



# Health Matters:

Voices of Georgia's Leadership

Healthcare Georgia Foundation  
grantmaking for health





## Message from the President

Every time you turn on a television or open a newspaper there is at least one story about health issues facing Georgians. Whether the topic is the rising cost of health care, pandemic flu, access to prescription drugs or the obesity epidemic, these issues take center stage for policymakers, health care providers and Georgia's 8 million health consumers.

While health and health care are leading concerns throughout Georgia, the issues hit close to home for us in our workplaces, neighborhoods and communities. Georgia's overall health ranks 43rd among the states. Here's a snapshot of why:

- > 50 percent of adults ages 45 to 64 in Georgia have diabetes.
- > Nearly 60 percent of Georgia's adults are considered overweight or obese.
- > More than 70 percent of youth in Georgia do not attend physical education classes daily.
- > More than 10,000 Georgians die every year from smoking or tobacco-related illnesses.
- > One in six Georgians does not have health insurance.

Statistics don't tell the whole story. These issues affect real people – the disabled child living in Dalton, the pharmacist serving an older adult in Valdosta, the CEO providing health coverage for employees in Columbus or the single mother enrolling her child in PeachCare in Augusta.

To understand the issues, Healthcare Georgia Foundation awarded a grant to Porter Novelli, a global leader in health marketing, to go beyond the data and talk to community leaders who face those realities every day. They asked key questions about underserved populations, solutions for better health and health care, and Georgia's capacity to provide effective leadership on emerging health issues.

Findings from this Listening Tour send the powerful message that the health of each of us is inextricably linked to the health of all of us. A change in one part of our health care system affects the overall system, including those Georgians served by it. This report identifies health care challenges and opportunities that can only be addressed by being grounded in science, focused on results that matter, and committed to inclusive partnerships.

On behalf of the Foundation's Board of Directors and staff, I thank all the leaders who provided their candid and valuable input for the creation of this report. Your visions for better health and health care are a call for collective leadership that will help each of us and all of us achieve a healthier Georgia.

Sincerely,



Gary D. Nelson, Ph.D.  
President  
Healthcare Georgia Foundation



## About The Listening Tour

As a statewide organization with a mission to advance the health of all Georgians, Healthcare Georgia Foundation awarded a grant to Porter Novelli, a public relations firm specializing in social marketing and research, to conduct a "Listening Tour." The purpose of this tour was to gain a deeper understanding of the health care issues, priorities and perceptions among thought leaders throughout the state. Preceded by two other listening tours with consumers and health care providers, this tour focused on health policy issues in Georgia and gave participants a chance to discuss the challenges and opportunities the state faces in advancing health and health care.

The results of this Listening Tour not only provide useful information about the state of health in Georgia, but also provide an initial framework for addressing the health care issues that have implications for the state.

Leaders who influence health policy across Georgia participated in the Listening Tour, including legislators, business and community leaders, health care administrators and public health professionals. In their various roles, these individuals influence the direction of public funding for health care and public health programs;

determine the benefits that will be offered to employees or mandated in insurance coverage; determine which policies will be adopted to promote healthy behaviors; and, as leaders, listen to and guide the opinions of the general public. They directly and indirectly have a strong impact on the state's health.

By obtaining their perspectives and opinions on health issues in the state, the Foundation can better understand the needs and opportunities for improving health in communities across Georgia. A total of 63 respondents were interviewed, representing the following sectors:

"I think a lot of people don't realize if there are people out there who don't have access to health care and who are sick — that we all pay for it."

| Sector                | Number of Interviews |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Health Care Providers | 18                   |
| Community Leaders     | 10                   |
| Corporate             | 19                   |
| Government            | 16                   |

The 63 respondents also represented Georgia's various regions including:

| Geographic Region   | Number of Interviews |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| Atlanta-Gainesville | 29                   |
| Columbus-Rome       | 6                    |
| Macon-Augusta       | 10                   |
| Savannah-Valdosta   | 11                   |
| Tifton-Thomasville  | 7                    |



## Overall Participant Themes

In talking to leaders across the state, several response themes appeared – both commonalities and differences. Not surprisingly, while various geographic regions and population groups face unique health care situations, many of the challenges and opportunities are similar.

### COMMON PERSPECTIVES

#### Access to Health Care and Cost

Access to and cost of health care resonated among all participants. The number of uninsured and underinsured – both in Georgia and the United States – continues to grow, creating a host of challenges for employers and residents alike. While all employers are seeing significant increases in health insurance costs, smaller employers find these costs especially expensive because they do not have enough employees to spread risk and negotiate lower rates with insurance companies. These higher costs are causing employers to shift a greater proportion of health care expenses to the employee, reduce benefit offerings or, in some cases, both.

Georgia residents feel the effects of these rising costs as well. People who are uninsured or have to pay high health insurance premiums, deductibles and co-payments tend not to seek preventive care, but rather they save their money for acute care needs. By doing this, they ultimately delay needed medical attention. As a result, they tend to be sicker when they seek treatment, which leads to greater medical expenses. People with limited or no health insurance visit hospital emergency rooms more frequently; thus, driving up the cost of care.

With a large rural population in the state, many Georgians are also concerned with residents' ability to access quality health care. Rural areas tend to have a larger proportion of small employers, leading to a higher percentage of underinsured and uninsured individuals. Fewer hospitals, care facilities, routine care providers and specialists and lack of transportation hamper the ability of rural populations to have access to affordable, high quality care. Several Listening Tour participants reported that emergency medical technicians serve as the primary source of care in rural communities with no access to other facilities or providers.

Reductions in Medicaid reimbursement for providers were cited as an additional threat to the availability of health care in Georgia. Because Medicaid serves as a safety net by paying for care among low-income Georgians, and assisting hospitals in paying for uncompensated care administered to the uninsured, many respondents feared that hospitals, particularly in rural areas, will not be able to remain in operation.

**"I think we've got a serious problem emerging with access to care. And it's hidden, in large part, from the people that can really make some decisions about it..."**



### Health Education and Prevention

The difficulty in obtaining preventive health care and the need for health education was a theme that surfaced among many respondents. Health disparities, health literacy, lifestyle choices and the environment are major concerns.

Participants noted that a lack of health education creates an environment in which people do not have the knowledge they need to make healthy choices about their lifestyle behaviors. They often lack the resources to maintain a healthy lifestyle and seek preventive health services. This lack of knowledge and resources contributes to poor health outcomes.

Listening Tour participants consistently discussed the need to improve Georgia's health literacy rate. Participants agreed that if Georgians are educated on how to make healthier choices (and have the opportunity to act on them), they will spend less time and money on illness or dealing with health conditions resulting from factors that they can control. For example, annual visits to a primary care physician can help prevent health

problems before they become urgent or dire. A few respondents observed that having healthier people in the workforce will result in employers seeing increases in business productivity and potentially decreases in health care costs.

Respondents also stated that environmental factors contribute to whether or not a person engages in healthy behavior. Experts and studies tell us that environments have a great deal of influence on lifestyle habits. Factors such as a lack of public transportation, affordable housing or community access to bike trails or other areas for physical activity contribute as well.

Listening Tour participants also noted that another factor contributing to poor health behaviors is a person's socioeconomic status. Respondents felt that people living in lower-income environments might not have adequate access to health information, and they might not have the resources necessary to purchase healthy foods, participate in regular physical activity or go for annual visits to a health care professional. Tour respondents also said that people living in low income neighborhoods often have fewer opportunities to engage in healthy behaviors because there are many times fewer grocery stores, parks, health clinics or hospitals.

"If you have a highly educated public, they make better decisions across the board, including about their health care."



### Differences in Perspectives

While there were several common themes that surfaced through this Listening Tour, participants had differing opinions about who should take primary responsibility for health care services and program funding.

One group of participants viewed health and health care as the primary responsibility of the individual. This group felt that health care outcomes are influenced to a greater degree by the individual choices that people make (e.g., tobacco use, lack of physical activity, alcohol and drug use or poor nutrition). This group had a tendency to believe that individuals and local communities should provide the majority of funding for health care programs and services.

Another group of Listening Tour respondents believed that health care is primarily the responsibility of the government, with varying degrees of accountability falling to local, state and federal levels. This group saw government as primarily responsible for funding health care programs and services.

Those participants that did not fall into the above categories expressed a wide spectrum of views about who should bear the cost burden for health care. Acknowledging that people and communities play a role, most of these participants also recognized that the government should play some role as well. They noted that the cost of health care should be balanced among federal, state and local governments and consumers.

### REGIONAL TRENDS

Interesting regional trends also emerged during the Listening Tour related to the key health care issues and strategies for funding health care programs identified by participants.

#### Top Health Issues

Overall, health and health care issues related to cost, access and insurance were mentioned by the majority of respondents; however, respondents in Atlanta-Gainesville and Tifton-Thomasville regions were more likely to list obesity as an important issue. Participants from the Columbus-Rome region were more likely to list shortages in the health care workforce as an issue.

#### Strategies for Funding Health Care

The majority of Listening Tour respondents stated that they would support strategies for funding health care in Georgia that include increasing alcohol and tobacco excise taxes and asking individual family members to pay a greater share of health care costs. Participants in the Atlanta-Gainesville and Savannah-Valdosta regions also felt that policymakers should consider using funding from other existing programs. Columbus-Rome and Tifton-Thomasville respondents also included a 1-cent sales tax in their list of top funding options.

When asked who should bear the burden of health care costs, respondents in the Columbus-Rome region felt that consumers should bear a larger burden than the government. Macon-Augusta, Savannah-Valdosta and Tifton-Thomasville participants felt that the government should bear a larger burden of health care costs.

**"There's a lot of focus on consumer-driven health care options. That's great, but if you don't have a job, none of that's going to help you..."**

# CORPORATE: Business and Manufacturing

Georgia's businesses and corporations have a major stake in the state's health care system: they depend on a healthy workforce for productivity, and they are major purchasers of health care. Business leaders recognize that to attract quality employees, they must provide competitive health benefits while still being fiscally responsible to the bottom line of the organization.

### WHAT WE HEARD

The business community's greatest challenges were consistent with the major themes addressing the rising cost of health care and access to quality care. Needing a healthy workforce, businesses and corporations were also concerned with the lack of emphasis on disease prevention and health promotion.

### Access to Health Care and Cost

Businesses and corporations consistently shared their concerns about the rising cost of health care and access to quality care for their employees. Specifically, they were concerned that the high costs of technology and prescription drugs are driving up both employer and consumer medical costs. Corporations noted that publicity regarding medical malpractice lawsuits increases the perception that quality of care is being compromised – they stated that consumers need to have confidence in knowing they are getting the best care possible.

Respondents noted that with costs continuing to rise, the result is a decreasing scope of employee health care benefits, leaving consumers with fewer choices. Some respondents felt that many employers cannot afford to offer coverage to employees, or they are forced to offer limited coverage. They feared that if access continues to be limited and the cost of care remains high, consumers will stop getting preventive care or treatment they need, impacting overall health. As health worsens, productivity decreases as employees miss more days due to more severe or chronic conditions that are caused by delaying care and working with impaired health. Decreased productivity could ultimately lead to a downturn in the state's economy.

Unique to the business sector, participants expressed an understanding of how health issues impact the "business" of health care. Respondents noted that with costs soaring, fewer community hospitals are able to operate financially, and those that do, may be forced to provide a reduced quality of care just to remain afloat. They recognized that in this scenario, only the biggest hospitals, with the most revenue and private pay patrons, are able to survive.

### Health Education and Prevention

Business leaders felt that health education with an emphasis on preventive health measures is a critical need. By providing Georgians with information to help them make choices to live healthier lives, the long-term impact on the state's economy would be much less negative. Specifically, respondents noted that efforts in the areas of chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease should be addressed through education: teaching people the impact that lifestyle has on their health and how to reduce risk factors. By addressing these issues, the business community believed we would see a decrease in health disparities across the state, greater access to care and more consumer accountability for health.

While the business community believed that health education and disease prevention are important strategies, when it comes to funding these programs, the scenario is not "black and white." Business leaders felt that it is important to fund health education programs, but they were uncomfortable raising taxes or rescinding recent tax cuts to support these programs. They felt that additional measures should be implemented to examine efficiency and effectiveness of disease prevention programs before agreeing to alter Georgia's tax structure. The majority of business leaders stated that they would support non-health related state agencies (e.g., transportation department building fitness trails, education department devoting time to physical education) using funds to support health initiatives.

### Opportunities for Progress

Business leaders saw education and health promotion efforts as the areas holding the most potential for progress, particularly related to behavior change and disease prevention efforts for chronic conditions like obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Some business community respondents felt that the high cost of prescription drugs would begin to be better controlled for seniors through the new Medicare prescription drug plan. Some respondents also felt that the greatest potential lies in implementing policies to help reduce medical errors would improve patient safety and overall quality of care.



**ACCESS TO CARE**

- > Consumer coverage
- > Quality of care

**COST OF CARE**

- > Employer costs
- > Prescription drugs
- > Technology

**HEALTH EDUCATION & PREVENTION**

- > Obesity
- > Heart disease
- > Diabetes

## PROVIDERS: Hospitals and Safety Net Providers

Hospitals and public health departments bring several perspectives to the health care issues facing Georgia: they are providers of privately and publicly funded care, safety nets for the uninsured, employers and community leaders. They are concerned about access to health care and the quality of care provided.

### WHAT WE HEARD

The provider community's greatest challenges were in providing affordable quality care, which is linked to access: patient access to insurance or third-party payers, facility access to a qualified workforce, and access to medical technology.

#### Access and Workforce Development

As with the other groups, hospitals were most concerned about access to health care. For this group, access is defined as patient access to health care coverage, as well as access to care providers. Providers noted that they are faced with workforce development issues like a shortage of nurses, a maldistribution of trained medical professionals and a lack of diversity in the workforce. Many nurses are finding more lucrative positions outside of clinical practice. With the rising cost of medical malpractice insurance cited as a contributing factor, many providers have left the medical profession for jobs in education or the private sector. Many hospitals believed that the lack of medical professionals, coupled with the increasing costs of health care, will exacerbate the problem of the uninsured and underinsured, leaving them without access to care entirely.

Public health providers were concerned about the barriers that impede their patients' access to care: transportation, poverty and lack of education to affect behavior change. While the respondents had differing views on the extent to which their patients should assume responsibility for their health, they cited a lack of understanding of the long-term impact of health decisions as an impediment to people making good choices.

#### Medicaid and the Uninsured

Participants cited the constraints on the Medicaid budget and the accompanying reductions in reimbursement rates as factors increasing the demands on hospitals. They felt these issues will ultimately compromise the ability to provide quality health care as well as cover uncompensated care for those who are either uninsured or underinsured.

#### Technology

The providers interviewed in the Listening Tour stated that technology has the potential to both improve the quality of care and increase the cost of health care for Georgians. At this point, however, they noted that technology is too expensive for all hospitals to make the required investments.

#### Opportunities for Progress

Providers were not optimistic about progress in the next few years. The areas cited as having the most potential for progress were issues of personal responsibility: reducing tobacco and alcohol use and increasing physical activity. They consistently stated that the majority of funding for health care should be borne by the federal government, particularly for low-income populations, including health care coverage, immunizations and basic preventive screening services.



#### TOP HEALTH CONCERNS:

### Providers

#### ACCESS TO CARE

- > Patient access to coverage and providers
- > Barriers to access (e.g., transportation, poverty, lack of education)
- > Workforce development

#### COST OF CARE

- > Medicaid budget
- > Uninsured population
- > Technology costs

# COMMUNITY: Not-for-profits and Community Groups

Community organizations and leaders serve as a bridge between business and government in many Georgia communities. These organizations complement hospitals and health care facilities by providing health education, literacy programs and support services for the residents. Community leaders champion the causes critical to our daily lives; they are the “eyes and ears” across the state.

## WHAT WE HEARD

Community leaders felt that the greatest health care challenges facing Georgians today are a lack of health education and disease prevention programming, addressing the aging population in terms of Medicaid and pharmaceutical costs, and various workforce issues.



### Health Education and Prevention

A top health concern of community leaders was the lack of consumer health education, particularly disease prevention programs. Community leaders noted that there is a lack of budget to support these kinds of programs, which only leads to continued decline in health for state residents. This group felt that if consumers were better educated on health issues and disease prevention, overall health would improve – both in terms of the medical condition of Georgia’s population and the state’s economic situation. Programs teaching residents about healthy behaviors as well as the importance of wellness visits to their doctor would have economic benefits for both consumers and the state.

### Georgia’s Aging Population

Community leaders were also concerned about how rising health care and insurance costs affect Georgia’s aging population. Specifically, they felt the increasing costs of Medicaid, Medicare and pharmaceutical drugs are putting many seniors in a position of not being able to afford the care that they need, forcing long term care costs to be absorbed by family members, communities or local governments. Community leaders did not see costs decreasing in the near future, and they predicted that nothing short of a disaster – a bankrupt health care system, completely overwhelmed Medicaid budget or an epidemic – would turn the system around. If funds continue to be cut from programs like Medicaid, community leaders felt that the number of uninsured Georgians would continue increasing as the quality of care decreases.

### Workforce Development

As with the provider community, workforce issues were also a concern for community groups. Respondents cited that competition for workers is driving health care professionals to more lucrative jobs outside of clinical care. Health care salaries are lower than other industries, which increases the cost of quality care, and this issue is reflected in the nursing shortage in Georgia.

### Opportunities for Progress

Community leaders expressed both optimism and pessimism regarding progress in expanding access to health care and improving quality. Some leaders felt that the greatest opportunity lies in balancing the long term care budget and regulating health insurance costs, while others felt there would be little progress in health care at all in the future. One leader cited that slow improvements in health would ultimately result in improved health for residents.

Confirming that health is a high priority for Georgians, community leaders unanimously ranked health care as the most important issue for the state to address. These leaders favored funding additional health programs no matter the cost – even if it means rescinding recent tax cuts or increasing taxes. Community leaders also supported non-health related organizations using funds to support health initiatives. As for who should bear the cost burden, leaders were divided: half felt that consumers should shoulder a larger share of costs and the other half felt that the responsibility should fall to the government at various levels (i.e., local, state and federal). One respondent stated that the country should implement a socialized medicine system.

#### ACCESS TO CARE

- > Needs of aging population
- > Workforce development (e.g., nursing shortage)

#### COST OF CARE

- > Health insurance costs
- > Impact of Medicaid budget
- > Long term costs of care

#### HEALTH EDUCATION & PREVENTION

- > Wellness visits
- > Lifestyle
- > Environment

# GOVERNMENT: State and Local Officials and Legislators

Legislators and state health officials have a birds' eye view of Georgia's health care system – as representatives of the people they must address broad priorities including security issues, public health and safety as well as more global concerns. They are responsible for creating and enacting policies and laws that affect people's daily lives, including health care issues.

## WHAT WE HEARD

As with the other groups, government leaders considered access, cost and health literacy to be the main health issues facing the state; however, this group had some deeper, more specific concerns embedded in these themes including the aging population, access to healthy foods and physical activity, transportation and education on how to navigate the health care system.

### Access to Health Care and Cost

With the duty of being fiscally responsible for Georgia's budget, legislators stated that the rising cost of health care is the number one concern facing the state today. Legislators felt that skyrocketing costs for pharmaceutical drugs and cutting-edge health care technologies are driving costs up, leading consumers to get pharmaceuticals from other countries and seek alternative treatment methods in an effort to conserve resources. At the same time, one group of government respondents felt that Georgia has enough money to adequately deal with the health care problems it faces but that monetary resources are not allocated properly to handle them. Another group of respondents cited that Georgia's revenue is not keeping up with the increase in cost of the Medicaid program, causing the gap to continue growing.

If the cost issue is addressed, the government community believed that more people would be willing to work for small businesses or become entrepreneurs themselves. If cost is not controlled, legislators were concerned that the number of uninsured residents will continue to increase, forcing consumers to shoulder the increased cost for medications and health insurance co-payments.

Government officials cited the lack of transportation, low requirements for physical activity in schools and limited availability of healthy foods as factors that foster an unhealthy population.

### Health Education and Prevention

The government community placed a high priority on disease prevention and health literacy. Supporting the notion that health education will be a key to progress, this group also felt that if residents are educated and empowered with health information, Georgia will see a resulting positive impact on state economics because people will take better care of themselves and require less medical attention. Respondents noted that state and local governments must agree to invest more for prevention programs and services. Legislators also felt that if people recognize the importance and role of personal responsibility and learn to make healthy choices, they will use health care more appropriately. One respondent stated that there is a specific need for health education as it relates to navigating the health care system in general, and specifically, the details of health insurance.

### Georgia's Aging Population

Government leaders cited the aging population of the state as a critical area of concern. In response to the growing increase in the state's Medicaid burden and country's Medicare burden, respondents noted that they believe consumers in general could bear more of the long term care financial burden moving forward, reducing the amount of government resources needed to address the elderly population.

### Opportunities for Progress

Although this group also believed that financing health care is not a clear-cut issue, these leaders saw the most opportunity for advancement in the area of health promotion. Specifically, legislators viewed the recently passed legislation banning indoor smoking in public places as a positive step in promoting health. Respondents cited this legislation is an effective way to encourage healthy behaviors. One participant noted that this policy contributes to improving public health by decreasing second-hand smoke without increasing the costs of the state or taxpayers.



## TOP HEALTH CONCERNS: Government

### ACCESS TO CARE

- > Consumer coverage
- > Barriers to access (e.g., transportation, availability of healthy foods for poor)

### COST OF CARE

- > Pharmaceutical drugs
- > Technology costs
- > Medicaid budget
- > Aging population

### HEALTH EDUCATION & PREVENTION

- > Lifestyle and environment
- > Navigating the health care/ insurance system



## Conclusions

Speaking with leaders around the state, we heard many different perspectives on the state of health and health care in Georgia. From the small business owner in Valdosta to the senator in Atlanta to the community director in Columbus, leaders of different constituencies all shared a common concern about the health issues facing Georgians. This Listening Tour revealed that while there may be varying views on the causes, consequences and even the language used to describe health care problems, six topics surfaced throughout all groups of leaders in all regions as areas in need of attention:

- > Access to quality health care at an affordable cost
- > Investments in consumer health education
- > Health care for the aging
- > Workforce development
- > Technology enabling quality health care
- > Improvements in quality of health care

These six issues, and the consensus around their importance to the state of Georgia, are also reflected in the goals of Healthcare Georgia Foundation: protect and promote the health of individuals, families and communities; improve the availability, quality, appropriateness and financing of health care services; and integrate and coordinate efforts to improve health and health care services.

The results also emphasize the importance our state's leadership places on striving to care for those who are least able to care for themselves. To truly have an impact on the overall health for the state, we need to create the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The Listening Tour results underscore the importance and complexity of finding ways to improve health, which will require increasing access to affordable care, supporting health education efforts and creating the social, economic and environmental conditions in which individuals can choose to lead healthier lives.

This Listening Tour is not merely an assessment for Healthcare Georgia Foundation. The insights and learnings gleaned from these interviews will be the beginning of a greater conversation – a conversation about solutions and action. The various perspectives captured here highlight that there are many players who both shape and are affected by the health of the state. No one entity can address these issues alone. These results will serve as a springboard for an ongoing dialogue to engage each of us in advancing the health of all Georgians.

"...unless we're able to decrease or somehow to stabilize the increase in health care costs, then it's going to continue to put a strain on state budgets and on the federal budget."

These results will serve as a springboard for an ongoing dialogue to engage each of us in advancing the health of all Georgians.







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grantmaking for health



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