

**The University of Alabama/ Pickens
Health Care Teaching County Partnership
Progress Report February 2016**

HCTC Partnership Summary:

An innovative partnership is in development between Pickens County citizens and The University of Alabama (UA) to create a "Health Care Teaching County" (HCTC). This partnership aims to sustain a struggling healthcare system by creating strong ties for innovation between UA and the County. It envisions UA students immersed in the county, overseen by UA faculty and County citizens, linked to health care providers to enhance health care, education and social support services, and benefiting from students' brightness and energy. The long term goal is intended to improve the health of its citizens and there by impact the county's ability to retain families and attract jobs.

Importance of the HCTC Partnership:

Rural communities, like Pickens County, face significant challenges to sustainability and growth. Along with education and jobs, health care is essential to sustain rural communities. Population characteristics of rural communities, where people in general are older, sicker, and poorer than non-rural areas, predict the need for greater availability of health care services. This is intensified in Alabama, where 41% of the population lives in rural areas versus 19% of the US. Pickens County is regarded as 100% rural, and at 41st in health outcomes amongst Alabama's 67 counties, is one of the least healthy counties in the state. Health is intimately tied to factors called "social determinants" which both contribute to and reflect the status. Examples include: median household income is \$32,214; a third of the population lives below the poverty level; high school graduation rates are below the state average; retail sales per capita are half the statewide average. A "big picture" approach to health must therefore look not only at traditional health care services but also social support services and economic development.

Partnership Activities:

Following developmental discussions in 2014 and early 2015 between a small group of UA and Pickens County leaders, a project steering committee, consisting of citizens representing the population of Pickens County and representatives from UA, began meeting in September 2015, to assess the direction and opportunities for development of the HCTC. Utilizing funding support from the Alabama State Legislature, the steering committee has developed and is executing an implementation plan that will be the next stage in development of the HCTC partnership.

The HCTC Partnership Implementation Plan has three components:

1. Create a basic infrastructure for administrative support by hiring a project coordinator/community liaison to facilitate overall daily program development and oversight for the partnership activities. This individual will be employed through UA, however will be based in Pickens County. The coordinator position is being posted in February and will be filled by spring 2016. The project coordinator will bestow the following qualities: program administration abilities, strong interpersonal communication skills, understanding of and respect for rural life and its values, knowledge of Pickens Co., administrative skills and coordination of project evaluation. A nursing, social work, public health, or other human services or health management related background is ideal for an individual in this role.

2. Pickens County Pilot Project Grants applications are currently available to both Pickens County community members and UA faculty and their students, working in collaboration with a Pickens County entity, to propose and develop projects/initiatives that address an identifiable health issue/priority within Pickens County. Award amounts of up to will \$25,000 for a one-year project will be available. Projects are expected to have a short term initial focus with potential for long term continuance and impact, will be reviewed as received and initiated as soon as possible but must start by summer 2016, and must have an evaluation component.
3. Pickens County Health and Services Fellowship applications are currently available for recent UA graduates, or UA students graduating in May 2016 who are seeking an opportunity to work in a health-related capacity (health in the broadest sense) in a community setting. The one-year service experience has the goal of providing the fellows practical, community based experience in which they can apply their education and commitment to service. A majority of the individual's time would be spent working in the community with a portion in a seminar series on health and public policy, leadership, and social determinants of health. Fellows will participate in concluding events, including an evaluation of the fellowship impact, at year-end. This "gap year" program will both provide resources to Pickens County and the projects of the Partnership, but will also give new graduates practical experience in community engagement, and thereby improve their preparation for graduate study and work life.

Future Steps for the Partnership:

Sustainable funding and leadership for the projects will be crucial for the success of this partnership in addressing health related needs in Pickens County. Annual funding will also provide opportunities for new projects in the future, and allow the steering committee to leverage state funding into external grant requests that can push the partnership beyond the initial implementation plan. The community-academic partnership being piloted in the HCTC has potential to be a model for other struggling rural counties within Alabama and surround states who face the same scarcity of health care and economic development resources, and a sense of despair about the prospects for a brighter future.