

Dare County health director “identifies the win-win and works to that end”

AS DIRECTOR OF DARE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH SINCE 1996, ANNE THOMAS HAS BEEN MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN IN HER ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNITY FOR OVER A DECADE.

Those changes have been *fundamental* (transforming the perception of public health in her community), *instrumental* (improving the culture in the health department itself), and *revolutionary* (working with a range of partners to implement program after program to improve health).

A major challenge for Thomas has been the overdoses and other substance abuse concerns that have plagued Dare County recently. In 2006, at a community meeting about the issue attended by then N.C. Secretary of Health and Human Services Carmen Hooker-Odom, State Senate President Marc Basnight, and Dare County human service agency directors, school administrators, and business and religious leaders, Thomas galvanized the community's resolve to address the problem and was tapped to lead development of a substance abuse plan for the county.

She began by convening partners from state and local public health communities to develop a vision for the plan. Under her guidance, they assessed the need and detailed

the necessary resources, timeline, cost of implementation, and funding sources for a substance abuse continuum-of-care demonstration project in the county. It worked. Based on this work, the state and county allocated \$1.4 million for a prevention, professional development and treatment services program which began in January 2007.

Always looking to learn more, Thomas is a graduate of the School's Management Academy for Public Health and Southeast

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Public Health Leadership Institute. (See page 7.)

Ellie Ward, nursing director for Dare County's Department of Public Health, explains Thomas' inspirational nature. “Anne sees where we are and where we need to go, and she gets us there,” Ward says. “With partners, even competitors or those



Anne Thomas

Anne Thomas, director of Dare County (N.C.) Department of Public Health, is a graduate of the School's Management Academy for Public Health and the Southeast Public Health Leadership Institute.

with reputations for being closed and unwelcoming, she identifies the *win-win* and works to that end. Most important, Anne communicates honestly and directly what others are afraid to say, and she is heard,

because she seeks to understand and solve, not judge or blame.”

In creating the substance abuse program, Thomas tackled a complex and emotionally-charged issue and succeeded in developing a comprehensive plan to serve her community now and in the future. ■

– BY ANNE MENKENS