



In July 2021, the North Carolina Institute of Medicine (NCIOM) and the South Carolina Institute of Medicine and Public Health (IMPH) launched the Carolinas Pandemic Preparedness Task Force. This two-state task force was charged with examining lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic and developing consensus around actionable recommendations for a resilient future. The work of the task force was guided by a focus on equity, a cross-sector approach to health and well-being, and attention to the needs of vulnerable and historically marginalized populations, which have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

This report presents 24 recommendations in eight chapters, including such topics as infrastructure improvements, expanded access to services, and collaborative partnerships. This report presents the scientific evidence and data underpinning these recommendations, as well as the wisdom gleaned from task force members' actions and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The recommendations are both attempts to remedy problems that arose during the pandemic and suggestions for permanently adopting emergent solutions that proved successful and should be implemented in a future public health emergency.

As the first task force jointly convened by the NCIOM and IMPH, the Carolinas Pandemic Preparedness Task Force included more than 90 experts and key perspectives from both states across many areas, representing state and local health departments, health care associations and health systems, health care providers, academia, community representatives, philanthropy, social services, behavioral health providers, chambers of commerce and business representatives, advocates for vulnerable populations, and public safety organizations. The NCIOM, IMPH, and partnering agencies prioritized diversity in perspectives, expertise, experience, and demographics among the task force membership, resulting in wide, multidisciplinary stakeholder engagement, robust discussion throughout the task force process, and ultimately a task force report produced by each state that reflects a shared vision. Generous funding and support for this work was provided by The Duke Endowment, the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, the BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina Foundation, and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

A steering committee contributed to the development of goals and refinement of the scope of work to be undertaken by the task force and selection of speakers, and supported the formation of dissemination and communication strategies to promote the final task force report produced by each state. North Carolina Secretary of Commerce Machel Baker Sanders and Harris Pastides, PhD, MPH, President Emeritus of the University of South Carolina, served as co-chairs of the task force. In total,

the NCIOM and IMPH convened the full task force seven times between July 2021 and April 2022 to develop consensus-based, evidence-based, and actionable recommendations to strengthen pandemic preparedness, response, and recovery in the Carolinas. The NCIOM also convened the North Carolina task force for two additional meetings in the fall of 2021, while the IMPH conducted key perspective interviews with South Carolina steering committee and task force members during that time. The scope of the task force's work was structured around four conceptual pillars: economic and social stability, education, equity, and health.

The task force took this “wide-angle lens” approach to the pandemic because of members' common understanding that health is not simply a physiological phenomenon. Health issues are embedded within social and political contexts, which have a definitive influence on the health of individuals and populations. The particular impact of any given pandemic pathogen is a result of the complex interplay of multiple factors: the pathogen's ability to spread and the severity of the illness caused by it; the level of disruption to normal activities required to prevent infection; the availability of effective treatments and preventive agents, such as vaccines; the social and political landscape; and the capabilities—both in terms of technical expertise and with cooperation and trust—of the societies in which pandemics occur.

To achieve the task force's goal of developing consensus-driven and actionable recommendations for timely, coordinated response that maximizes community resilience, members spent hours reflecting on information presented by state and national leaders about these conceptual pillars; studied articles and analyses; and discussed and debated priorities, strategies, and solutions. To effectively address these pillars, task force members were chosen for their professional expertise and lived experience in these sectors, bringing voices from business, education, nonprofits, advocacy groups, and community development alongside health leaders from a variety of health care and public health settings. Task force members committed to learning about issues outside of their own areas of expertise to thoughtfully engage with all aspects of the inclusive scope of this project. Each of the conceptual pillars plays a decisive role in community resilience, and this task force plays a unique role in our state by bringing representatives of these areas together for shared reflection, policy deliberation, and problem-solving.

Future pandemics are inevitable. The degree of devastation wrought by these pandemics will be determined by such factors as a strong health and public health infrastructure, a well-prepared workforce, a vibrant economy, effective and trusted communications, a robust social services safety net, and adequate access to equipment, supplies, diagnostic tools,

and treatments. This report from the North Carolina task force offers policymakers and stakeholders a set of actionable recommendations based on a shared vision and tailored to the needs of North Carolinians. Similarly, the report from the South Carolina task force contains a set of recommendations tailored to the needs of South Carolinians, and the preface to this report highlights the cross-cutting, foundational recommendations shared by both states.¹ Each report represents a time capsule of the challenges, successes, and lessons learned, and reflects the shared experiences of North and South Carolinians during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Task Force Vision for Pandemic Preparedness in North Carolina

Our vision for pandemic preparedness, response, and recovery in North Carolina is a system and culture that centers the needs of vulnerable and historically marginalized populations and elevates strategies to achieve equity, supports data-driven decision-making and emergency management, and promotes effective coordination in navigating the challenges presented by disease outbreaks, pandemics, and other public health emergencies. The North Carolina task force identified the following components as essential in achieving this vision:

- Access to the supplies necessary to effectively control the spread of disease and reduce disease risk, particularly among the most vulnerable and those at highest risk, and a robust supply chain to support access to needed supplies (**Chapter 3**)
- Infrastructure changes to support adaptability in meeting response-related needs and promoting health and safety by reducing the transmission of respiratory pathogens (**Chapter 4**)
- Workforce development that prioritizes retention and strengthening the workforce pipeline to promote sustainability (**Chapter 5**)
- Modernized surveillance and information systems to support data-driven decision-making and clear, effective, and tailored communication of public health guidance to North Carolinians (**Chapter 6**)
- Expansion of broadband infrastructure and addressing digital literacy to bridge the digital divide, and improved provider capacity to offer supports and services (**Chapter 7**)
- System changes to ensure supports and services that exist to be accessed before, during, and after public health emergencies, and clear, effective, and tailored communications about accessible supports and services to North Carolinians (**Chapters 8 and 9**)
- Promotion of effective coordination and maximizing resources by establishing new partnerships and maintaining existing partnerships, and system changes to support partnerships and collaboration (**Chapter 10**)

This report has been structured to provide recommendations in support of each component of the vision outlined above, and to provide context and background to support the recommendations of the task force. The task force offers these recommendations with humility and with recognition of the valiant work of the many leaders across our state who made critical decisions with the best information they could gather, often with inadequate resources and incomplete data. This report does not intend to denigrate their work; rather, the recommendations included in this report are designed to identify critical gaps and areas of opportunity, while also elevating, enhancing, and building upon work currently underway in North Carolina that is in alignment with the vision of the task force. The recommendations in this report, if implemented by our legislative and agency leaders, will make our state even more prepared, resilient, and equitable in responding to future emergencies.

¹ Lessons Learned from COVID-19: Contagious Disease Outbreak Planning and Response in South Carolina, full report can be accessed at <https://imph.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/SCIMPH-Pandemic-Preparedness-Taskforce-Report-2022.pdf>