

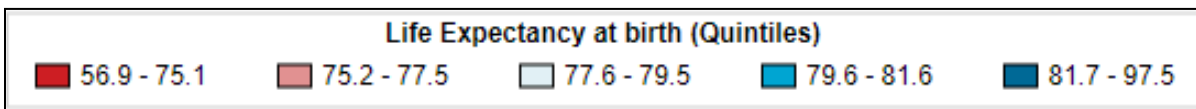


## Executive Summary

# Emerging Issues and Opportunities in Healthcare Policy for WNC: Social Care Delivery Systems, NC Medicaid Expansion, and Workforce Development

### Introduction

Western North Carolina (WNC) faces significant healthcare challenges, mirroring national trends of stagnating life expectancy and persistent health disparities. NC fares more poorly than the US, with an overall life expectancy average of 76.6. The Appalachian region and WNC have some of the highest levels of death for adults in their prime (35 to 64; figures 1 and 2). Despite substantial healthcare spending, chronic illnesses remain the biggest threat to premature death and disability, particularly among working-aged individuals. These trends undermine our economy and threaten long-term fiscal and economic well-being in our region, state, and nation. In response, the 2024 WNC Legislative Caucus is committed to addressing three pressing healthcare policy issues: Social Care Delivery Systems, NC Medicaid Expansion, and Workforce Development.



Life Expectancy at Birth for U.S. Census Tracts, 2010-2015

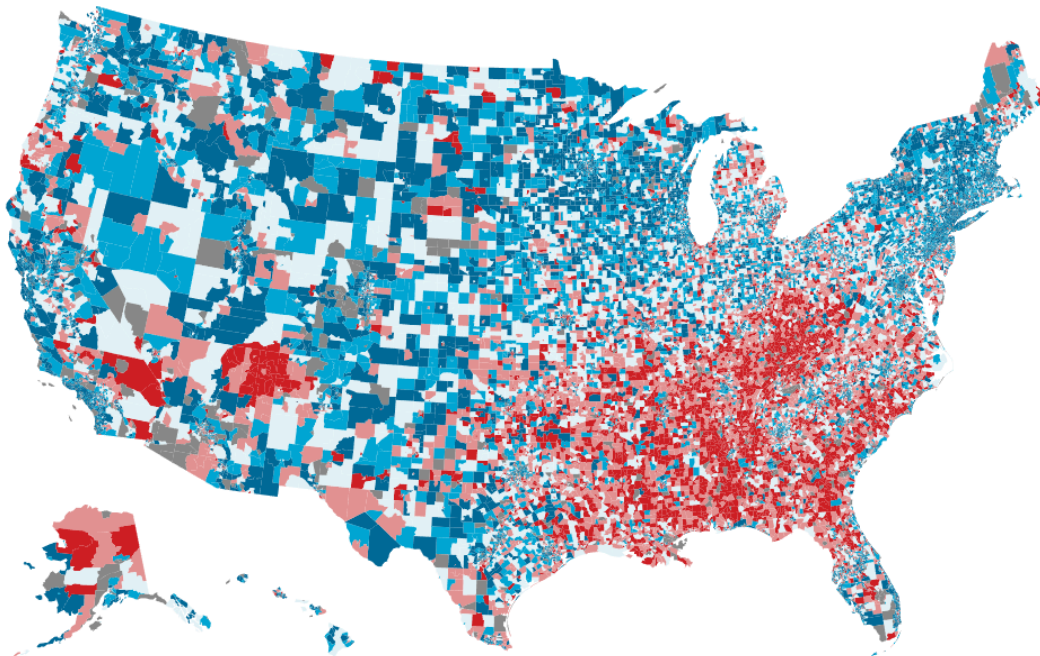


Fig. 1 Tejada-Vera B, Bastian B, Arias E, Escobedo LA., Salant B, Life Expectancy Estimates by U.S. Census Tract, 2010-2015.

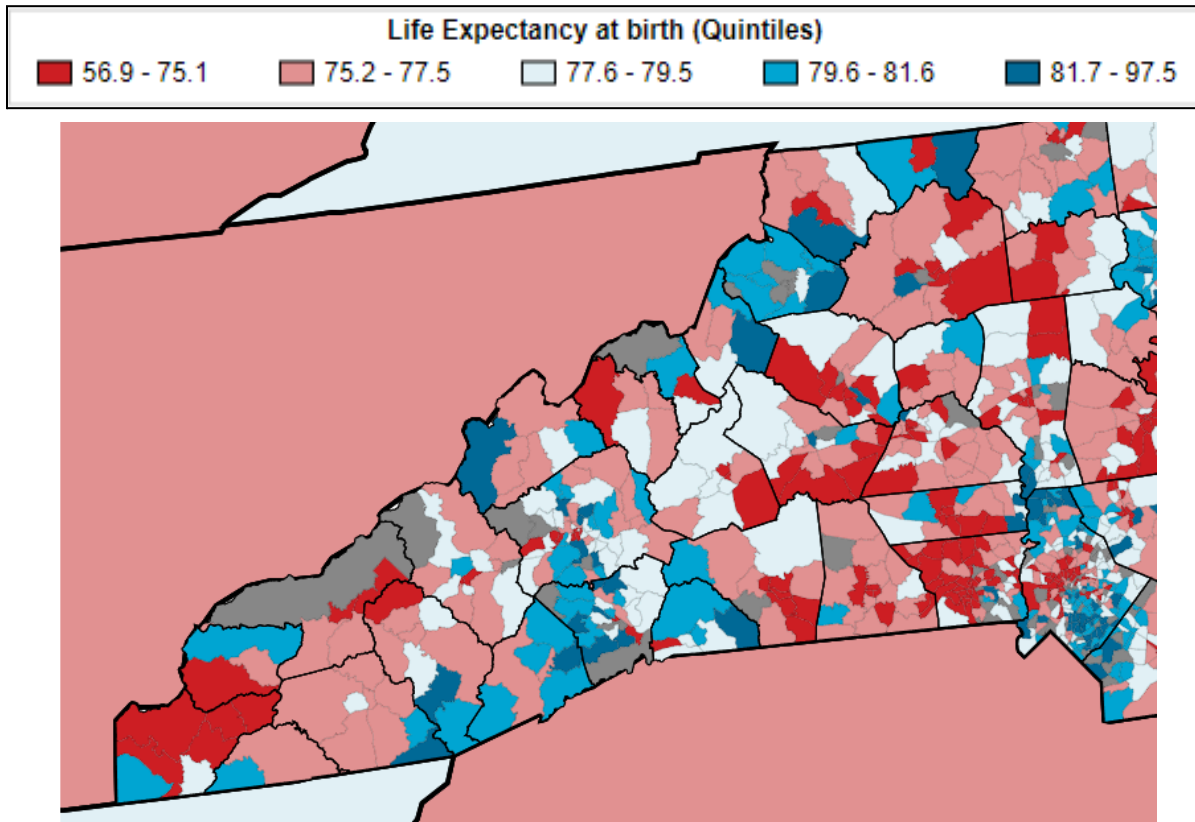


Fig. 2 Tejada-Vera B, Bastian B, Arias E, Escobedo LA., Salant B, Life Expectancy Estimates by U.S. Census Tract, 2010-2015.

### Social Care Delivery Systems

Unmet social needs contribute to increased healthcare costs and poorer health outcomes. In WNC, initiatives like the NC DHHS Healthy Opportunity Pilot (HOP) are pioneering solutions by integrating social care delivery into healthcare systems. HOP addresses housing, food, transportation, and personal safety, demonstrating the potential to improve health outcomes while reducing costs. Impact Health, as the HOP network lead for WNC, facilitates connections between stakeholders, which fosters innovation and leverages available resources to address social determinants of health. This comprehensive approach not only enhances health but also stimulates the local economy, demonstrating the viability and scalability of social care delivery systems.

### NC Medicaid Expansion

North Carolina's decision to expand Medicaid offers significant benefits for WNC, where poverty rates exceed the state average in many counties. Early enrollment data indicates strong uptake, with over 31,200 new users in WNC alone. Medicaid expansion enables access to preventative care, shifting the focus from crisis treatment to proactive management of chronic conditions. By leveraging Medicaid to address upstream health factors, such as access to primary care and chronic disease management, WNC can improve health outcomes, reduce healthcare costs, and promote equity.

in healthcare access. Community Health Workers (CHWs) can play a vital role in scaling enrollment of eligible community members, particularly individuals and families from historically marginalized communities.

### Workforce Development

Critical shortages and maldistribution of healthcare providers persist in WNC, exacerbating existing health inequities. Workforce shortages are particularly acute in behavioral health care. For example, 7 WNC counties have no clinical psychologists and the majority have fewer than 2 for every 10,000 people (figure 3). Efforts to address these challenges include expanding primary care services, enhancing mental health access, and investing in educational pipelines to attract diverse healthcare professionals. Cross-sector collaboration is essential, with initiatives like the Caregiving Workforce Strategic Leadership Council offering recommendations to strengthen the healthcare workforce. By fostering strong local partnerships and tailoring workforce development efforts to regional needs, WNC can build a healthcare workforce that reflects community needs and promotes equitable access to care for all residents.

## North Carolina Health Professional Supply Data

### Psychologists per 10,000 Population by County, North Carolina, 2022

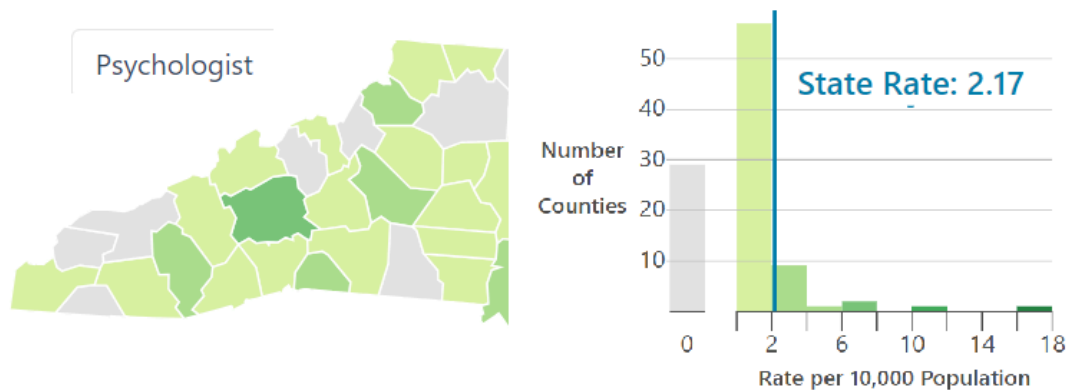


Fig. 3 National Center for Health Statistics. 2020

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the WNC Legislative Caucus recognizes the urgency of addressing healthcare policy issues to improve the health and well-being of residents. By prioritizing Social Care Delivery Systems, NC Medicaid Expansion, and Workforce Development, policymakers can make significant strides towards enhancing health outcomes, reducing healthcare costs, and promoting equitable access to care in Western North Carolina. Through collaborative efforts and innovative solutions, WNC can build a healthier future for generations to come.