



# TOGETHER WE CAN DO BETTER.

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## **Campaign launched to rebuild Georgia's public health system**

Atlanta – July 14, 2010 – Supporters of public health in Georgia are launching a campaign aimed at educating policy makers and the public about the need to reinvest in and rebuild the state's system.

The campaign – "Partner Up! For Public Health" – has so far rolled out a Web site ([www.togetherwecandobetter.com](http://www.togetherwecandobetter.com)); organized a statewide advisory board of nearly 30 organizations; and held advocacy Leadership Academies in Tifton, Savannah, Rome and Athens.

The campaign was initiated and funded by [Healthcare Georgia Foundation](#) in reaction to nearly a decade of funding cuts that have decimated the state's public health system.

"This initiative is aimed at building public and political will," said Gary D. Nelson, president, Healthcare Georgia Foundation. "Georgia's public health system stops the spread of infectious diseases, ensures the safety of the food we eat, promotes good health and manages chronic conditions. If it is to continue that work, it is necessary to reverse the dangerous and harmful trends that have severely compromised public health capacity in recent years."

Since 2000 Georgia's population has grown 20% but per capita state spending for the public health system has been cut 21%. Today, per capita state spending on public health in Georgia is about four cents a day, among the lowest in the nation.

Most recently in the FY 2011 budget the Division of Public Health's (DPH) general fund budget was cut from \$158.6 million to about \$148.9 million, a reduction of about \$9.75 million.

Georgia ranked 38<sup>th</sup> in per capita state public health appropriations, according to the March 2010 "[Shortchanging America's Health](#)" report by the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Georgia's budget was substantially less than neighbors like South Carolina, Florida, Tennessee and Alabama.

Lost positions, low pay and high turnover hinder Georgia's public health system. More than 1,000 of approximately 7,500 public health positions across the state are vacant, according to the Division of Public Health (DPH).

But that's only part of the story: in addition to vacancies, hundreds of positions have been eliminated since the start of the decade. For example, during a time when the state's population grew by more than a million, the public health nursing workforce shrank nearly 22 percent, falling from 1,817 positions in 2002 to 1,423 this year, according to DPH.

Those who continue are paid annual salaries that are approximately \$20,000 below market. Pay for a public health staff nurse in Georgia is \$36,753, while Georgia's market rate is upwards of \$61,200, according to DPH data. Some public health nurses work two jobs, others need food stamps. Recruiting is a challenge.

Environmental health professionals who inspect restaurants and drinking water are also in short supply. In Fiscal Year 2008, there were a total of 493 environmental health specialist positions statewide. By Fiscal Year 2010, 46 of those positions had been eliminated and another 43 positions were vacant –a 20 percent total decrease in manpower, according to DPH data.

Meanwhile, prevention programs that can pay for themselves have been cut or are in jeopardy. An annual investment of \$10 per Georgian in programs shown to increase physical activity, improve diet, and reduce tobacco use could save the state \$426 million annually within five years, according to a [2009 report](#) published by the Trust for America's Health and the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. It amounts to a return of \$4.77 on every dollar spent.

Years of inadequate funding and staffing have had serious consequences, said Bob Stolarick, executive director of the Georgia Public Health Association.

“Georgia historically ranks near the bottom of state-by-state rankings of overall health indicators,” he said. “Our state has some of the nation’s worst measurements of health determinants and outcomes. Cutbacks are impacting environmental health inspections and there continues to be serious concern that the system will collapse during a major emergency or pandemic because of the shortage of public health nurses.”

Georgia did poorly in rankings such as The Commonwealth Fund’s [“Aiming Higher”](#) (38<sup>th</sup> in 2009) and [“America’s Health Rankings”](#) (43<sup>rd</sup> in 2009), a joint effort of United Health Foundation, the American Public Health Association and Partnership for Prevention.

Among the states, Georgia gets these poor health rankings according to the [“2008 Health Rankings: Georgia and Georgia’s Children”](#):

- 31<sup>st</sup> for the percentage of adults who do smoke.
- 37<sup>th</sup> for the percentage of adults who do not exercise regularly.
- 38<sup>th</sup> for the percentage of overweight high school students.
- 39<sup>th</sup> for the percentage of adults who are obese.
- 41<sup>st</sup> for the percentage of adults with diabetes.
- 40<sup>th</sup> for infant mortality.
- 41<sup>st</sup> for teen birth rate.
- 43<sup>rd</sup> for pre-term births.
- 45<sup>th</sup> for low birthweight babies.
- 47<sup>th</sup> for the prevalence of infectious diseases like tuberculosis, hepatitis and AIDS.

Georgia’s most recent bad health grade came this summer in the 2010 [“F as in Fat”](#) report: Georgia trailed only Mississippi in the percentage of children between 10 and 17 who are obese. The report is produced by the Trust for America’s Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

“It’s difficult to overstate the damage done to Georgia’s public health system in recent years,” said Charles Hayslett, CEO of Hayslett Group LLC, an Atlanta-based public relations firm that is managing the campaign. “Long-term, our goal is to persuade the General Assembly to restore the funding they’ve cut in recent years, and to get the state’s public health system back to a footing where it can truly meet its responsibilities. But before we get to that point, we have to come to grips with just how little the public – and many of our political leaders – understand about the role of our public health system.”

The effort is supported by an advisory board of nearly 30 stakeholder organizations who share the vision of rebuilding Georgia’s public health system.

The advisory board includes: AARP; American Cancer Society; American Diabetes Association; American Lung Association; Armstrong Atlantic State University, Association County Commissioners of Georgia; Community Health Works of Georgia; Dougherty County Board of Health; Echols County Board of Health; Emory University; Fort Valley State University; Georgia Breast Cancer Coalition Fund; Georgia Budget & Policy Institute; Georgia Chapter - American Academy of Pediatrics; Georgia Free Clinic Network; Georgia Municipal Association; Georgia Public Health Association; Georgia Rural Health Association; Georgia Southern University; Georgia State University; Georgia Women for a Change, Inc.; Georgians for a Healthy Future; Gwinnett County Board of Health; HealthStat; Medical College of Georgia School of Medicine, Savannah; Morehouse School of Medicine; Society for Public Health Education (Georgia); and, University of Georgia.

**About the Partner Up! for Public Health Campaign:** Partner Up! for Public Health is a statewide advocacy campaign funded by [Healthcare Georgia Foundation](#) and designed to advance public health in Georgia. The campaign was launched in October 2009 as part of a multifaceted effort to rebuild a public health system that has been decimated by budget cuts in recent years. For more information visit [www.togetherwecandobetter.com](http://www.togetherwecandobetter.com).