

Andy is twelve, and his parents lovingly call him “sturdy,” but he is carrying an extra 45 lbs., which makes him clinically obese. Although they live in the beautiful mountains of Appalachia in Wythe County, Virginia, the family doesn’t get much exercise, and mom and dad are also overweight. The family doesn’t realize they are courting an often preventable disease, type 2 diabetes. Diabetes means a lifetime of constant management of insulin levels, and even when “managed,” diabetes carries a high risk of blindness, amputation, and premature death. If Andy’s parents knew this, they might make lifestyle changes that could prevent this disease.

Virginia Turning Point Natural Allies

In Wythe County, the age-adjusted mortality rate of diabetes as primary cause of death is more than twice that of the state rate. As researchers look for reasons for the discrepancy, public health workers are trying to save lives with screening and education. For those at high risk, like Andy and his family, reasons are not as important as outreach and education.

Health department nurses screen for diabetes at health fairs, and the local hospital provides classes for newly diagnosed diabetics referred by physicians. Unfortunately, you won’t find Andy’s family, or many others who are at risk, at a health fair. In 2001, hospital and health department staff were increasingly frustrated that despite their efforts diabetes hospitalizations and mortality remained high. They needed a new outreach strategy.

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In the meantime, the Virginia Center for Healthy Communities in Richmond, an outgrowth of the Virginia Turning Point

Initiative, was exploring roles that non-public health partners could play in improving the health of their communities. Constantly on the lookout for natural allies, the Center staff recognized an untapped resource and ally in Wythe County: the business community. Diabetes can mean many work hours lost to

illness. Because insurance companies pass the higher costs of caring for the chronically ill on to the group purchasers, diabetes affects a business’s bottom line.

In January 2002, the Center’s Turning Point director, Jeff Wilson, spoke to the Wytheville–Wythe–Bland Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber’s executive board members and executive director Jennifer Jones quickly saw the relationship between preventive health and their interests. The Chamber enthusiastically formed an alliance with public health. Business owners would help reach people by opening their workplaces to health interventions. With the local health department and hospital on point for service delivery, and the Center providing technical assistance, the Chamber is leading a social marketing intervention complete with screenings at worksites, education about lowering diabetes risk, and materials about preventing and managing diabetes. The Chamber’s new HealthTask Force is considering expanding the program with a physical activity or nutrition intervention.

The Wytheville–Wythe–Bland Chamber of Commerce’s HealthTask Force brings together business leaders, health educators from the local health department, and nurses from the community hospital. Their combined vision and expertise generates creative solutions to health problems. The Virginia Center for Healthy Communities links sectors and helps each see their distinct role in improving the public’s health. By taking the lead and lending their tremendous assets to public health, business leaders in this part of Appalachian Virginia are making a difference for business and Andy’s family – a winning outcome for all.

At A Glance: Virginia



Aim of Virginia Turning Point

Turning Point's Virginia Center for Healthy Communities is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the health of Virginia's communities. The Center bridges the gap between the public health, health care, and business sectors; demonstrates the strong relationship between improved health and economic prosperity; and supports collaborative efforts to improve health. The Center's mission is to support public/private partnerships that improve the health of local communities by conducting research on community health, sharing information with organizations and individuals interested in community health, and providing technical assistance for local community health improvement efforts. The ultimate aim of the Center is a Virginia where each community strives to optimize the health and quality of life for its citizens.

Virginia's Public Health Challenges

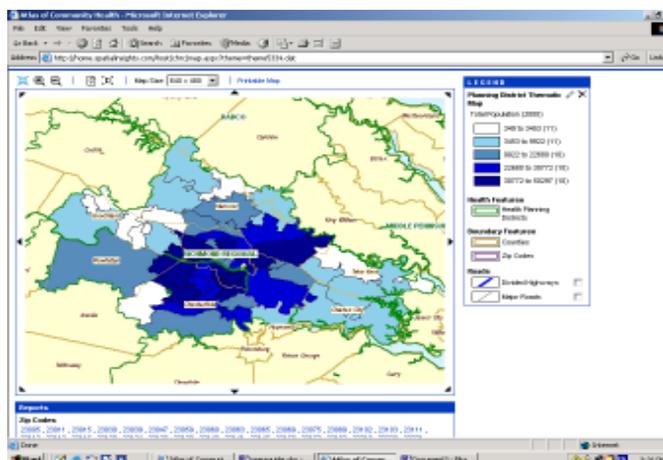
Virginia is respected as a safe and healthy place to live, but troubling signs are ahead. Virginia spends \$300 million per year to cover inpatient treatment for preventable injuries. The state loses \$2.8 billion annually in direct medical and indirect costs related to diabetes. More than one million Virginians are without basic health insurance. In just the past six years, Virginia's overall health status has fallen from 10th in the nation to 19th.

Virginia Turning Point's Contribution to Improving Public Health

Virginia Turning Point has successfully:

- Engaged the business community within the Commonwealth of Virginia in community health improvement activities, such as workplace diabetes screenings and interventions.
- Developed the Virginia Atlas of Community Health, an online publicly available resource providing zip-code level data and maps depicting up to two indicators and capable of running reports on health status in specific areas of the state.
- Conducted three Business Roundtables on Health, opportunities for business leaders to dialogue with public health officials, health care providers, elected officials, and local government personnel about health issues facing their communities.
- Established an independent 501(c)3 called the Virginia Center for Healthy Communities, a self-sustaining organization dedicated to developing effective public-private partnerships reflecting diverse sectors to improve health for Virginians.

Virginia Atlas of Community Health



For More Information

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