THE HEALTH DEPARTMENT AND YOU

Howard County Health Department Strategic Plan 2026 - 2028

Final Report

HOWARD COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Promote. Preserve. Protect.

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Introduction

The Howard County Health Department's Strategic Plan for 2026-2028 provides a roadmap for the department over this three-year period. The plan reflects priorities for enhanced impact across programs and services in the department to further the health and well-being of those in the county. The strategic priorities that were identified align with the Howard County Community Health Improvement Plan, created with extensive community input, that serves as the strategic plan for the Howard County Local Health Improvement Coalition CHIP and aligns with the State Health Improvement Plan SHIP.

A review of health data, input from Board of Health and staff and ongoing efforts to sustain critical health and safety resources in the county, contributed to the plan. Our discussions acknowledged a context of fiscal constraint and uncertainty. Priorities were identified based on current unmet needs and ongoing efforts. The four priority areas are: *Improving Behavioral Health*, *Preventing Chronic Disease*, *Improving Maternal and Infant Health,* and *Preserving Essential Public Health Services*. For each priority area identified, a working group was formed made up of staff members with expertise in that area and others interested. These working groups were asked to create action plans with goals, objectives and action steps that increase our impact within the priority without new large-scale resource investments.

Four additional themes emerged. Given the cross-cutting nature of these themes, it was decided to use them as lenses to maximize our impact in the priority areas. These themes (now lenses) were grouped into the following categories: *Community Engagement/Outreach/Customer Service/Partnership Building; Communications in Support of Public Health and to Counter Misinformation; Workforce and Professional Development;* and *Systems Enhancement*. Strategies developed in this plan reflect these lenses, applied to goals in each of the priority areas.

Mission Vision and Values

Staff input to inform an update of the Mission, Vision, and Values of the health department was invited and gathered through the fall 2025 Employee Satisfaction Survey.

Mission

To promote, preserve and protect the health and well-being of all in Howard County.

Vision

A dynamic community in which health equity and optimal wellness are accessible for all who live, work, and visit Howard County.

Values

LEADERSHIP: We lead by listening, providing reliable information and services, and advocating for effective public health practices and improvement.

HEALTH EQUITY: We identify and remove barriers that prevent access so that every person has the opportunity to achieve their full health potential.

INNOVATION & EXCELLENCE: We encourage innovation and pursue excellence by using quality improvement methods, evidence-based and data-driven approaches, and piloting emerging practices.

COLLABORATION: We cultivate and expand partnerships to achieve common goals based on a shared vision.

CULTURE OF RESPECT & CARING: We respect and value our staff, volunteers, partners, community, and all those we serve.

ADVOCACY: We are committed daily to elevating community voices and advancing equitable health policies so every resident can thrive.

PROFESSIONALISM: We employ credentialed, licensed, and trained professionals who abide by professional standards and show mutual respect, transparency, and accountability.

INTEGRITY: We conduct ourselves with honesty, fairness, and trustworthiness.

HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT: We monitor, protect, and promote a safe environment to support the health of the community.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: We are committed to providing support to our customers that is timely, complete, and delivered with professionalism and care.

Strategic Priorities

Strategic Priority Areas for the 2026-2028 plan include three ongoing priority areas and one that reflects critical work that local health departments perform.

- **Improving Behavioral Health**

  Strong mental health is critical to and integrated into the overall well-being of the county. This plan will work to expand mental health services and prevent suicide.

- **Preventing Chronic Disease**

  Active living, access to healthier food, timely preventive health screenings and avoidance of nicotine and other substance use decrease the burden of chronic disease. For this plan, the focus will be on addressing chronic disease and obesity, increasing cancer screenings and outreach, and addressing food insecurity.

- **Improving Maternal Infant and Child Health**

  Integrating a comprehensive approach improves the overall health and well-being of individuals as well as birth outcomes. This includes assessing and addressing the physical, mental and

social health needs of women from adolescence through reproductive years, pregnancy and postpartum.

- **Preserving Essential Public Health Services**

  A local health department performs functions that are foundational to the health of the county. For this plan, Essential Public Health Services are the fundamental health department services and regulatory functions responsible for maintaining the health and safety of communities that are not carried out by any other organization. These core services include environmental health, disease surveillance and infection and outbreak prevention/response, immunizations, access to health care (e.g. MCHP), enhancing clinical services to close gaps, and public health emergency preparedness.

Lenses

Following discussions with staff and the Board of Health, and taking into account the current fiscally constrained environment, the focus of this plan will be on preserving the good work we do and elevating it through creative means to have greater impact. This approach will be achieved by applying the four lenses to each priority area related to goals, objectives and action steps. These lenses help us to look at these priorities in a new way to enhance the work we are already doing. The four lenses are described here.

Community Engagement/Outreach/Customer Service/Partnership Building – Improve access to resources and healthcare services, address disparities through outreach to specific populations and expand and strengthen community partnerships. Intentionally improve the centering of community voice and maintain a visible presence in communities.

Communications in Support of Public Health and to Counter Misinformation - Promote trust in public health and science by addressing misinformation, creating unified messaging and providing more information in various languages. Convey the important role public health plays across aspects of people's lives.

Workforce and Professional Development - Support staff to optimize performance, provide opportunities for training and professional advancement. Sustain motivation and generate interest about working in public health.

Systems Enhancement - Improve awareness and use of data sources, systems, and available software; promote evaluation, quality improvement, and innovation; use technology including AI to increase efficiency; enhance cybersecurity. Seek opportunities to foster collaboration between bureaus to leverage resources.

Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats

An analysis of internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats (SWOT) provided additional context for the plan. Staff and Board of Health members provided input.

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Diverse and dedicated staff • Strong partnerships • Strong infrastructure (policies, internal systems) • Fiscal management	• Staff turnover and burnout • Communication across programs and duplication of efforts • More community input and circling back to community for follow up needed
Opportunities	Threats
• New partnerships (ex. businesses) • Expand work in the community • Innovations including AI • Diversifying funding sources • Increased potential volunteer pool	• Reduced funding • Changes in policies • Public distrust of public health • Immigration concerns • Cybersecurity threats

Goals and Key Action Steps

Improving Behavioral Health

Goal: Strengthen and promote coordinated, continuous behavioral health services that address health disparities, deliver culturally responsive care, and build strong community partnerships to close gaps in support.

Action Steps

Community Engagement/Outreach/Customer Service/Partnership Building

- Create a list of current partners. Identify and outreach to new partners to expand into new sectors and populations by program (Examples include Rec & Parks, Spas, Gyms, Child Care Organizations, Urgent Care and others).
- Designate staff to attend community meetings to build relationships and learn about community needs.
- Continue to refine the protocol for referral follow up to ensure connection to requested resources.
- Identify resources needed to accommodate walk-in clients including referring people in crisis to the appropriate resources.
- Identify ways to share feedback on improvements made with community/customer input.

Communications in Support of Public Health and to Counter Misinformation

- Develop and promote testimonials from clients to show how HCHD can help the community.
- Collaborate with other bureaus to create a "myth vs. fact" series on social media for behavioral health and other areas.
- Counter stigma by partnering with children/youth programs to promote good mental health and normalize help-seeking early in life.

Workforce Support and Development
- Make sure staff are aware of wellness activities and benefits available to them from the state, county and HCHD.   - Create opportunities for exercise, stress reduction, meditation, staff-run meetings (example admin lunches, wellness groups).   - Provide trainings to HCHD staff on topics such as Mental Health First Aid, Trauma-informed Care, QPR, Conflict Resolution/Deescalation and Mediation.
Systems Enhancement
- Employ CAREAPP to improve referral systems and follow up.   - Consider QI project(s) to improve data tracking and usability.   - Identify ways to inform HCHD staff about behavioral health resources including accessing the BH newsletter, providing information in weekly staff updates and Townhalls and other ideas.

Preventing Chronic Disease

Goal: Expand awareness and engagement in chronic disease prevention services.

Action Steps

Community Engagement/Outreach/Customer Service/Partnership Building
- Create an inventory of partner and meeting lists including LHIC partners, County List of Agencies, contracts/agreements lists. Prioritize, in groups, those with established relationships/partnerships and those we need to re-connect with or start new relationships with.   - Reflect on who is not at the table. Ask our collaborators this question too.   - Identify community members whose input we particularly need. Conduct focus groups and short surveys among community members to understand their perspective on chronic disease.   - Create a map of chronic disease programs offered in the county.   - Make sure we understand customer needs and level of satisfaction with services. Suggest bringing customer survey QR code to outreach events and adding to email signatures.   - Provide staff training on HCHD services so staff can offer services in other programs to clients and community including using CAREAPP. Consider various ways for staff to learn about services provided by other programs, such as shadowing and periodic exchange sessions.
Communications in Support of Public Health and to Counter Misinformation
- Expand our messaging about chronic disease on social media including tagging partners to cross post and adding a widget to ask "How can I help you today?" Identify additional creative ways to share the information that will draw people to click.   - Identify myths about healthy food and food assistance resources and create messages to dispel them.

Workforce Support and Development

- Consider identifying a wellness coordinator and possible incentives for HCHD (or dividing up tasks to coordinate activities).
- Provide quarterly trainings to staff on chronic disease prevention resources in Howard County, including at HCHD.

Systems Enhancement

- Offer more training and technical assistance for CAREAPP to increase staff use. Encourage partners to also promote use of CAREAPP.
- Offer health literacy training to staff for awareness with clients.
- Include bureau updates in Town Halls and All Staff meetings and celebrate inter-bureau collaborations.

Improving Maternal Infant Health

Goal: Strengthen coordination and continuity of services** from preconception through the postpartum period with an emphasis on reducing racial disparities in outcomes.

**Services include maternal infant health, mental health, social services, substance use disorder and other areas that drive health outcomes.

Action Steps

Community Engagement/Outreach/Customer Service/Partnership Building

- Develop means to further engage clinical partners: Hospital, OB/Gyn providers, pediatricians in two-way discussions for mutual awareness.
- Invite African American Community Roundtable, Hispanic Roundtable, and /or other community reps and HCHD CHWs to attend Maternal Infant Quarterly (or other) meetings.
- Brainstorm creative ways to get community input (short surveys, focus groups, councils) and give feedback on projects (video clips with comment capability).
- Work with partners to create culturally appropriate versions of MIH services brochures; distribute to clients at WIC, SBWCs, Reproductive Health Clinic, HCC and Overdose Prevention vans, at HCHD and through Sankofa and Trinity Wellness.

Communications in Support of Public Health and to Counter Misinformation

- Develop and share video content explaining the services that can be accessed through HCHD and how to get them; make it available through Instagram and the website.
- Develop messages about health risks before and after pregnancy to share through social media.

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Workforce Support and Development

- Work with HR to explore ability to assist with time or funds to pursue certifications.
- Provide training to HCHD staff on MIH services and how to connect clients to them.
- Provide training on AI tools; benefits and risks.

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Systems Enhancement

- Create map of HCHD/county MIH services and resources along the continuum from preconception to postpartum.
- Provide HCHD staff training on resources, fliers, and other tools.
- Use weekly newsletter to increase awareness of programs across bureaus.

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Preserving Essential Public Health Services

Goal: Strengthen the effectiveness of essential public health services by enhancing surveillance systems, expanding disease prevention activities, improving access to services, and coordinating efforts to meet the needs of priority populations.

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Community Engagement/Outreach/Customer Service/Partnership Building

- Decide whether to be an Academic Public Health department as a means to assist with analysis, evaluation, and conveying Public Health impact.
- Apply CBPR, and/or engage the CHWs to proactively gather more info on community interests and needs from essential PH services.
- Use info gathered to update the Action Plan. Compare customer services approaches taken within HCHD to share best practices.

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Communications in Support of Public Health and to Counter Misinformation

- Develop messaging to raise awareness of Public Health, the Invisible Shield, touching multiple aspects of daily life.
- Get input from communities to understand their perspectives.
- Gather data on cost effectiveness of Public Health interventions. Pilot messages to share this information.

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Workforce Support and Development

- Use weekly newsletter, Town Halls, 'person on street' interviews to raise awareness of HCHD services/programs among staff.
- Share information to staff about services/programs through communications channels.

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Systems Enhancement

- Investigate steps other Maryland LHDs are taking to use and share qualitative data, through Learning Collaborative, Epidemiologists Learning Community, and/or Accreditation Learning Community.
- Plan meetings with bureau and CHW leads to consider ways to leverage CHW work in the community.

Plan Implementation

The four work groups formed around the strategic priorities plan to meet at least every six months to review progress toward the goals and objectives set out in the action plans. The plans are considered "working documents" and will be updated and revised as needed. A mid-plan review will be conducted in June 2027 to evaluate progress and take into account possible changes to the environment in which Howard County Health Department works (e.g. funding, county leadership). If the context of a particular objective changes or new data illustrates that an alternative strategy or objective is needed, these changes will be considered by the work groups in adjustments to the objectives or strategies for the next stage of plan implementation.

One of the lenses applied to the priority areas to develop the action plans is a systems approach, where working groups explicitly consider quality improvement approaches and projects among ways to enhance ongoing work. This should foster a further increase in the culture of improvement within HCHD. In addition, when reviewing progress in achieving strategic objectives, workgroups will continue to use a systems approach and will deploy quality improvement techniques to address areas where implementation is stalled. Additional process owners and in-house experts will be brought in to form quality improvement teams as needed to move forward on specific action steps. Where appropriate, the HealthStat performance management system can be used to track progress toward objectives.

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Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALICE	Asset Limited Income-Constrained Employed
BH	Behavioral Health
BBH	Bureau of Behavioral Health
CAREAPP	Internet-based platform connecting people to resources and services in Howard County
CBPR	Community-based Participatory Research
CHIP	Community Health Improvement Plan
CHNA	Community Health Needs Assessment
CHW	Community Health Worker
FY	Fiscal Year, running July 1- June 30
HCC	Howard Community College
HCHAS	Howard County Health Assessment Survey
HCHD	Howard County Health Department
HR	Human Resources
JHHCMC	Johns Hopkins Howard County Medical Center
LHD	Local Health Department
LHIC	Local Health Improvement Coalition
MDH	Maryland Department of Health
MIH	Maternal Infant Health
OB-GYN	Obstetrician-Gynecologist
PH	Public Health
RH Clinic	Reproductive Health Clinic
SBWC	School-based Wellness Center
SHIP	State Health Improvement Plan
SWOT	Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats
QI	Quality Improvement
QPR	Question, Persuade, Refer Suicide Prevention Training
QR Code	Quick Response Code to Link to Web-based Site or Survey
UMD	University of Maryland
WIC	Women Infants and Children Nutrition Supplement Program