

Graham County Health Department

Community Assessment
2004

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

I. The Assessment Team

The original community assessment team was comprised of board members of the Tri County Community Health Partnership, Inc. (TCCHP) [Healthy Carolinians for Cherokee, Clay and Graham Counties]. In Graham County, the working members came from the Graham County Health Department staff and three Graham County board members of TCCHP.

The TCCHP board members developed a Community Health Opinion Survey, which was printed in volume and distributed to the three counties to administer to the public. Results of these surveys were used to get statistics for the assessment based on opinions of people in the community.

In Graham County, 188 people responded to the survey, which was administered to segments of various community groups throughout the county: Stanley Furniture employees, Lions Club members, health department patrons, three Psychology classes at Tri-County Community College, Graham County Center; two local church groups, Tallulah Health Center staff, Graham County Rescue Squad, and Graham County Courthouse employees.

In addition to the Community Health Opinion Survey, five listening groups were conducted among small gatherings in the community by the health department director. Data were recorded by various health department

personnel, and responses were combined with the responses from the opinion survey.

The data for the Health Opinion Surveys and listening groups were tallied and analyzed by two Graham County board members of TCCHP. The report will be shared with county government officials prior to the dissemination to the public to make them aware of public concerns.

II. The Community Picture

A. Geographical Information

Graham County is a rural community, enclosed by rugged mountainous terrain and lakes. The western range of the Great Smoky Mountains separating Graham County from Tennessee is called the Unicoi Mountains. The southern boundary is the Snowbird Mountains, which swings northward to the Cheoah Bald. The northern boundary is the Little Tennessee River, which flows into Fontana Lake. The Cheoah range and the Yellow Creek Mountains traverse the northern part of the county, completely boxing in Graham County, with the exception of the rocky gorge below Lake Santeetlah, where the Little Tennessee River enters the State of Tennessee. (see map, Appendix A) It is little wonder that this region was one of the last regions of Western North Carolina to be settled by white men (Graham County Centennial Book, 1972).

The rugged nature of Graham County has been largely responsible for the slow development of the county. Today, it is the only county in North Carolina without a completed four-lane highway system.

Graham County had been known from the late 1950's until 1982 as the land clearing capital of the world, when Phillips and Jordan, Inc., a land clearing operation, moved to Knoxville, Tennessee. Other land clearing companies still operate in this community.

Presently, Graham County is known for the beginning of an 11-mile highway section (U.S. Highway 129 North) called "The Dragon's Tail," a Mecca for motorcyclists who appreciate its 318 curves. Their fearless prowess in negotiating these curves results in many traffic accidents and deaths among their groups. Graham County natives have learned how to address this road and do so with great care and efficiency.

Graham County is home to three dams, the Cheoah (most famous for the daring leap of actor Harrison Ford into the roaring waters of the Cheoah River below in the movie, "The Fugitive" in 1993); the Santeetlah Dam, which is the smallest and most picturesque dam in the Eastern United States, and the Fontana Dam, the largest dam in the Eastern United States. Two of the dams, Fontana and Cheoah still operate. Santeetlah operates only during times of flood threat.

Graham County has become a tourist haven in the last four years. The Graham County Visitors Center, which was formed in 2001, sees approximately

850 visitors annually. Many of these visitors have expressed a desire to move here because of the pristine and secluded beauty of the area (interview with Judy Jones, Director, Graham County Visitors Center, 2004).

Graham County's residential areas include: Yellow Creek Community, Town of Santeetlah, incorporated in 1988; Stecoah Community, Tuskegee Community, Snowbird Community, Tallulah Community, Town of Robbinsville, and the Snowbird Indian Reservation, which is home to the Snowbird group of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. These gracious people are remnants of those who escaped into the mountains and remained behind during the Cherokee Removal of 1836.

B. Historical Information

Graham County was formed from the eastern part of Cherokee County in 1872. An act was passed and ratified on January 30, 1872, because transportation to travel the required distance to attend county affairs and court sessions was extremely difficult (Graham County Centennial, 1972).

The county is believed to have been named for William A. Graham, a senator who helped the passage of the act. At one time Mr. Graham had been the Governor of North Carolina, Speaker of the House of Commons, Secretary of the United States Navy, and Senator of both the United States and Confederate States of America.

Robbinsville is the county seat of Graham County. Three courthouses have been the home of county government since 1873. The first session of court was held in the original courthouse in the fall of 1874. It served the county 20 years,



until the floor collapsed during a sensational murder trial, because of the large crowd that had gathered for the proceedings. A larger wooden courthouse was erected in 1895. This building remained in use until the current

stone structure was erected in 1942. The second court house was the last wooden courthouse in North Carolina.



Courthouse in 2004

Early history records only three white families living in Graham County, which was known as Cheoah Valley at the time. The three families were the Crisps, who came from Haywood County originally; the Hydes, and the Rowans.

Most of the people living in Graham County today descended from the early settlers and the Cherokee Indians, who have lived in these mountains since time began.

Part of the original “Trail of Tears” still exists in Graham County on a six-mile section of gravel road called Tatham Gap, which connects Graham and Cherokee Counties. The only identifying mark on this road is a wooden sign erected by the U.S. Forest Service, indicating that the road was built in 1836 for the purpose of removing the Indians. Please see photo at Appendix B.

Graham County’s most famous Native American, the Great Chief Junaluska, according to historians, saved the life of President (then General) Andrew Jackson at Horseshoe Bend. He was awarded 337 acres of land, made a citizen of North Carolina, and given \$100 in recognition of his bravery.

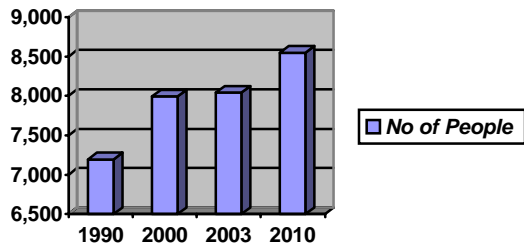
One of the folk tales that still remains to this day in Graham County is that of an oral disorder among infants called thrush. It is known as “thrash” in this community. It is said that the only cure for it is to find a seventh son of a seventh son and ask him to blow in the mouth of the child suffering from “thrash.” Hence the disorder clears up. It is also said to work if a son (or daughter) who has never seen his (or her) father blows in the child’s mouth. One can’t dispute the word of hundreds of people who have witnessed this phenomenon. Can you?

C. Demographic Information

The population of Graham County at the last census was 7,933; 3,900 males and 4,093 females. The county is predominantly white, 91.9%. Other ethnic groups consist of Black Americans, 0.2%; Native American (Snowbird Indians), 6.8%; Asian, 0.2%; and Hispanic or Latino, 0.8%.

Population density is 27.4 persons per square mile.

Population Trends

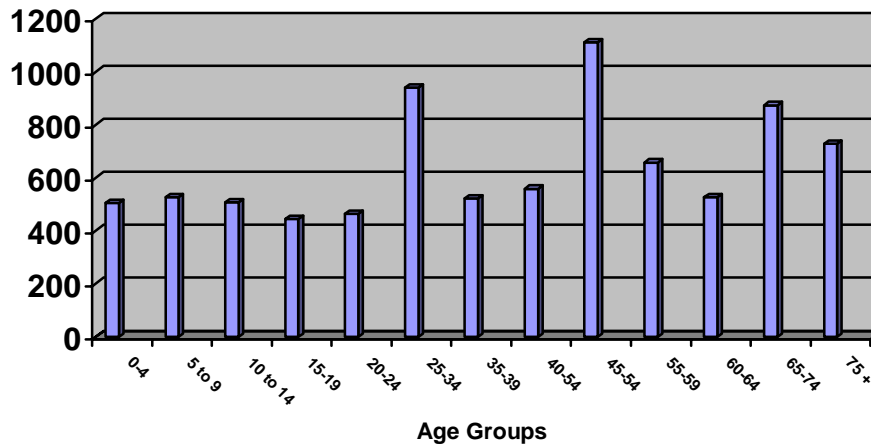


Persons ages birth to 18 represent approximately 22% of the total population (see Table DP1, Profile of General

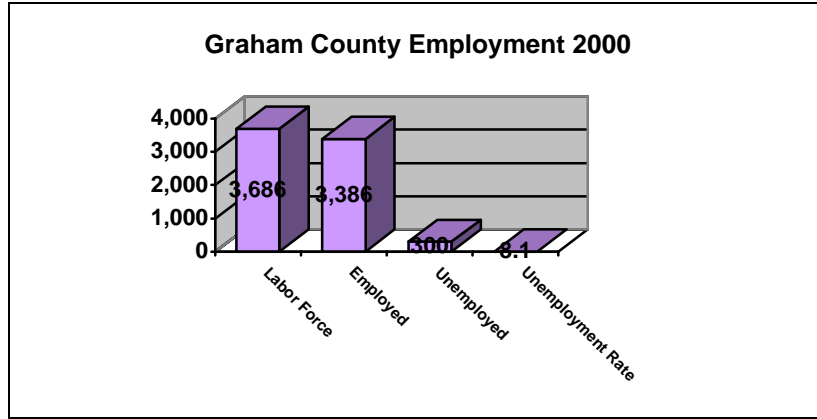
Demographic Characteristics 2000, Appendix

C) for further details.

Projected Graham County Population By Age Group For 2005



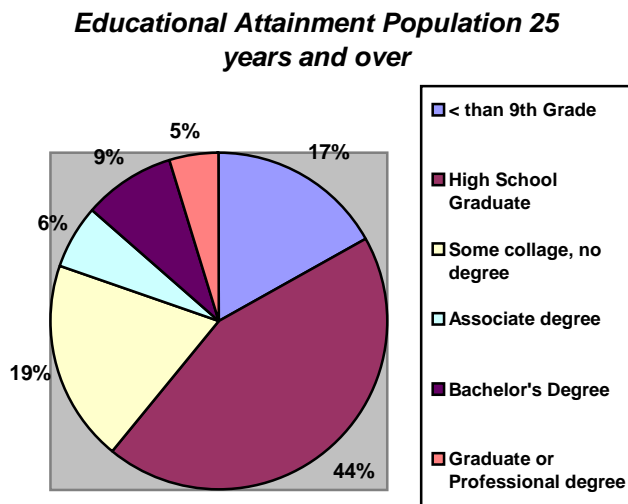
D. Social, Economic, and Political Information



The major industry in Graham County is the Stanley Furniture Plant, which employs approximately 625 persons. Other industries include construction, which employs 609 persons; retail trade, 324; and local government, 680 persons. Other employment may be found in Table DP3, Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics, Appendix D.

Graham County has two

school systems. One serves grades Kindergarten thru Sixth and the other serves grades Seventh thru Twelve. See graph to left as to education attainment.



Graham County presently serves the public spiritually with almost 50 churches (see Faith Guide at Appendix E).

III. Health Information

a. Mortality: County vital statistic records reveal an increase in cancer deaths among 40-64 year-old persons; whereas deaths from heart disease remain constant for that age group. For persons aged 65-84 years, heart disease takes more lives than cancer.

b. In analyzing the Top Ten Health Concerns as perceived by public opinion, there was a great deal of surprise. Asthma was rated as the major health concern in Graham County. The remaining health concerns and their ranking are as follows:

2. Lung cancer
3. Depression
4. Dental health problems
5. Emphysema
6. Mental health problems
7. Learning and developmental disabilities
8. Breast cancer
9. Diabetes
10. Hypertension.

According to the County Health Data Book, specific for Graham County, all indications are that heart disease is still the most deadly disease and most costly of all conditions treated.

Asthma hospitalizations are not as high as perceived. Only 4 events occurred during a one year period compared to 144 hospitalizations for heart disease in a one year period. Asthma is, however, the leading cause of absenteeism in Graham County Schools. See Diagnosed Current Asthma and Undiagnosed Current Wheeze by County, Appendix F.

Although the public did not perceive injuries and poisonings a concern, these fell second only to heart disease in a one year period of hospitalizations.

The public's perception of mental disorders, however, was close to accurate. For the years 1996 to 1998, these disorders accounted for the highest of all hospitalizations, a total of 775, ranking Graham County 344.3 in comparison with the state rate of 260.6. Mental disorders, of course, include drug and alcohol abuse and depression.

Heart disease is no respecter of persons. It strikes all ethnic groups equally in Graham County. However, it occurs more frequently among males over the age of 40, and its prevalence is seen more acutely among the Snowbird Indians. We know that the major risk factors include obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, smoking, and sedentary lifestyle.

c. Health and Human Services Concerns

The primary concern among respondents to the Health Opinion Survey was the lack of adequate 24-hour medical care. Graham County has no hospital. The closest hospital, which provides primary and limited secondary care, is in Bryson City, a travel time of 30 minutes in good weather. Graham County has one health clinic Tallulah Health Center, which is staffed by three physicians, one family nurse practitioner and two physician assistants, but it provides no 24-hour services. The Snowbird Indians are served by Snowbird Indian Health Clinic on the Snowbird Reservation.

Most people choose Harris Regional Hospital in Sylva for their care. This is a distance of 45 to 60 minutes travel time in good weather.

The majority of people in Graham County go to the health department. The health department offers the majority of services for children, but only receives eight percent of its funding locally. Services offered are limited to mandated services, such as well child, family planning, maternal health, child service coordination, maternity care coordination, immunizations, WIC, childbirth and parenting classes, communicable disease, environmental health, and health promotion. The health department provides all of the childhood immunizations in the county and currently 95% of the children are appropriately immunized. Approximately 77.8% of children use health department services.

For tertiary care, people must travel to one of three or four major areas for continued care: Asheville, NC (two hours); Knoxville, TN (1 1/2 hours); Atlanta, GA (3 hours) or Chattanooga, TN (3 hours).

Respondents also stated disappointment with the three pharmacies in Graham County. This is because they are not open at convenient times to the working public.

Other concerns centered around transportation to health care, the lack of health insurance, Medicare and Medicaid eligibility problems, housing assistance, utilities assistance, poverty in families with children, mental health care for the elderly, recreation and social programs for the elderly, and adult day care. Each of these concerns was ranked fairly equally at 68 – 74%.

d. Tobacco Issue: A final question was added to the Health Opinion Survey in the interest of determining public opinion concerning raising the excise tax on tobacco products to seventy cents per product. The question stated: Would you favor a 75 cent increase in the state tobacco usage tax? One hundred eighty-eight persons responded to this question. Fifty-eight percent were for the tax; and thirty-nine percent were against it.

IV. Community Concerns/Priorities

Graham County will continue to work on programs addressing the problems surrounding heart disease by creating ways to encourage people to increase

exercise, eat nutritiously, and to quit using tobacco. By combining the efforts of both the Graham County Health Department and Snowbird Indian Clinic in addressing heart disease, it is believed that more success will be garnered than by working separately toward this issue.

Another problem that has arisen and heretofore had not been recognized as a major health concern is mental health. Graham County will find ways to address this problem. One of the possible factors that contribute to mental disorders is the lack of things to do in Graham County, besides hunting, fishing, and boating. Maps, showing the road system and lake recreation areas are at Appendix G. There are no movie theaters, no bowling alleys, and no activities either for kids or for adults in the evenings.

V. Summary

The two major issues confronting Graham County are heart disease and mental health. These will be targeted in the forthcoming Community Action Plan.