

# LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

## *North Carolina's Path to Healthier Women and Babies*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Preconception health offers a new perspective on an old problem. This vision presents healthy women as a desirable end in itself, as well as an important way to improve the health of babies. North Carolina has a high rate of infant death, ranking 45th in the nation. Many preconception risks have been identified as harmful to women and their children, including alcohol misuse, obesity, smoking, closely spaced pregnancies and exposure to sexually transmitted infections.



Preconception health acknowledges the impact of women's health on birth outcomes - offering a new way to promote both infant health and women's wellness. New partnerships are needed to implement this vision and create a brighter future for the women of today and the children of tomorrow.

Preconception care is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as interventions that aim to identify and modify biomedical, behavioral and social risks to a woman's health or pregnancy outcome through prevention and management. It emphasizes health behaviors and risks, which must be acted on before conception or early in pregnancy to have maximal impact. The fundamental elements of preconception care include: a) screening for medical and social risk factors, b) providing health education and c) delivering effective interventions. Unfortunately, the current model of health care for women of reproductive age centers around pregnancy, resulting in missed opportunities for prevention.

Historically, North Carolina has been an innovator in preconception health. Leaders in the public and private sector continue to play an important part in the national preconception health and health care movement. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and the March of Dimes have all published guidelines addressing preconception care. The CDC, in partnership with over 35 national organizations, has put forth an ambitious vision for improving preconception health and health care in the United States.

Implementing this vision will require more than effective clinical care for women. Changes in the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to reproductive health among both men and women are paramount. Emphasis should be placed on the systems and policies that facilitate improved access to services and support as well as on the needs of individuals. Health care providers and communities will need to support women and families in making healthy lifestyles and behaviors a habit. Many different organizations, health care providers and community advocates can help move North Carolina closer to this vision. In some cases it may be the addition of an evidence-based, low cost service or a modification in the way that a health message is presented. In others, it may be groups of people coming together to advocate for substantive change.



North Carolina, with its long history of demonstrated commitment, capacity and resourcefulness, is a great place to develop a national model for preconception health. We invite you to become part of this initiative, and challenge you to move to the next level of engagement and creativity.

