NC MedAssist

the
CONVERSATION

Policy to Patients:

Reshaping NC Healthcare Access

Wednesday, October 7, 2026
The Friday Conference Center
Grumman Auditorium
UNC Chapel Hill

Presented by

AmeriHealth Caritas

NC MedAssist | Our Programs

NC MedAssist improves access to essential medications through two primary programs: the Free Pharmacy Program and the Over-the-Counter (OTC) Medicine Program. Together, these programs help individuals across North Carolina with limited resources access the medications and support they need to manage and stabilize their health.

Free Pharmacy Program

The NC MedAssist Free Pharmacy Program provides eligible uninsured North Carolinians with free prescription medications for acute and chronic conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, asthma, behavioral health, and more. By removing the financial barrier to essential medications, the program helps individuals better manage their health, remain consistent with treatment, and reduce the risk of preventable complications and costly healthcare utilization. Medications are delivered directly to patients in all 100 North Carolina counties. To qualify, individuals must be uninsured and have a household income at or below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level.

Over-the-Counter (OTC) Medicine Program

The NC MedAssist Over-the-Counter (OTC) Medicine Program provides free over-the-counter medications, health supplies, and other health-related products to individuals and families across North Carolina. Through statewide clinics, safety-net partnerships, community outreach initiatives, and other direct distribution efforts, NC MedAssist reaches communities in ways that respond to local needs while connecting individuals to additional healthcare resources and NC MedAssist's Free Pharmacy Program.

Access to these everyday health essentials helps people manage common health needs safely at home, prevent conditions from worsening, and reduce unnecessary doctor, urgent care, and emergency department visits. **Key OTC initiatives include:**

Gerhart Health Hub *(COMING SOON)*

NC MedAssist's Health Hub serves as a statewide community resource that connects individuals to NC MedAssist programs and other critical healthcare and safety-net resources, including health products, screenings, education, community services, and other resources that support better health. The Health Hub also serves as a place for volunteers to support statewide initiatives that expand medication access in North Carolina communities where access to healthcare and medications is limited.

Mobile Free Pharmacy (OTC Distribution Events)

The programs bring free over-the-counter medications and other health-related products directly to communities across North Carolina through distribution events held nearly every week. Events are developed in partnership with local organizations and volunteers and connect participants with additional health and safety-net resources in their area. As NC MedAssist’s largest outreach program, The Mobile Free Pharmacy also provides an important opportunity to identify individuals who may qualify for NC MedAssist's free prescription program.

Ask about how you can join us in making an impact.

Brenda Vass | CEO	bvass@medassist.org
Jordan Fletcher, CFRE | Chief Development Officer	jfletcher@medassist.org
Dustin Allen, PharmD, MBA | Chief Operating Officer	dallen@medassist.org
Nicole Stanfield, MHA | Chief Program Officer	ncstanfield@medassist.org
Derek Page | Marketing & Communications Director	dpage@medassist.org
Rebecca Galloway, MBA | Partner Relations Director	rgalloway@medassist.org
Lisa Szabo | Mobile Free Pharmacy Program	lszabo@medassist.org

Melanie Bush
MPAff

Deputy Secretary
NC Medicaid

PANELIST

Melanie Bush is Deputy Secretary of Medicaid for the North Carolina Division of Health Benefits (DHB), also known as NC Medicaid. In this role, she provides leadership, strategic direction, operational oversight, and managed care supervision for the North Carolina Medicaid program, which serves more than 3 million North Carolinians who cannot afford health care.

As Assistant Secretary and Chief Operating Officer, Melanie led teams through managed care transformation, the unwinding of continuous coverage for the COVID-19 public health emergency, and Medicaid expansion, extending access to care to more than 700,000 additional North Carolinians.

Melanie also serves as a Governor's appointee to the Board of Trustees for the North Carolina State Health Plan. Prior to joining NC Medicaid, Melanie was the Medicaid Fiscal Analyst for the Fiscal Research Division of the North Carolina General Assembly (NCGA), where she led the Health and Human Services budget team.

Her previous roles also include Senior Policy Analyst for Medicaid at the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) and Policy Analyst for the Center for Community Change in Washington, DC.

Melanie holds a Bachelor of Science in Foreign Service from Georgetown University and a Master of Public Affairs from the University of Texas at Austin.

Laura Gerald
MD, MPH

President
Kate B. Reynolds
Charitable Trust

PANELIST

Dr. Laura Gerald is president of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, one of North Carolina's largest private foundations. A pediatrician who was born and raised in rural North Carolina, she has decades of leadership experience in health care delivery, rural health, philanthropy, and public health.

Under Dr. Gerald's leadership, the Trust has deepened its commitment to racial equity and systems change and announced in 2022 it will divest from tobacco and invest $100 million of the foundation's corpus in socially responsible funds supporting North Carolina residents.

Prior to joining the Trust, she served in critical roles focused on statewide health improvement including serving as the North Carolina State Health Director.

Dr. Gerald holds a bachelor's degree from Harvard and Radcliffe Colleges, a medical degree from Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, and a Master of Public Health degree from Harvard University School of Public Health.

She currently is the Board Chair of Grantmakers in Health, on the Board of Trustees for Winston-Salem State University, and adjunct faculty at UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health. Dr. Gerald is a board-certified pediatrician and fellow in American Academy of Pediatrics.

David L. Pope
DrPH, JD, MHA

President & CEO
Scotland Health
Care Group

PANELIST

David Pope is the President and CEO of Scotland Health Care System. He has spent his career improving health for those living in rural areas and small towns.

David grew up in Union County, North Carolina and attended college as a Morehead Scholar at UNC. He holds master's and doctoral degrees from the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health. His dissertation studied community-based mental health services in rural North Carolina. David also holds a law degree from Wake Forest University.

David served as a judge advocate in the Marine Corps from 2005 to 2009 and deployed to Iraq with Second Battalion, Second Marines. David and his family moved to Laurinburg in 2019 when he was hired as the Chief Operating Officer at Scotland Health.

In 2025 David was honored as North Carolina's Community Star by the North Carolina Office of Rural Health. In 2025 he was also awarded the Dr. Collie Coleman Spirit of Unity Award by the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In 2026, David was named Richmond Community College's Citizen of the Year.

David currently serves as the Chair of the Laurinburg/Scotland County Area Chamber of Commerce.

Rep. Heather H. Rhyne, RPh

NC House of Representatives District 97

PANELIST

Heather Rhyne, a lifelong North Carolinian, represents Lincoln County in the North Carolina House of Representatives.

Originally from Cherryville, she earned her Pharmacy degree from UNC-Chapel Hill and serves as a retail pharmacist for several independent pharmacies. Before joining the legislature, Heather spent eight years on the Lincoln County Board of Education, including three as Chairwoman, where she championed quality education and built strong community relationships.

Elected to the North Carolina House of Representatives, Heather quickly distinguished herself by being chosen as Freshman Leader of the new member class in her first year and becoming the only freshman legislator to receive a vice-chairmanship. In her first session, she successfully worked on legislation that became law, including Senate Bill 479 and House Bill 412, as well as House Bill 517 and House Bill 536. Her collaborative, level-headed, and common sense approach has allowed her to provide valuable insight on a range of legislative issues.

For Heather, representing her community is both an honor and a calling that reflects her lifelong commitment to faith, family, and public service.

Michael Waldrum

MD, MSc, MBA

Chief Executive Officer
ECU Health

Dean
Brody School of
Medicine, ECU

PANELIST

Dr. Michael Waldrum is Chief Executive Officer of ECU Health and Dean of the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University.

A specialist in critical care medicine and pulmonology, he has extensive experience in clinical effectiveness, information system and health care management in academic organizations.

Before coming to eastern NC, Waldrum served as President and CEO of The University of Arizona Health Network. Previously, he was CEO of University of Alabama Hospital at Birmingham and Vice President of the UAB Health System, where he also served as Chief Operating Officer and Chief Information Officer.

Waldrum is a member of the CaroNova Board of Directors, the NC East Alliance Board of Directors and the Greenville Pitt County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors. Waldrum also serves as the chair of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) Board of Directors where he has held board leadership positions since 2020.

Waldrum graduated from the University of The South Sewanee in Tennessee with a BA in English and the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine. He completed his residency at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, received a Master's Degree in epidemiology from Harvard School of Public Health and earned his MBA from the University of Michigan.

Emily Roland
MPH

Executive Director of Program Implementation North Carolina Healthcare Foundation

MODERATOR

Emily Roland is Executive Director of Program Implementation at the North Carolina Healthcare Foundation, the charitable nonprofit affiliate of the North Carolina Healthcare Association. She leads cross-functional teams and strategic partnerships to improve health and advance access to care, behavioral health, rural health, and the healthcare workforce.

Emily oversees grant-funded programs and implementation initiatives that address chronic disease, expand healthcare access, and scale innovative approaches to equitable health improvement through community-led interventions and policy change.

Previously, Emily worked in the North Carolina Healthcare Association's advocacy and policy department, leading grassroots advocacy engagement among more than 130 member health systems and their partners across the state. Before joining NCHA in 2014, Emily spent a decade at the North Carolina Chapter of Blood Cancer United (formerly the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society) as the statewide Campaign Director for various corporate and community fundraising campaigns.

She is a graduate of Leadership NC Class XXV and currently serves on the Steering Committee of the NC Rural Health Association, the Office of Rural Health's Primary Care Advisory Committee, and the State Health Improvement Plan's Uninsured Workgroup.

Emily earned her bachelor's degree from UNC Chapel Hill and her Master of Public Health from East Carolina University.

Care that connects communities.

AmeriHealth Caritas North Carolina is part of a national mission-driven health care organization with deep experience serving Medicaid populations. We are proud to support NC MedAssist in hosting conversations that help shape the future of health care in our state – and to work alongside providers and community partners to improve access, support whole-person care and build healthier futures for our members and communities across North Carolina.

Care is the heart of our work.®

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We're proud to support the work of NC MedAssist.

It's work that has a powerful, positive effect on the health of thousands of North Carolinians — and helps build a brighter future for all.

North Carolina

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UNC HEALTH

UNC Health is proud to support
NC MedAssist and the Conversation.

Together, we're helping spark meaningful conversations that inspire understanding, build connections, and strengthen the health of our communities.

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NC MedAssist is grateful for Merck's support of *the Conversation.*

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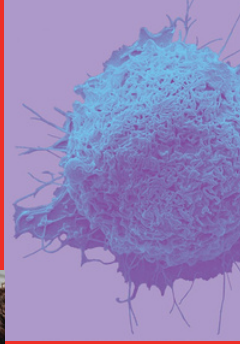

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NC MedAssist 30 YEARS OF DISPENSING HOPE

2027 EXECUTIVE LUNCHEON

Tuesday, March 16, 2027
The Revelry - North End
Charlotte, NC

Join 800+ healthcare and community leaders committed to improving medication access for neighbors in need.

For more info and sponsorships, contact:

Jordan Fletcher, CFRE
Chief Development Officer

jfletcher@medassist.org | 704.350.3597

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the CONVERSATION

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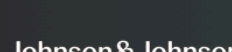

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