



## Public Policy Study: Local Public Health Agencies

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Expanding our work to help public policy decision-makers gain access to information is one of the School's top strategic priorities. Much of our conversation about public policy focused on doing more of the kind of work that faculty members have done for many years. Working with a legislative study commission, for example, to help its members understand the different policy options and then drafting legislation to implement their choices. That is one approach to policy work and we definitely should do more of it.

I want to describe a recent example that illustrates another kind of work that we can do to help policy decision-makers. [It is a study comparing the different organizational models for local public health agencies across North Carolina](#). Jill Moore and Aimee Wall started getting inquiries in early 2011 after several bills were introduced in the General Assembly that could produce significant changes in local public health service delivery. There were legal questions, not surprisingly, but people also were asking lots of other questions. For example, they wanted to know how the different types of agencies compared on measures such as staffing, costs, public health service delivery, and health outcomes.

The absence of ready answers to those and other questions prompted Jill and Aimee to collaborate with Maureen Berner on a grant proposal to study local public health services in North Carolina. Jill and Maureen were the principal investigators on a \$200,000 grant that was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in December 2011.

[The report](#), along with an [issue brief](#), was released last month in time for consideration by the



current General Assembly. It does exactly what we talked about in our strategic planning discussions. “The report does not offer recommendations, best practices, or other endorsements related to the different types of agencies. Rather, the goal is to provide objective, methodologically sound research findings that will support state and local policymakers in their decision-making processes.” Jill put together a team and coordinated the legal analysis, and Maureen pulled together a team for the evaluation component. Aimee played the overall coordinating role that she will continue to play on other projects as the leader of our public policy initiative.

The report is a first-rate piece of work, and we will have the opportunity to hear more about it at an upcoming faculty meeting. In the meantime, let me highlight a few things about this study that give me confidence we can do more of this kind of policy work.

- We can find [outside funding](#) to support this kind of study and to support the team of professionals required to pull it off.
- We can conduct a study that meets the inevitable crazy-short, legislative deadlines, and those deadlines must be met if we want the information to be useful in the policy decision-making process. The grant was funded in December 2011 and the report was ready for the legislative short session in May. The full study originally was not scheduled to be completed until after the session. Everyone worked enormously hard to accelerate the final report because a decision could be made this summer, and because we didn't want the report's unavailability to be used by anyone as an excuse for delaying a decision.
- We can put together an [interdisciplinary research team](#) of people with the professional skills required to conduct a high-quality policy study. In addition to Jill, Maureen, and Aimee, Margaret Henderson and Lydian Altman were an important part of the evaluation team. We also involved lots of other experienced professionals, including MPA alums and public-official clients like Chris Hoke, a lawyer with the Division of Public Health.
- We can pull together the professional staff to present the information and data in multiple ways that are easy to access and understand. In addition to the full report and the issue brief, the project also created [a dedicated website](#) and [a webinar](#). The team included Rob Moore and Greg Whisenhunt from the Instructional Support Division, Brad Bednar from our Information Technology Division, Gini Hamilton from the Marketing and Communications Division, and Kevin Justice, Nancy Dooly, and Dan Soileau from our Publications Division.



Standing: Rob Moore, Milissa Markiewicz, Greg Whisenhunt, Lydian Altman, Jill Moore, and Johanna Foster Seated: Aimee Wall, Margaret Henderson, Neil Dermody, and Dayne Batten

This project required a major effort by lots of folks, and I don't want to underestimate the many challenges involved in this project and in this kind of policy work. I look forward to hearing from Jill, Aimee, and Maureen to learn more about those challenges, including the political tightropes that had to be walked. It is an impressive piece of work and it is exactly the kind of project that I had in mind when we made the policy initiative a major priority. Kudos to everyone for their hard work in making it happen.