to understand and effectively address issues and concerns
- ▶ Helped hospitals effectively use all available resources – testing, PPE, vaccines, etc.
- ▶ Used a **dimmer switch approach** which allowed NC to **keep infection peaks lower than surrounding states**
- ▶ Developed patient coordination system to efficiently move patients to hospitals with resources to meet individual needs

Provided childcare for front line workers

- ▶ **Established an emergency child care subsidy program** for essential workers, starting with health care staff
- ▶ Served over 36,000 children of essential workers in April and May of 2020



# VACCINATION AND TREATMENT

Our emphasis on equity allowed us to provide COVID vaccines and treatment to the most marginalized populations.

## Through our response efforts, we:

- ▶ Were recognized **as best in nation** by Bloomberg News for data quality for vaccination rates by race and ethnicity
- ▶ Were recognized in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* for incentive program that increased vaccinations
- ▶ **Eliminated gap** in vaccinations between Hispanic and non-Hispanic population and **narrowed gap** for Black/African American communities
- ▶ **Launched Healthier Together** to increase the percentage of historically marginalized populations receiving vaccinations by partnering with state and community-based organizations to support on-the-ground vaccination equity efforts

### Ensured widespread vaccine access

- ▶ As of 11/15, there are **3,459 COVID total vaccine access points in NC**
- ▶ As of 11/15 there are **834 pediatric vaccine access points on myspot.nc.gov**
- ▶ 60% of total NC population has been vaccinated with at least 1 dose

### Convened special population working groups to break down barriers to access

- ▶ Led the nation by investing in comprehensive market research to **understand vaccine confidence** and **messaging in historically marginalized communities**
- ▶ **Led effort to establish vaccines at home program** by launching hotline for people who have limited mobility to be vaccinated at home
- ▶ Led effort to ensure **vaccine coverage across long term care** population through matchmaking facilities with vaccinating providers

### Expanded and improved access to Monoclonal Antibodies (mAbs) & other therapeutics

- ▶ Partnered with FEMA to open sites for mAbs administration
- ▶ Administered **over 66k mAbs treatments as of 11/15**
- ▶ **13% average weekly mAbs admin rate per positive test with a maximum rate of 29%**
- ▶ Over 2,800 hospitalizations estimated to have been prevented saving a minimum of \$56,200,000

# HOW HAVE WE FARED

\*Hospitalization NC DHHS dashboard  
\*\*[NC Covid Dash](#) as of 11/23  
\*\*\* Comparing Delta surge to Winter 2020 surge



## Maintained hospital capacity\*

Statewide hospital capacity never exceeded **81%**

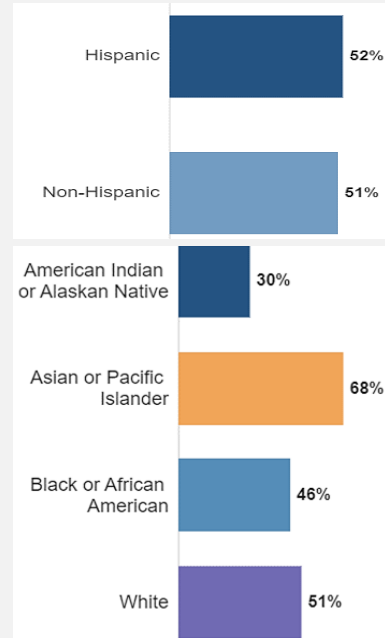
Statewide ICU capacity never exceeded **90%**

Maintained statewide supply of available ventilators, never borrowed from other states



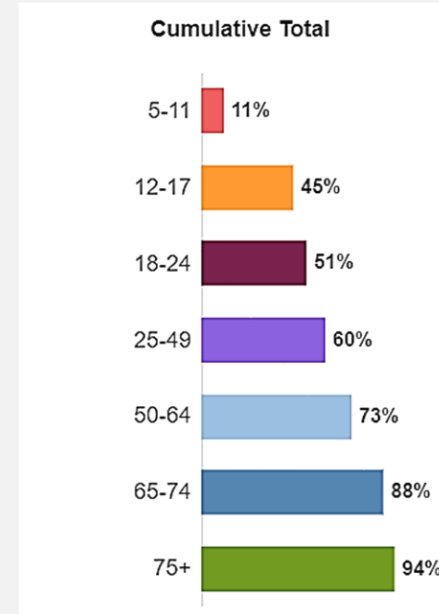
## Among lowest for equity gaps in vaccination

Percent of population vaccinated with at least one dose by race and ethnicity\*\*



## Recognized as top in nation for vaccinated 65+

Percent of population vaccinated with at least one dose by age\*\*



## Created safer healthcare settings for patients

- 99%** Nearly all 10,000 state-operated healthcare facility employees are fully vaccinated.
- 95%** Decrease in deaths of LTC residents\*\*\*
- 93%** Decrease in hospitalizations of LTC residents\*\*\*
- 89%** Decrease in cases of LTC residents\*\*\*

# KEYS TO SUCCESS

North Carolina's success has largely been due to our efforts in grounding ourselves to three main pillars:



## Strong Partnerships

- Unified statewide response with **Emergency Management, Dept of Public Safety, and National Guard**
- Coordination w/ **Local Health Depts, DSS and county officials**
- Regular stakeholder meetings w/ **communities and industry sectors**
- Frequent conversations w/ **hospitals**
- Close collaboration w/ **State Board of Ed and Dept. of Public Instruction**
- Partnership w/ **Depts. of Ag and Labor**
- Formed **Higher Ed Work Group**
- Partnership with **DOT** to provide transportation for vaccinations



## Accountability

- **150+** press conferences
- Regular updates on our **public dashboard: Received an A** for dashboard data transparency
- Honored by the National Association of State Chief Information Officers for "Bridging the Data Divide and Bringing Health Equity."
- Artemis Research found that through trusted community outreach **DHHS increased the population with intent to vaccinate from 60% to 70% between Nov 2020-June 2021**



## Equity

- Duke Health Center recognized NC as having **the most complete race & ethnicity data in the nation**
- **Healthier Together** work lowered equity gaps in equity for both testing and vaccinations
- **DHHS introduced an "equity bump" and community event allocation strategies** to increase supply allotments for counties with marginalized populations