

**Wake County Health and Human Services Board
Meeting Minutes
February 26th, 2026**

Board Members Present:

Dr. Ojinga Harrison
Maty Ferrer Hoppmann
Wanda Hunter
Christine Kushner
Terry McTernan
Dr. Tonya Minggia
Ann Rollins
Dr. Anita Sawhney
Commissioner Cheryl Stallings
Tanyetta Sutton
Irv Trust
Dr. Kelcy Walker Pope
Birchie Warren

Guests Present:

Deidre McCullers

Staff Members Present:

Jennifer Brown
Sheila Donaldson
Sara Gisler
Barbra Gonzalez
Anika Hamilton
Petra Hager
Richie Hayner
Duane Holder
Brittany Hunt
Evan Kane
Jason Mahoney
Annemarie Maiorano
Karen Morant
Shanta Nowell
Toni Pedroza
Mike Ranck
Catherin Rivera
Lechelle Wardell
Mike Wescott
Tammy Whitaker
Diamond Wimbish
Ross Yeager

Call to Order

Chair Ann Rollins called the meeting to order at 7:36 a.m.

Next Board Meeting – March 26th, 2026 – Wake County Health and Human Services Board Retreat

Approval of Minutes

Chair Ann Rollins asked for a motion to approve the January 22nd, 2026 Board meeting minutes. There was a motion by Mr. Irv Trust and Mr. Terry McTernan seconded. The minutes were unanimously approved.

Treasurer's Report

Treasurer Terry McTernan provided the Treasurer's Report. In January, the fund was reported as \$9,167.95. Since that report, the Board had received an addition of \$150 in donated Board members' stipends. This brought the fund to \$9,317.95.

Health and Human Services Board Applicant: Optometrist Seat

(Presented by Ms. Ann Rollins)

Chair Ann Rollins asked for a review and consideration of Dr. Carrienne Starnes for the vacant Optometrist seat on the Wake County Health and Human Services Board.

Ms. Christine Kushner made a motion to recommend Dr. Carrienne Starnes to the Wake County Board of Commissioners (BOC) for the Health and Human Services Board's Optometrist seat. Mr. Irv Trust seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously passed.

Nesterenko Appeal Discussion

(Presented by Mr. Ken Murphy)

Mr. Ken Murphy (Senior Deputy County Attorney) explained that this was an appeal panel's decision for the full Wake County Health and Human Services Board to consider. This decision came after two days of evidentiary hearings – one in August 2025 and another in September 2025. The appeal panel was composed of Ms. Christine Kushner, Ms. Lily Chen, and Dr. Jim Peterson. The appeal panel's recommendation to the full Board was that they upheld – by 3-0 vote – the decision from Onsite Wastewater staff to deny a septic permit application for Mr. Andrei Nesterenko. Mr. Nesterenko had applied for a specific type of septic system. Onsite Wastewater staff went through their application review process applying the Wake County local septic rules that the County adopted. These incorporated, by reference, the State septic rules. Unfortunately, in this case, there were three grounds that Onsite Wastewater staff denied the application. Any one of the three reasons was a sufficient ground to deny the permit, but three were found. Under the Board's appeal rules, the appellant who applied for the septic permit could have submitted a written objection to the appeal panel's decision and requested to make an oral argument to the Board. This did not happen. The appeal panel's decision was sent to the appellant in early October 2025 and the ten days for objection have long since passed. This objection would not have encompassed new evidence as this was limited to the appeal panel hearing in August and September. Now, without this, the Board had to make their determination by a simple majority vote based on the reasonableness standard. The recommendation of the appeal panel could be affirmed and adopted by the Board, reversed, or modified in some way.

Mr. Irv Trust asked if Mr. Nesterenko was given guidance or recommendations on how to better prepare an application for consideration. Mr. Murphy stated that he had indeed been given much advice through the two days of the appeal hearing with options and guidance alongside the facts of the case.

When asked if it could have been a language barrier that made understanding the County's decision difficult, this was hard to answer definitively. A translator was provided by the County at the pre-hearing as well as at both appeal hearing dates. Ms. Kushner voiced that there was extensive time for translation. She noted that there was an option to go offsite and potentially place a system in an area designated for a septic system. But this was not an option Mr. Nesterenko wished to explore.

Dr. Ojinga Harrison asked how much more the cost would be to place the septic system offsite. This was not known.

After the Board had made their final decision, Mr. Nesterenko would have the right to appeal that decision to the Wake County District Court system. The Wake County Health and Human Services Board, however, would be done with the case after its decision that day.

Chair Ann Rollins asked if there was feedback from the State as they had been looking into this case. Mr. Murphy confirmed that Mr. Nesterenko asked the State Onsite Wastewater division for an informal review of his application and the County's decision to deny it. This was, however, completely separate

from the Health and Human Services Board’s process. It was not known what the status of the potential informal review was. Since the County had adopted its own local Onsite Wastewater regulations, this was a County decision. County staff can take input from the State but are not bound by the input. To Mr. Murphy’s knowledge, however, no input had been received from the State.

Mr. Terry McTernan made a motion to affirm and uphold the decision of the appeal panel. Mr. Irv Trust seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously passed.

Annual Regional Networks Review

(Presented by Ms. Annemarie Maiorano)

Ms. Annemarie Maiorano (Deputy Director of Social Services – Operations) provided a 2025 Regional Center update. Ms. Maiorano was responsible for Operations, which the Regional Centers fell under. She was excited to share an overview of the regional services delivery and accomplishments of the Centers over the last year. She then introduced the Regional Center Directors (listed below).

- Eastern Regional Center (ERC) – Mr. Darryl Blevins (not in attendance)
- Departure Drive Regional Center (Departure) – Ms. Petra Hager
- Western Health and Human Services Center (WHHSC) – Ms. Karen Morant
- Northern Regional Center (NRC) – Mr. Ross Yeager
- Southern Regional Center (SRC) – Mr. Richie Hayner

Ms. Maiorano also recognized Ms. Barbra Gonzalez (Department Communications Consultant) for creating the presentation.

The purpose of the Wake County Regional Centers was to bridge access and service gaps and break down barriers to service. This was done by establishing a regional network of care within the community with internal and external partners, integrating services to improve social and economic vitality (SEV), and expanding outreach and impact.



*Regional Centers are **strategically located** in outlying areas of the County. This community-based service delivery model **reduces transportation barriers** and provides **enhanced opportunities for coordinated access to services.***

Wake County was, admittedly, big with over 800 square miles covering the county. Establishing strategically located center outside of Raleigh helps to remove accessibility barriers. It also helps to tailor services to the local needs which may vary widely from locations like Zebulon to Wake Forest to Fuquay-Varina. The Regional Centers have both client goals and staff goals, listed below.

- Client Goals
 - Exceptional, personalized customer service
 - Engage visitors holistically
 - Connect visitors to resources and opportunities
 - Empower success
- Staff Goals
 - Cross-trained, versatile team
 - Foster sense of purpose and community impact
 - Meaningful outcomes

Next, programs offered at the Centers were reviewed.

Core Programs

Economic Services

- Medicaid - Family & Children + Adult
- Work First
- Energy/Water Assistance
- Food and Nutrition Services
- Long Term Care Assistance
- Child Care Subsidy

Child Welfare

- CPS Assessment
- CPS In-Home
- Foster Care/Kinship Care
- Adoption
- Foster Home Recruitment/Licensing
- Family Support Services (Prevention)

Core Programs

Health Clinic Services

- Family Planning
- Prenatal Care
- Immunizations
- Communicable Disease/STD
- Pharmacy
- Lab (Contract)
- Child Health

Public Health

- Health Promotion
- WIC (Women, Infant, Children)
- Care Management for At-Risk Children (CMARC)
- Maternal Care Services
- High Risk Nursing Services
- Preventive Dental (SMILES)
- Environmental Services

Facility-Based Services

Inter-Departmental

- Tax Administration
- Vital Records (R.O.D.)
- Inspections (C.S.)
- Wake County Sheriff
- Capital Area Workforce Dev.
- Housing-Veterans Services
- Passport Services

Onsite Partner Agencies

- NC Works Career Center
- Monarch Behavioral Health
- UNC Healthcare
- Advance Community Health
- Fernandez Community Center

There are other community partners – including faith partners, municipalities, nonprofits, and business communities – in the buildings. Starting on July 1st, 2025, staff began keeping a more official count of people entering the Centers. Since then there have been 52,000 visits total.

Each region has a Community Advocacy Committee (CAC) comprised of local leaders to ensure our focus and initiatives are aligned with the priorities of the communities served. The CACs partner with local communities to assure quality services, identify local needs and priorities, serve as a forum for information-sharing, increase coordination and service linkages, and serve as a resource for local Regional Center and Wake County Human Services. These are groups of local residents in the community alongside some Wake County staff members.

Next, Ms. Maiorano reviewed the 2025 Regional Center highlights.

- Departure Drive - Raleigh
 - Monthly on-site HIV/STI testing clinics
 - Hosted Care Management for At-Risk Children (CMARC), Care Management for High-Risk Program (CMHRP), and Doula trainings
 - Mental health visits on-site through private provider
 - Wear Red Walk celebrating American Heart Month
 - Breast Cancer Awareness Walk honoring Breast Cancer Awareness Month
 - Child Abuse Prevention Month, Pinwheel Planting
 - Foster Care Awareness Month promotion
 - Holiday Food Drive Collection for North Raleigh Ministries and Millbrook United Methodist Church Food Pantry
 - Back-to-school immunization event, serving 60+ students
 - Summer Feeding Program at Green Road Library – 1,180 meals, 50+ bookbags distributed
 - Alianza Latina Pro-Educación en Salud (ALPES) Mental Health Fair coordinated with ALPES and the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS)
 - Hosted community partners:
 - Dress for Success
 - Care Management Organization Medicaid
 - Mi Familia en Acción
- Eastern Regional Center – Zebulon
 - Back-to-School Vaccine Clinic
 - Expansion of Homelessness Prevention Services

- On-site Veterans Services
 - Simplified Assistance for Well Water Testing – access to reduce-fee testing
 - Warmth for Wake – Program promotion
 - Vital Records expansion of services
 - Notary Oaths
 - Marriage License Applications
 - Pre-K Screenings through WCPSS Office of Early Learning
 - Community Health Worker (CHW) support for Social and Economic Vitality (SEV)
 - On-site HIV/STI Clinics offered
 - Faith Partnerships/Summer Meals Program
 - East Wake Food Family Partnership
 - Community Input Sessions
 - One Water Plan
 - Eastern Wake Area Plan
 - Wake County’s Consolidated Plan
 - Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA)
 - Community Health Fairs
 - Wake County Holiday Cheer, 97 families
 - Fire Services Recruitment Engagement event
- Northern Regional Center – Wake Forest
 - Three Veterans Resource Fairs in partnership with Wake County Veterans Services and local non-profit the Joel Fund
 - The innovative “Eat. Well. Wake.” food prescription program. This is a collaborative effort to ensure healthy fresh foods are provided to those with chronic health conditions. Was recognized with an award by the National Association of Counties (NACo)
 - Hot vehicle awareness event to highlight the dangers of leaving children and pets in vehicles during the summer heat. Partnered with the Alston Massenburg Center and Maternal and Child Health (MCH) to host
 - Elder Abuse Awareness Day – Partnered with Wake County Adult and Family Services, the Town of Wake Forest, and the Wake Forest Senior Center. This included a walk and information fair
 - Back-to-School event providing backpacks and supplies to more than 50 local families. 85 children were able to get essential school vaccines
 - Winter Coat Distribution giving 210 winter coats to local clients with needs
 - Southern Regional Center – Fuquay-Varina
 - New Summer Food Sites in the Southern Region – Beech Bluff County Park and Pine Acres Community Center
 - Mental Health Training provided
 - Youth Mental Health First Aid (English)
 - Youth Mental Health First Aid (Spanish)
 - Community Resilience Model (2 Sessions)
 - Health Clinics
 - Wake County Clinic returned to five days per week
 - Behavioral Health
 - Monarch increased onsite presence to five days per week
 - Mental Health Resource Event
 - “M” is for Menopause Women’s Health Exhibition
 - Monthly Outreach at Southeast Regional Library
 - In calendar year (CY) 2025:

- 4.5% increase in client encounters
 - 28,251 total client encounters
 - 30% increase in number of tax payments
 - 19% increase in number of Register of Deeds (ROD) certificates
- Preventive Health Efforts
 - HIV/STI testing two times per month
 - Regional Smiles Child Dental Clinic monthly
 - Rex Mammogram hosted by Advance Community Health (ACH)
 - Back-to-School Vaccine Clinic
 - At-Home Test Kits (Naloxone, STI, COVID-19)
 - 3,388 patient visits between Wake County and ACH
 - Southern Region Community Resource Event
 - Grilling and Chilling Back-to-School event
- Western Health and Human Services Center – Cary
 - Western Regional Community Advocacy Committee (WRCAC) Collaboration with regional Transit Service Organizations
 - Onsite HIV/STI Clinics
 - Back-to-School Vaccine Clinic
 - Monthly Preventative Dental Services for uninsured youth
 - Food Drive in partnership with PH School Social Workers Team
 - Community Conversation: with Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) and Child Welfare Social Workers and Community Case Managers
 - WRCAC Career Navigation: Partnership with Wake Tech and Social and Economic Vitality (SEV) and nonprofits
 - Domestic Abuse and Violence Prevention training
 - Breast Cancer Awareness Walk
 - Pre-K Screenings through WCPSS Office of Early Learning
 - Warmth for Wake and Holiday Cheer Programs
 - Fire Academy Recruitment event
 - Accessibility with transit

As clear from the feats above, the Regional Centers went above and beyond. Each were Holiday Cheer pick-up locations and promoted Warmth for Wake and Cool for Wake. Each Center was also a location for the Human Services Food Drive for local food pantry distribution. The Familias Seguras brochure is available at each Center and disseminated by ACLU and El Pueblo in Spanish as well as English. Each Center has also hosted employee appreciation events.

Staff continue to increase awareness of Regional Centers through a growing presence on Wake County social media and Regional Center Facebook pages. The intent, as always, is to align with customer needs.

Vice Chair Wanda Hunter asked if there had been an increase in mental health service needs for immigrants. A friend of hers shared that her mother was so terrified of the rampant presence of the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that she sat in her home in the dark for fear of being found and taken. Ms. Hager stated that Departure as bilingual services as well as telehealth so that individuals who may feel uneasy to leave their homes can still receive care and begin to find stability once more. She had personally seen a small increase but one that staff were meeting the needs of. With Departure, the Fernandez Community Center through Alliance of Behavioral Health served non-American citizens and Hispanic American citizens alike. The Alliance of Behavioral Health had been in place for 25 years and worked closely with the community. They had held a mental resource fair last year and, in 2026, would hold their third. Ms. Morant saw an increase aligned with the presence of ICE in

Wake County. In Apex, these clients would be served through the Latino Congregation, a mental health program created by the YMCA. Mr. Hayner, too, saw the need firsthand although the data that the Centers receive (from Monarch in all Centers save for Departure which uses Alliance Behavioral Health and Western which uses a referral for a partner) is limited. Despite this, the SRC had a full day of mental health first aid in Spanish with bilingual staff present to participate.

Commissioner Cheryl Stallings asked if there were bilingual staff at all Centers. This was confirmed to be true. Outside of Spanish, there was a language line available through video or audio. When asked about the mental health services being available at all locations, it was assured that Western would receive this support as well once they had moved into a larger building. Currently, there was not enough space to house a mental health partner on-site.

Chair Ann Rollins asked what the wish date was of an opening for the Western Regional Center (to replace the Western Health and Human Services Center). The anticipated date was December 2027. The approval processes with the Town of Cary have taken time given the need to meet septic regulations and other requirements. Staff were encouraged, however, by the neighborhood and partners already supporting this work. The logistics may be taking some time with Facilities, Design, and Construction better able to answer questions relating to any delay. But the Town of Cary was a great community partner ensuring transportation concerns were resolved prior to clients getting to the site.

When asked if there had been any incidents at the Regional Centers in regards to immigration and federal presence, it was shared that there were none at the Centers. There was a small incident at Somerset, but staff have worked with the front desks to ensure they are aware of what to do. The County's Attorney's Office has given guidance for if someone comes into a public or private area to call the Attorney's Office immediately. Ms. Maiorano uplifted the security partners. She recognized Mr. Scott Chestnut (Company Officer) who served at Somerset. All security was trained to know how to handle any incidents such as these. It was known that ICE was likely to return to North Carolina meaning that these trainings would continue and staff would be directed to call the Attorney's Office if an incident arose.

There were programs – like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) – which was open to everyone regardless of immigration status. There were many parents with children who were American citizens who were then eligible for programs such as Energy Assistance, Medicaid, and Food and Nutrition Services (FNS). But the fear brought by ICE and other rhetoric had an impact on these families seeking help or even leaving their homes.

Commissioner Stallings commended staff for their work and welcoming culture during a difficult time. She asked if there had been missed appointments noticed with immigrant families not coming into the Centers. Mr. Yeager shared that trust was at the core of such considerations. He saw this fear firsthand when the NRC began to see a decline in individuals coming for the food prescription program. While there had not been a decline overall – or a significant reduction – did not mean that the issue did not exist. The Centers work closely with community partners to advocate for those who might find themselves less willing to come to the Centers. Ms. Hager stated that, with around half of clients at Departure being immigrants, there was a decline in attendance in November when ICE was actively in the county. After this, however, attendance returned to normal. The building itself felt safe which might not be the case for larger, established locations such as Swinburne or the Public Health building. Trust, indeed, was key. Ms. Morant shared that even community partners were seeing the impacts of trust. The West had held a community forum led by the immigrant community discussing brokering trust and building a supportive network. After this, an increase was seen at the Center.

Chair Rollins asked for more information to be shared about the CACs. At one time, Health and Human Services Board member had intentionally been placed on CACs close to their area. Attendance and

participation was still encouraged although the only connections the Board seemed to actively have was Ms. Maty Ferrer Hoppmann and Mr. John Myhre (as a former Board member and current Public Health Committee member). But the CACs undoubtedly enriched the Regional Center delivery with their connections, conversations, and collaborations. Board members would receive information about when the CACs met after the meeting. Ms. Maiorano assured that it was not a large time commitment and the impact was unquestionable. Mr. Yeager pointed out that the CAC's abbreviation used to stand for *Community Advisory* instead of *Community Advocacy*. This small but meaningful change emphasized how the work with the community was at the forefront. CAC members advocate for services in the Centers but also for the needs of their local community. Ms. Morant shared that the CACs had strategic plans heavily connected to the Wake County Board of Commissioners (BOC) and their own strategic plan. The West's priorities were currently affordable housing, food security, workforce development, and transportation. These community advocates actively look for and address gaps and barriers to community members visiting Centers such as transportation and childcare.

The reorganization of Human Services was brought up and Ms. Maiorano explained that staff were being extremely intentional about ensuring a seamless transition in the Centers. The reorganization should not be apparent event to staff working in the Regional Centers. Collaborations could not be overlooked nor the great connections already built with Public Health and Social Services. She highlighted the need to build connectivity so innately into the culture so that anyone joining Wake County knew the collaborations needed to continue. She also brought up the Regional Center Directors' connections with their local towns. The Centers acted as links between the services and the surrounding municipalities.

Commissioner Stallings asked how many services were standardized – percentage wise – across the Centers. Ms. Maiorano stated that service offerings were standardized throughout the Centers with Human Services programs offered everywhere with the exception of the Western due to the size constraints. There were also other County departments represented in these standardized services. What is not as standardized was the Sheriff's Office as Departure did not have as much reason for a hub given the focus on Raleigh. Well water testing kits, too, should be offered in all Centers if they were not, though this was admittedly a heavier concern for rural communities. Having said all of this, she estimated around 90% of programs were standardized. To the extent that services are not standardized, staff are working for them to be. As a resident, the service delivery should not be different from Center to Center. The front desk, waiting area, and building will be different, but the quality of services should be the same as received at Swinburne or the Public Health building. This is the consistent quality control staff hope to provide.

Ms. Toni Pedroza (Director of Social Services) shared that this was a "no wrong door" approach. NC FAST was a statewide system. Whether staff were reporting to a Regional Center or in Swinburne, they were seeing the same information and able to provide the same service and attention to detail. This was extremely important given sometimes a Regional Center would be closer while other times a client might choose to go to Swinburne. Having flexibility and options was key.

Mr. Yeager agreed with Ms. Maiorano's comments on standardization. The remaining 10% was bolstered by work with community partners. He gave the example of Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) which, even in the most emergent of cases, could take up to ten days to provide relief. With the help of different community partners, that ten-day gap could be bridged. The fact that not only Human Services but other County services such as Housing were all together allowed for a wealth of collaboration. In addition, ERC, NRC, and SRC all had libraries on their campuses. This broad approach allowed for all sorts of business from water testing to birth certificates to voting to occur all at one convenient place. Deputy County Manager Duane Holder added that the County even had certain inspections available, notably those housed at the ERC.

Chair Rollins encouraged Board members to tour the Regional Centers after collaborating with the Regional Center Directors. Ms. Ferrer Hoppmann praised the CAC experience, especially with being a Board member. Being able to grow as a community and advocate for services was extremely rewarding. The different Centers did have different community partners with a number of initiatives unique to each Center.

Treasurer Terry McTernan asked how often the Regional Center Directors met together to share best practices. Ms. Maiorano responded that this used to occur every other month but, as of 2026, the Directors were meeting monthly. This enhanced communication especially given more remote work as of late.

Chair Rollins thanked the Regional Center Directors and Ms. Maiorano. The Regional Networks Committee did provide information on the highlights from the CACS in each month's packet for the Health and Human Services Board. Board members also recognized Mr. Blevins who was retiring from his position as the Director of the ERC. He had served in this position for many years and had become the face of the Center, something many would come to miss and honored him for.

Holiday Cheer and Warmth for Wake Review

(Presented by Ms. Vielka Gabriel)

Ms. Vielka Gabriel (Seasonal and Volunteer Supervisor) shared an overview of Holiday Cheer, Warmth for Wake, and Cool for Wake. Ms. Gabriel had worked with the County for over 23 years in various positions that helped tremendously with bolstering the seasonal programs.

Holiday Cheer matched children and seniors to community sponsors who assisted with meals, gifts, and other support at the most meaningful times of the year. In the end, 2025 was a record year for all seasonal programs. Ms. Gabriel attributed this to Team Wake, to the community partners ensuring that the community was brought together. Holiday Cheer was expanded to include a Dia de Reyes (Three Kings Day) celebration in January 2025. Staff connected with partners in the Latino community to elevate the holiday not only for those who celebrate it but also for those looking to learn more about the culture. People of various faiths and various backgrounds attended the celebration in Cary.

Keeping up this momentum, there was an Eid-Al-Fitr (Ramadan) celebration in March 2025. This was the first time that the seasonal programs had worked with the Islamic community. With Eid-Al-Fitr arriving soon on the calendar, staff were looking to celebrate this once again. This was open to those celebrating Ramadan but also served as an educational opportunity with some elementary schools in the areas receiving an introduction to Ramadan. Staff are working with a mosque in Raleigh and are even determining if there are children of faith in foster care that can receive support. The intent was to make sure all children felt recognized and celebrated during their cherished holidays.

Thanksgiving in 2025 saw incredible improvement over 2024. There was a 66% increase in families served (250 to 415) and a 195% increase in individuals served (570 to 1,682). This was not just about turkey. Staff were purposeful in ensuring meals were culturally friendly including vegetarian options. She recognized community partners including the Board's own Vice Chair Wanda Hunter who helped secure food for hotels. The County partnered with Fat Boys Kitchen right off New Bern Avenue (with another now located in Wake Forest) as well as a local church to serve homeless individuals as well as those living in hotels. There was an effort to target and provide meals to seniors and individuals who were homebound. A Thanksgiving meal was served the day of Thanksgiving at the church with intentionality around combating social isolation. There was bingo as well as other activities paired alongside information from the Social and Economic Vitality (SEV) team to ensure these individuals were connected.

In December 2025, there were multiple Christmas gift events and efforts, broken down below.

- Holiday Cheer-led Gift Events: 222 Families – 632 Children
- Sponsor-led Gift Events: 433 Families – 1,331 Children
 - Total 655 Families – 1,963 Children

This was a groundbreaking year as 100% of the individuals sponsored for Holiday Cheer were provided gifts. The generous donation of the Wake County Health and Human Services Board helped make a huge difference, especially once Ms. Gabriel was able to secure a match from a few community partners. This, again, was made possible by all of Team Wake including General Services Administration (GSA) who partnered and adopted over fifteen families as well as the County Manager's Office with the County Manager showing up to support a gift distribution event. The County was even able to adopt a senior center where a huge celebration was held and every resident received a handmade quilt as a Christmas gift. Faith partners came together and a local youth group made cards for the occasion. All of this is done while connecting these families and children to resources such as the Community Health Workers (CHWs). The goal is to offer support and referrals to build capacity in the person's home to elevate them beyond the need for Human Services programs.

Next, Ms. Gabriel reviewed Warmth for Wake, which focuses on distribution of space heaters and firewood from October through March.

- Firewood Delivery
 - Volunteers split and deliver firewood at multiple sites to residents who use wood as a primary or backup heating source
 - Firewood is purchased by the program and delivered by vendor partners to residents outside of volunteer delivery coverage areas
- Space Heaters
 - Space heaters are distributed at Regional Centers and multiple Raleigh-based service centers
 - Heaters are also purchased and delivered by community partners to households referred by the program

The program also works with the Social and Economic Vitality (SEV) program and the Housing Department to identify funded home improvement opportunities that improve homeowners' long-term capacity to heat and cool their homes. This is not just a concern for those in more rural areas of the county. There are individuals in Raleigh who rely on firewood as their main source of heating.

Ms. Gabriel was purposeful about reaching out to Wake County departments for volunteers to cut firewood. Warmth for Wake also encouraged the wraparound services that Regional Centers could provide by encouraging families to pick up their firewood locally, thus emphasizing resources they may have voiced needing. All funds through all three seasonal programs were donations. This time last year, Warmth for Wake had a little less than \$30,000 in donations. Mid-January 2026, there were \$78,000 in donations. This is about all of Wake County and all of Team Wake coming together to support the most vulnerable through these programs. This time last year, the heater distributions were around 100 and 150. So far in 2026, 319 households had received heaters. This increase was timely with the cold front that came through in January and February. She uplifted Departure Drive that was able to secure not only a reduced price of space heaters at Ollie's (\$40 compared to \$80 elsewhere) but also a 10% discount on two pallets once the salesperson heard of destination for the space heaters.

For wood distribution, there had been 308 deliveries to 147 households. The County worked with the City of Raleigh Yard Waste Center as well as a faith partner to the south and a small distribution center in the Brier Creek area. Ms. Gabriel attributed this increase to marketing and going door-to-door to see who might be in need. If one neighbor needed wood, it was all too likely that their neighbors' homes used wood as well. A total of \$9,587 of donations had been spent on heaters while \$24,042 donated dollars went towards wood. The value of the firewood volunteer hours was \$6,200. This figure was calculated with every volunteer's contributions being equivalent to \$34 per hour. The average volunteer worked around three to four hours. All of these figures were from the City of Raleigh distribution site, but full data would be available in the near future.

Next was Cool for Wake. This program provided fans and air conditioning units to residents adversely affected by extreme summer temperatures from May through September. In 2025, staff distributed 407 fans, a 58% increase over 2024. There were 101 A/C units distributed, a 312% increase over 2024. In 2026, staff planned to increase the A/C units and fan distributed with a focus on areas where transportation was a barrier. In 2025, staff were purposeful about working with Meals on Wheels and other partners to truly reach individuals they knew were in need. This included a partnership with the Raleigh Realtors Association who not only purchased A/C units but delivered them as well. The intention was for community partners to see the value of their donations. Instead of simply writing a check, they could meet the person whose life their donation was changing.

Last year, staff worked with community partners in the Town of Apex. It was a harsh truth that heat was required, A/C was not for certain housing. One location had temperatures spike to 98° with fans running. This is a blatant health concern with death very possible without adequate airflow.

Problems like this deserve innovative solutions. With Warmth for Wake, such solutions included the possibility of portable electric blankets after individuals in white flag shelters asked for blankets. This was something that could help long-term with the ability to charge them at warming stations. Staff found such blankets for less than \$50 each. They also looked at rechargeable hand packets instead of hand mittens – devices that cost \$10 but whose heat could last for up to 20 hours. With firewood, pine and evergreen could not be distributed. However, could it possibly be set to the side to split and drop off for use to burn at homeless encampments? There were countless and constant considerations being made to enhance these seasonal programs' offerings.

Ms. Gabriel closed with providing details for donations. Links to donate online are listed below as well as the address for donation checks for all programs.

Wake County HHS
4401 Bland Road
MD-110
Raleigh, NC 27609

- Cool for Wake Donations: <https://www.wake.gov/departments-government/health-human-services/programs-assistance/utility-bill-assistance-help-heating-cooling-and-water/cool-wake>
- Warmth for Wake Donations: <https://www.wake.gov/departments-government/social-services/programs-services/utility-bill-assistance-help-heating-cooling-and-water/warmth-wake>
- Holiday Cheer: <https://www.wake.gov/departments-government/social-services/programs-services/holiday-cheer>

Vice Chair Wanda Hunter recognized the contributions and assistance of Ms. Gabriel's husband Mr. Paul Alston who, despite not being a Wake County staff member, was always going above and beyond for the program. She also noted that everyone had seen a hike in their Duke Energy bill and asked if Ms. Gabriel

foresaw an increase in individuals having heat or cooling but being unable to pay the bill. Ms. Gabriel said that there were ways of partnering to help meet these needs. She had spoken with Ms. Felicia Downing (Economic Benefits Manager) to see what could be done. While the seasonal program funds were strictly for Warmth for Wake, Cool for Wake, and Holiday Cheer, there was a possibility that, by applying for various grants, the program could lend monies to Energy Assistance. When someone receives firewood or a fan, they signed a waiver. Part of this waiver might be applicable for these grants to show a holistic approach that might make this feasible based on need.

Ms. Tanyetta Sutton thanked Ms. Gabriel for her presentation and dedication to the County. She was spoken of highly throughout the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS). Ms. Sutton shared that there had been a fire in Morrisville impacting 70 families. How could the seasonal programs help with these families? Ms. Gabriel said she had been working with Ms. Karen Morant (Western Health and Human Services Center Director) and community partners to try to address this particular incident. The first contact to tap into would be the fire district. Helping individuals to know how to install and work a smoke detector could prevent cases such as this. It also helped for families to know if they had renter's insurance or a safety plan in place in case of emergencies. A fire closer to Departure Drive had staff collaborating with the Green Chair Project. Community Health Workers (CHWs), too, might be options to provide support.

Ms. Maty Ferrer Hoppmann commended staff upon seeing photos of the warming locations mentioned, particularly upon seeing Ms. Gabriel and Deputy County Manager Duane Holder present to help even outside of work hours. She asked if there were eligibility requirements for the services and if non-citizens could apply if they had children who were citizens. Ms. Gabriel said that the programs look at needs, not statistics. A priority is placed on seniors as well as individuals with children. However, immigration status was not a question that was asked.

Chair Ann Rollins recalled that she was at a conference dealing with the water crisis in North Carolina. Climate change was happening quickly with long-lasting impacts. She asked if the seasonal programs worked directly with the municipalities and the City of Raleigh in particular. Ms. Gabriel said that staff were aiming to be purposeful about working closely with the municipalities. She was actually scheduled to present to several municipalities in the near future. She often referenced Raleigh as it was large and needs varied. However, needs were clearly seen throughout the county. Chair Rollins spoke of a collaboration the Raleigh police was invested in to put together a community police. Ms. Gabriel said she would connect for these contacts and would continue to meet with local groups and municipalities to educate and further partner with them.

Chair Rollins also asked if the programs were receiving referrals for children through the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS). All seasonal programs and especially Holiday Cheer received referrals from the schools. Ms. Gabriel explained that this help to avoid duplications. She works with many Social Workers and knows the need is great.

Commissioner Cheryl Stallings congratulated Ms. Gabriel and her team on their work. She asked if the Raleigh Yard Waste Center was the main source of firewood. Ms. Gabriel shared that all wood was donated. Some was from the Raleigh Yard Waste Center but there was still a cost associated with clearing these trees. Donated wood was eagerly sought and Ms. Gabriel was working with community partners and discussing options such as partnering with the local parks. Chair Rollins suggested that a municipality may be able to donate wood cut from trimming tree limbs to avoid power lines and Ms. Gabriel said that this was an option being explored.

There was a discussion about resources given to those receiving donations. Ms. Gabriel worked with community partners and libraries to take as much as she could in a backpack or in her car to have readily

available to hand out to families upon request. CHWs also assisted in this regard. The approach, purposefully, was a holistic one emphasizing wraparound services.

Dr. Ojinga Harrison commended Ms. Gabriel's variety of work and the support she had garnered. He asked about the need left even after the increase in individuals and families served. Ms. Gabriel stated that she knew that the County was still not meeting all of the needs of the communities. She could only distribute what she had funds to cover. Months where the temperatures dropped or soared to extremes were difficult given the crises that arose. Staff were hoping to seek out assistance from even more partners like local churches and even WakeMed. As impressive as these numbers were, it was nowhere near what it needed to be to address everyone in need. Assessments such as the Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) were helping staff to fully understand the communities' pain points.

Dr. Harrison asked if these programs were a part of bylaws or general statute. Mr. Holder clarified that it was not a mandated service. Dr. Anita Sawhney asked if public funding was possible and when asked if she meant government funding, she replied yes. Mr. Holder explained that the Wake County Board of Commissioners (BOC) had heard a public request and response to the increase of property taxes. Unfortunately, property tax relief was not legal. However, the BOC was able to build in \$1 million to the County's base budget to expand the energy and utility program. This was a million dollars of local taxpayers' money to meet this need that recurred every year. The County received around \$5 million annually from the federal government to cover the Energy Assistance program. This \$1 million annually was in addition to that. This was a gap met through public funding.

Ms. Annemarie Maiorano (Deputy Director of Social Services – Operations) added that the salary for Ms. Gabriel's position along with two other staff were totally funded through the County.

Ms. Gabriel also clarified that the seasonal programs were not intended to cover utility bills. The County had indeed provided more funds for Energy Assistance and the seasonal programs were merely supplementing for the need for heaters/firewood or A/C units. Ms. Toni Pedroza (Director of Social Services) recalled that emergency monies became popular during the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and its programs. However, many monies, such as the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIEAP) had been around for a lot longer, just like Warmth for Wake and Cool for Wake.

Ms. Maty Ferrer Hoppmann pointed out the mention that A/C was not legally required in certain housing. She asked who regulated this. Ms. Maiorano said that it was likely a building code, but the language of the policies were as clear as they were shocking – heat was required, A/C was not. Ms. Gabriel shared that she had worked with the Housing Department and many apartments ran into this issue. Their A/C units would break and there would be no hurry to fix them as the landlords were not technically obligated to do so. One family went an entire summer without a technician coming to fix their broken A/C. The only one that did respond to calls for help from staff were landlords who accepted housing vouchers or were under the Housing Authority. The Town of Zebulon Housing Authority, in particular, helped. Staff now stressed the need to self-advocate with documentation for every time a person asked for assistance and it went unheard. This allowed for a paper trail that could be helpful in resolving the issue. Vice Chair Hunter added that it also depended on a person's lease. If the lease indicated that A/C was required, then the landlord was responsible if the temperatures went beyond a certain degree. Empowering communities and ensuring that there was no language barrier was also on the forefront of staff's minds when resolving such cases.

Public Health Update

(Presented by Ms. Jennifer Brown)

In the absence of Ms. Rebecca Kaufman (Director of Public Health), Ms. Jennifer Brown (Deputy Director of Public Health – Community Health) provided brief updates from the Public Health department.

- This week marked the official opening of the new Public Health building. There was a phased approach to staffing with the building at 60% capacity this week. It was expected that this would be at 100% capacity by March 9th, 2026. So far clients are experiencing a new workflow with security, the front desk has been a success, and only improved experiences with check in and wait times have been reported. It was a pleasure welcoming clients to the building.
- February was Children’s Health Month and, in recognition, the dental clinic was partnering with six Wake County libraries in celebration of the “Brush, Book, Bed” campaign.
- Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) is finalizing preparations for the 2026 pool permitting season. Annually, around 1,200 pools in North Carolina require permitting. The season starts at April 1st with most locations working to open before the Memorial Day holiday. Because of the rule changes earlier in the year, there will be new educational materials for operators to educate them on changes when sending invoices. Staff will also be refining the pool reference books that they use to perform regulatory activities. These enhanced processes ensure staff have their expertise readily accessible if they run into conflicts or issues in the field.
- On February 10th the Public Health Department was notified by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NC DHHS) that a person infected with measles visited several public places in Wake County while they were contagious. There were five exposure sites including 02 Fitness, Everbowl, Walgreens, and two separate Harris Teeter stores. Staff immediately worked with the Communications Office to issue a press release, social media campaign, and media interview to notify the public of the exposure sites and reinforce the importance of vaccination. The Communicable Disease (CD) team did collaborate with the sites to identify any staff members working through the time of exposure. The window closed on February 24th. Thankfully, no additional notifications came from this exposure.
 - Staff continue to prepare internally to keep the public safe. Part of the Public Health team posted two Lunch-and-Learn sessions – one in-person and one virtual – for staff led by Ms. Morgan Poole (Epidemiology Program Manager) and Mr. Brian Gravlin (Nurse Supervisor - Public Health). Internal staff learned about measles epidemiology as well as where the state is with outbreaks and cases. As of February 17th, there were 22 cases in North Carolina as a whole. These sessions allowed staff to prepare workflows for how responses would look in the clinics and elsewhere.
 - Chair Ann Rollins noted that the person related to this exposure did not live in Wake County. Ms. Brown confirmed this sharing that they were from the South Carolina outbreak. Wake County staff continue to monitor measles despite most measles cases in the state being more west. Inevitably, people travel. It was noted that Buncombe County was working with South Carolina officials to obtain lessons learned from their outbreak.
 - Ms. Maty Ferrer Hoppmann inquired about the vaccination protection. Ms. Brown said that it was recommended that the vaccine was received in two doses. Once received, it had around 96 to 97% effectiveness. Of the 22 cases in North Carolina as a whole, seventeen (17) were unvaccinated and below the age of 17. However, there was a cluster in South Carolina that had a majority of vaccinated individuals contracting measles. Either way, it was important to know your vaccination status.
 - Ms. Christine Kushner asked if there were drop offs in school vaccination numbers. Overall, Wake County had a 94% measles vaccination rate. In speaking with Buncombe County, it was the schools with 90% or less vaccination rates that posed the most risk. If a student is exposed, they have to isolate or quarantine between 21 and 28 days. This is a

significant hit for children in school. If the school's vaccination rate is lower than 90%, it has a greater impact on the other students. Wake County does have information for its individual schools and has communicated the importance of retaining up-to-date records.

- Mr. Irv Trust asked if the County had expressed concern about an individual advocating against vaccines before the United States Senate. Deputy County Manager Duane Holder clarified that it there was a concern, the State would verbalize this.
- Another Board member brought up the misinformation surrounding vaccinations causing autism and other issues. When asked if there was any outreach done to compact this, Ms. Brown stated that the Public Health Department continued to lean on the evidence-based information but always cautioned those concerned to contact their primary care provider. Commissioner Cheryl Stallings added that any communication from Wake County was based on science and stated how critical and important vaccinations were. These messages do include encouragement to speak to a healthcare provider.
- Ms. Lechelle Wardell (Population Health Director) shared that there was an upcoming Ask-the-Doc town hall to educate the community on measles and vaccinations and the efficacy of vaccines. This would be a broader session with measles and communicable diseases as a focus. Ask-the-Doc became a town hall series during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were an open forum where community residents could ask questions to subject matter experts (SMEs) and medical providers. A press release would be coming out that very day for this session and attendance was encouraged. When asked if it was virtual or in-person, it was confirmed that it was a virtual webinar that would be broadcasted live on the County's Facebook.
- Ms. Wardell and the Population Health team had a kickoff meeting on February 11th at the Commons building for their Nonprofit Capacity Building Institute. Nineteen organizations were in attendance and the following topics were identified by organizational assessment: strategic planning, organizational structure, program management, marketing, and community relations. The ultimate goal of the Institute was to advance these organizations' efficiency and capacity to expand their services to serve their community.

Social Services Update

(Presented by Ms. Toni Pedroza)

Ms. Toni Pedroza (Director of Social Services) provided brief updates from the Social Services department.

- At the annual Smart Start retreat, attendees learned of another opportunity for childcare vouchers. This was a new initiative and separate from Social Services programs. This was a program for those who may have exceeded income guidelines for childcare subsidy but would qualify for this new initiative. If found eligible, the parent pays a third of the cost, their employer pays a third, and this program pays the final third. This would be a huge win as far as childcare was concerned.
- She and Deputy County Manager Duane Holder continued to meet with Central Pines to discuss adult services and how the County might best partner with them to ensure services to both the community and those visiting the community.
- Staff continue to implement new policies in Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) and Medicaid. Applications in both programs have remained timely even as staff are learning new policies. There had been some obstacles with NC FAST, but this had been anticipated as with any update to the technology. Still, resolutions were being pursued.
- Kinship Care was up and running with the intent to identify at least sixty relatives when a child comes into custody. This will assist staff with placing a child with a family member which represents, statistically, a more stable environment.

- Mr. Jason Mahoney (Child Welfare Assistant Division Director) and his team continue to perform a training series in the Five Protective Factors (parental resilience, social-emotional competence of children, social support concrete support, and understanding child development).
- In Energy Assistance, the team has taken 19,000 applications in heating and cooling.
- Ms. Stantavia Wright (Food and Nutrition Services Assistant Division Director) recently gave an interview to WRAL about the FNS changes and possible impacts (<https://www.wral.com/news/nccapitol/new-federal-food-stamp-rules-nc-immigrants-feb-2026/>). In another highlight, Ms. Felicia Downing (Economic Benefits Manager) and her team starred on Spectrum News.

Committee Chairs Update

(Presented by Chair Ann Rollins, Vice Chair Wanda Hunter, and Dr. Anita Sawhney)

Chair Ann Rollins noted that the Regional Networks Committee report was a part of the Board's agenda packet.

Vice Chair Wanda Hunter (Co-Chair of the Social Services Committee) reported that there was a presentation on Medicaid – Private Living Assistance (PLA), Long Term Care (LTC), PACE, CAP-DA, and Special Assistance (SA). She said one question that Committee members had was why the Wake County PACE Center was located in Durham. With the growing number of aging adults in the area, assistance was needed. Though the PACE Center had received 171 participants, only 89 were from Wake County. In Special Assistance In-Hom (SAIH), there were 338 participants. The Committee also discussed the Council of Aging and looking at a model out of Cumberland County. The Growing Old, Living with Dignity (GOLD) Coalition was also brought up. Ms. Toni Pedroza (Director of Social Services) shared that PACE was technically not a Social Services program but instead a program that senior citizens could sign up for if they met certain eligibility requirements. It operated like a managed care organization (MCO) program where applicants had to use their providers. This sometimes made the program unappealing as they did not want to be with a singular provider especially if they had both Medicaid and Medicare. The PACE Center in Durham did serve three counties – Durham, Wake, and Granville. There was not a PACE Center in North Carolina that served one county alone. Even in Mecklenburg, the PACE Center covered Mecklenburg and Cabarrus.

In January, there were over 219,000 receiving Medicaid benefits. Of those, over 51,000 were Medicaid Expansion recipients. These were stark numbers with talks of cutting back Medicaid Expansion. In January, Medicaid met its timeliness rate of 94%. Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) served around 39,000 families in January and around \$14 million in benefits. Child Support experienced a 265% increase in cases, many being referrals. Since the expiration of the pandemic waiver in July 2025, referrals had been growing in child support cases.

Vice Chair Hunter asked how many children were living in the Social Services building. Twelve were currently residing in Swinburne.

Ms. Tanyetta Sutton spoke about the Protecting Our Children program, a mandatory training being taught to both staff and students in middle and high school. It was a program talking about inappropriate touching and being able to report inappropriate conduct. Ms. Pedroza noted that it sounded like the Darkness to Light program, but it was confirmed to be different.

Ms. Maty Ferrer Hoppmann shared that her staff had met with Mr. Jason Mahoney (Child Welfare Assistant Division Director) to plan a stronger partnership so that all courses that came in English could be provided in Spanish in a type of "Child Welfare Academy."

Dr. Anita Sawhney reported that the Public Health Committee had met twice – once in January and once in February – since the last update. January had measles preparation and outbreak information. Ms. Rebecca Kaufman (Director of Public Health) reported a spike in respiratory and flu-like viruses in December 2025. Shelters had opened in local high schools because of the severe cold where volunteers came out from Human Services. In February, the conversation continued around measles, specifically the case that came through Wake County. There was excitement about the new building. Finally, Ms. Dauline Singletary (Maternal and Child Health Section Manager) shared the 2025 Maternal and Infant Mortality Report. Unfortunately, there continued to be health disparities between races. Black infants were twice as likely to die in their first year of life as opposed to other races. This was a multifaceted problem that would continue to be evaluated.

In addition, the Public Health Committee had gone from bimonthly meetings to monthly meetings. To assist, Mr. Irv Trust agreed to become Vice Chair of the Public Health Committee.

Commissioner Cheryl Stallings stated that there was a Maternal and Infant Mortality Taskforce that was working on the recommendations that came from the 2025 Maternal and Infant Mortality Report. She encouraged the Board to welcome Ms. Singletary at a future meeting to present. These findings of health disparities were unfortunately the same as they had been for many years showing a deep need to be addressed in a sustainable way.

Public Comments

- None

Upcoming Events, Community Highlights, and General Discussion

(Presented by Chair Ann Rollins)

Mayor Frank Eagles Excellence in Community Service Award nominations close on Friday, March 13th.

Chair Ann Rollins shared her experience at a conference on water that was very informative with the Emerging Issues Institute. She invited everyone to the March 10th Poe Center opening of their renovated and upgraded playground scheduled for 11:00 a.m.

Vice Chair Wanda Hunter encouraged everyone to vote if they had not done so, especially those aged 18 to 35. Ms. Christine Kushner shared that early voting was still available through that coming Saturday (February 28th, 2026).

Commissioner Cheryl Stallings thanked staff for their amazing work. She requested, when possible, a way to quantify the number of needs not being met. Business community members wanted to assist with these efforts – particularly the Chamber of Commerce. But understanding where the needs were and how much need was needed could help to educate community partners.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 9:40 a.m.

Board Chair's Signature:



Date: 04/23/2026

Respectfully submitted by Brittany Hunt