

## **Promoting Healthier Communities Through the Delaware State Health Improvement Plan**

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### **Abstract**

The Delaware State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) is a statewide, multi-year strategic plan that aims to address Delaware's most pressing health issues. The SHIP, in its fourth year of a five-year action plan, is led through a collaboration involving the Delaware Division of Public Health (DPH), the University of Delaware (UD) Department of Epidemiology, and the UD Partnership for Healthy Communities (PHC), which together form the SHIP internal team. The purpose of the SHIP is to outline objectives and strategies for implementation across five health priorities identified through a State Health Assessment (SHA): mental health, chronic disease, maternal and infant health, avoidable injury, and premature death. Since the SHIP's publication in April 2025, the SHIP internal team has worked with the SHIP Partnership Coalition to actively implement the plan and refine its strategies. This commentary highlights the SHIP's objectives and the progress made toward them.

### **The SHIP Partnership Coalition**

The Delaware State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) internal team connects with stakeholders and representatives across the state who form the SHIP Partnership Coalition. The Partnership Coalition consists of community-based organizations, non-profits, and federal agencies representing all sectors across the state, including health systems, education, transportation, housing, and more. The Partnership Coalition was created to bring together institutions and groups from all sectors to collaborate toward our common goal of improving the health of Delawareans. Thus, the Partnership Coalition is the active implementer of SHIP strategies. Before the implementation phase, the Partnership Coalition played an active role in shaping the SHIP. The Partnership Coalition members provided feedback on the state's goals, objectives, and strategies during bimonthly meetings throughout 2024. After the SHIP was developed in April 2025, SHIP Partnership Coalition members met regularly to discuss organizational updates that further support SHIP objectives and strategies. The Partnership Coalition members also address any community-level challenges so the coalition can continue to advance the organization's mission and, in turn, SHIP goals.

### **Stakeholder Engagement and Strategic Alignment**

Many organizations in Delaware are implementing SHIP strategies to promote the state's health goals. The SHIP primarily targets stakeholders and community-based organizations rather than the general public or individuals. The SHIP internal team champions the state's health priorities by focusing on capacity building, public health messaging, and sharing information and support. These initiatives enable the SHIP to assist local organizations through strategic planning,

research, data translation, and cross-sector collaboration. Wongsin et al. examined studies that demonstrated the relationship between strategic planning and organizational performance in the public health sector.<sup>1</sup> This research indicates that having a public health strategic plan, like the SHIP, positively influences organizational performance, including goal achievement.<sup>1</sup> This is important because when stakeholder or organizational goals align with SHIP's goals, the strategies being employed to advance health are more effective. Furthermore, partnerships between community agencies and public and private institutions, such as the Partnership Coalition, have been shown to be one of the most promising practice-based approaches in public health as different systems collaborate to cross-share resources and information, thus improving health outcomes from a multi-systemic approach.<sup>2</sup> Additional reviews have found that public health partnerships, such as the Partnership Coalition, lead to improvements in health outcomes that align with many of our objectives, including infant mortality, tobacco use, alcohol use, physical activity, and car crashes.<sup>3</sup> This directly honors the SHIP's main tenets: community engagement and de-fragmentation. The SHIP is directly influenced by the Vital Conditions of Health and Well-Being Framework seven domains or the properties that communities need to be able to thrive. If a gap exists in one area, it affects all others.<sup>4</sup> This principle guides the SHIP, which includes input from key sectors—such as transportation, housing, education, and non-profits—to promote a multi-systemic approach and break down silos. By prioritizing the Partnership Coalition's feedback, SHIP's goals, objectives, and strategies remain aligned with the communities most impacted.

### SHIP Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

The Delaware State Health Assessment (SHA) was conducted in 2022 and 2023 to evaluate the health of Delawareans and identify the state’s strengths and areas for improvement.<sup>5</sup> The SHA identified pressing health priorities and community-level needs, which informed the SHIP objectives and goals. The SHIP follows the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) guidance for SHIPs, sorting the strategic plan into priorities, goals, objectives, and strategies.<sup>6</sup> The SHIP internal team and Partnership Coalition collaborated to establish the plan, ensuring it was specific to Delaware and feasible for our partner organizations.

Priorities are specific health topics that encompass the goals we want to achieve to improve the health of Delaware's residents.<sup>6</sup> The SHIP’s priorities are mental health, chronic disease, maternal and infant health, avoidable injury, and premature death. Goals are broad statements that fall under the health priorities and describe what we want to accomplish and how we want to accomplish it.<sup>6</sup> The five priority health outcomes and their goals are shown in Table 1.<sup>7</sup>

Table 1. Summary of SHIP Priority Health Outcomes and Goals

Priority Health Outcomes	Goals
Mental Health	Expand access and improve mental health results via increased services and awareness of mental health conditions.
Chronic Disease	Reduce the population’s risk of chronic diseases among the population by promoting healthy lifestyles, preventive screenings, and chronic disease management.

Maternal and Infant Health	Decrease adverse health outcomes for birthing parents and infants.
Avoidable Injury	Improve community safety by expanding transportation access and reducing the risks of violence and falls.
Premature Death	Reduce drug and alcohol use among both youth and adults.

Objectives are measurable achievements for each goal.<sup>6</sup> For each objective, baseline data are available at the time the SHIP was published (2025), and a target was set to reach by 2028, the end of the five-year SHIP cycle. The SHIP includes specific measurable objectives to track progress and trends in health indicators, identify gaps in strategies, and pinpoint areas for improvement throughout the SHIP cycle. Measurable targets were developed using the National Center for Health Statistics Percent Improvement Tool,<sup>8</sup> which was used for Healthy People 2030. The target numbers were reviewed for feasibility by comparing them to recent trends and undergoing a thorough DPH review.

Strategies are the actions or activities that will support the SHIP in achieving its objective.<sup>6</sup> The SHIP strategies were identified and refined through SHIP Partnership Coalition Meetings. Other strategies were identified through a literature review of national and state sources, including the University of Wisconsin's Population Health Institute and the United Health Foundation's America's Health Rankings (AHR). Current strategies are available on the Delaware SHIP website.

## Objective Performance

Since publication in April 2025, the SHIP internal team has been working with the Partnership Coalition to determine what actions and initiatives are currently underway to address the five priority health outcomes and what work remains to be done. The SHIP internal team will publish an Annual Report to showcase our progress toward our goals, tackle the identified gaps in achieving our priority health outcomes, and refine our strategies to keep advancing.

The original 2025 SHIP report had 42 objectives. Of the 42 objectives, 12 showed measurable improvements, and six met their target. However, three objectives remained unchanged, and 15 objectives worsened. The remaining six objectives' data are unavailable at this time. The objectives were updated using state and national sources to identify the most recent data available for each objective. Objective performance by priority health outcome is as follows:

- 1) Mental Health — 0 out of 5 objectives improved and/or were met (0% met).
- 2) Chronic Disease — 8 out of 15 (53%) objectives improved and/or were met.
- 3) Maternal and Infant Health — 3 out of 6 (50%) objectives improved and/or were met.
- 4) Avoidable Injury — 4 out of 11 (36%) objectives improved and/or were met.
- 5) Premature Death — 3 out of 5 (60%) objectives improved and/or were met.

Based on objective performance, Mental Health and Avoidable Injury emerged as the priority that requires the most attention over the remainder of the SHIP cycle. Table 2 presents the 16 priority health outcomes and objectives that have improved, along with the percent improvement

from the baseline data used in the 2025 SHIP to the current reporting period. Because baseline data years varied by source, the applicable timeframe for each indicator is provided in the table.

Table 2. Percent Improvement for Priority Health Outcome Objectives

Priority Health Outcome	Objective	Percent Improvement	Timeframe
Chronic Disease (2.1.2)	Increase the percentage of adults who met the federal physical activity guidelines (150 minutes of moderate or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity and two days of muscle strengthening per week) in the past 30 days.	18.9%	2019 to 2023
Chronic Disease (2.1.4)	Reduce the percentage of adult obesity	3.4%	2022 to 2024
Chronic Disease (2.1.5)	Reduce the percentage of children ages 10 to 17 who are overweight or obese	1.4%	2020-21 to 2023-24
Chronic Disease (2.2.1)	Reduce the percentage of adults who are current smokers (smoke daily, some days, or at least 100 cigarettes in their lifetime)	21.7%	2022 to 2024
Chronic Disease (2.2.2)	Decrease the percentage of children ages 12 to 17 who reported using a tobacco product in the past month	55%	2018-19 to 2022-23
Chronic Disease (2.3.1)	Increase the percentage of women ages 40 to 74 who reported receiving a mammogram in the past two years	6.9%	2022 to 2024
Chronic Disease (2.3.3)	Increase the percentage of adults who visited a doctor for a routine checkup within the past year	1.2%	2023 to 2024
Chronic Disease (2.4.3)	Reduce the percentage of adults who reported ever being told by a health professional that they have diabetes	5%	2022 to 2024

Maternal and Infant Health (3.2.2)	Reduce the percentage of preterm births	1.9%	2022 to 2024
Maternal and Infant Health (3.3.1)	Increase the percentage of live births in which the pregnant person received prenatal care	2.3%	2022 to 2023
Maternal and Infant Health (3.3.2)	Increase the percentage of women with a recent live birth who reported receiving a postpartum checkup	1.4%	2021 to 2023
Avoidable Injury (4.1.2)	Increase the percentage of people walking to work	9.5%	2023 to 2024
Avoidable Injury (4.1.3)	Increase the percentage of people bicycling to work	100%	2023 to 2024
Avoidable Injury (4.4.2)	Reduce the rate of homicide deaths per 100,000 population	44.2%	2020-21 to 2022-23
Avoidable Injury (4.4.3)	Decrease the rate of firearm-related deaths per 100,000 population	25.9%	2021 to 2023
Premature Death (5.1.3)	Decrease the percentage of adults who reported illicit opioid use in the past 12 months	74.5%	2023 to 2025
Premature Death (5.2.1)	Reduce the percentage of adults reporting binge or heavy drinking	2.6%	2022 to 2024
Premature Death (5.2.2)	Decrease the percentage of children ages 12 to 17 who reported drinking alcohol in the past month	26.7%	2018-19 to 2022-23

## Discussion of Progress on Priority Health Outcomes

### Chronic Disease

The SHIP goals of increasing physical activity, reducing tobacco use among children, and expanding mammogram screenings were achieved. Targets related to adult and child obesity, adult smoking, routine check-ups, and adult diabetes have also shown progress, as shown in Table 2. In Delaware, public health campaigns, education, and community interventions led by groups such as the YMCA, the Community Health Advocacy Mobilization Group (CHAMG),<sup>9</sup> the Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention (PANO) Program,<sup>10</sup> and UD Cooperative Extension have consistently addressed physical activity, obesity, and diabetes. Workplace programs, community-based physical activity and self-management initiatives, and walkable community projects enhance residents' access to physical activity and chronic disease

management. Education efforts continue to promote adult smoking cessation and prevent child tobacco use through ongoing programs and social norm changes. Organizations such as Healthy Delaware, the American Lung Association, and Delaware Quitline provide tobacco cessation services and vape-free education, supported by a five-year plan to meet statewide goals. Faith Forward Collaborative and Lutheran Community Services offer community outreach and trusted messengers to deliver resources and raise awareness in underserved areas. Various organizations, including the Delaware Breast Cancer Coalition, Community Health Workers Association, and the Health Literacy Council of Delaware, have improved access to prevention, such as mammograms and routine screenings, through care coordination, health navigation, financial aid, and mobile services, thus increasing the community's ability to prevent, treat, and manage chronic diseases.

### **Maternal and Infant Health**

In relation to the maternal and infant health priority health outcome, preterm births, prenatal care receipt, and postpartum checkup receipt objectives improved (Table 2). Delaware has made this progress through a range of programs and partnerships that support birthing parents and infants before, during, and after pregnancy. Statewide initiatives such as the Healthy Women, Healthy Babies program provide prenatal care, nutrition, mental health, and family-planning services for individuals who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant, particularly those at higher risk of adverse birth outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Community-based efforts, including home visits and parenting support programs such as Smart Start, provide education and guidance to expectant parents and families with young children.<sup>12</sup> Other community organizations, including Black Mothers in Power and the Do Care Doula Foundation, Inc., work to expand culturally responsive care and improve birth outcomes among historically underserved communities. Organizations such as Children & Families First further support maternal and infant health through programs that provide parenting education, home-visiting services, and family support. These services help families navigate the postpartum period by connecting them with healthcare resources, promoting postpartum checkups, and providing guidance on infant care, breastfeeding, and maternal well-being. Additionally, the Delaware Healthy Mother and Infant Consortium coordinates statewide strategies to reduce maternal and infant mortality and improve health outcomes through policy recommendations, data monitoring, and collaboration among healthcare providers and community organizations.<sup>13</sup> All together, these initiatives strengthen prenatal and postpartum care, expand family support services, and promote healthier outcomes for birthing parents and infants in Delaware.

### **Avoidable Injury**

The targets for walking and bicycling to work improved, and the goals for reducing homicide and firearm-related deaths were achieved (Table 2). Delaware has made significant strides toward creating a more walkable environment through initiatives such as the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) Pedestrian Action Plan,<sup>14</sup> the Safe Routes to School Program, and Wilmington Area Planning Council's (WILMAPCO) Safe Streets for All,<sup>15</sup> all of which are focused on enhancing street safety and walkability across the state. Nature-based walking and biking are also promoted by the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) and groups such as UD Cooperative Extension and Sussex Cyclists. These organizations use policies, education, and outreach to improve Delaware's built environment and encourage alternative transportation options. To address homicide and firearm-

related death reduction, Delaware has adopted a coordinated, community violence intervention approach. Recent efforts include hospital-based recovery and re-injury prevention, law enforcement enhancements, and community street outreach. ChristianaCare's Empowering Victims of Lived Violence (EVOLV) supports trauma recovery for individuals impacted by community and interpersonal violence.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Delaware is strengthening crisis response and behavioral health services through Crisis Intervention Service Centers, Community Mental Health Centers, the Recovery Response Center, and hospital emergency rooms. Several organizations, including End Community Violence Now<sup>17</sup> and Group Violence Intervention, work to connect community members, organizations, and law enforcement, fostering trust and sustainable partnerships for violence prevention across the state.

## **Premature Death**

In this priority area, the objectives related to adult opioid use have been met, and there have been improvements in adult binge or heavy drinking and child alcohol use (Table 2). Delaware's opioid response has significantly advanced due to several factors, such as expanded access to addiction treatment and recovery services, increased distribution and use of naloxone, harm reduction efforts, and public health education about the risks of opioid use. Multiple organizations contribute to these achievements, including the Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health (DSAMH) State Prescription Monitoring Program,<sup>18</sup> which helps track and reduce misuse of controlled substances. Other groups, such as Delaware State University (DSU) and Trauma Matters Delaware, offer trauma-informed training for healthcare and social service providers. Additionally, Brandywine Counseling & Community Services offers harm reduction services, including a Syringe Service Program that provides sterile equipment and connects individuals to substance use and mental health treatment. For both substance and alcohol use, many organizations have expanded access to treatment and recovery through Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC), which offer integrated behavioral and substance use disorder services, along with healthcare systems delivering outpatient and specialized addiction treatment.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the SHIP provides a coordinated, evidence-based framework for addressing the state's most pressing public health challenges. Since the publication of the SHIP in 2025, progress has been made across several priority health outcomes, including chronic disease, maternal and infant health, avoidable injury, and premature death. These improvements reflect the collective efforts of public health agencies, healthcare systems, community organizations, and the SHIP Partnership Coalition, who work collaboratively to implement evidence-based strategies. While important progress has been made, priorities such as mental health require continued attention and targeted interventions over the remainder of the SHIP cycle. Ongoing monitoring of objective performance enables the SHIP internal team and its partners to identify gaps, refine strategies, and strengthen community partnerships to better address emerging needs. Moving forward, continued collaboration among state agencies, providers, and community-based organizations will be critical to achieving the SHIP's long-term goals. By aligning local initiatives with SHIP priorities and maintaining cross-sector partnerships, Delaware can further improve health outcomes and promote healthier communities across the state.

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