

Gina Upchurch, RPh, MPH is the founding Executive Director of Senior PharmAssist (SPA) in Durham, NC. Senior PharmAssist promotes healthier living for older adults in Durham by helping them obtain and better manage needed medications, and by providing tailored health education, Medicare insurance counseling, community referral, and advocacy. Gina received her pharmacy and public health degrees from UNC-Chapel Hill, where she currently holds adjunct appointments after completing her pharmacy residency in geriatrics.

When studying geriatric pharmacy, Gina quickly became aware that many older adults struggled to afford their medications, while at the same time, some of their medications were creating more risks than benefits. When Gina needed a summer project while obtaining her degree in public health, she was hired by the Durham County Hospital Corporation via the Council for Senior Citizens to study ways to address both medication appropriateness and access in Durham. This information became a public policy analysis and with encouragement from her public health mentor – JoAnne Earp – they published the findings in the NC Medical Journal. The Duke Endowment made a significant three-year investment to get Senior PharmAssist jump-started. Today, the program serves over 2,300 Durham residents annually.

Gina has been involved with local coalition building and an African Proverb has been her North Star: “If you want to go fast – go alone, but if you want to go far – go together.” The SPA team – paid and volunteer – includes many gifted individuals who have inspired the collective work for 31 years. In addition to team effort, Gina attributes the agency’s success to evolving the work while remaining focused on how the work impacts the quality of life for the older adults who engage with the program. SPA has published peer-reviewed outcomes demonstrating tremendous annual savings to Durham residents during Medicare’s open enrollment period. For participants who receive all of SPA’s services – the program has demonstrated that after two years, their use of emergency rooms and hospitalizations is reduced by one-third.

Other local efforts Gina has been engaged with include serving as co-chair of the Partnership for a Healthy Durham in addition to co-chairing with the Access to Care Committee when they partnered with other advocates to help create Project Access of Durham County. Project Access offers donated specialty care and wrap-around services to Lincoln Community Health Center patients who are uninsured. Gina continues to serve proudly on their Board of Directors. When Medicare D began in 2006, the SPA team started the Durham Medicare Rx Network to ensure front-line workers across agencies would meet regularly to discuss how to navigate both medication assistance and Medicare insurance coverage. SPA efforts improve health literacy so that individuals are more in control of their own health, when possible.

When the Covid pandemic hit, it became clear that Durham agencies needed to intentionally integrate their services and be more supportive of community laypersons as leaders – now called community health workers. This cross-agency work led to the creation of Aging Well Durham, which supports the collective effort to implement the Durham Aging plan; Gina serves on that Board of Directors. Gina has recently agreed to co-chair a subgroup of the multi-sector NC aging plan called *All Ages, All Stages* and her team’s work will focus on improving long-term care costs and Medicare in North Carolina.

Outside of local coalition-building, Gina has served on several NC Institute of Medicine’s Task Forces, Duke University Health System’s Geriatrics Coordinating Council, the board of the NC Healthcare Quality Alliance, and the American Geriatrics Society Public Policy Committee. She has worked with Duke colleagues on a National Institute on Aging grant to help three communities in North Carolina replicate the Senior PharmAssist model. That work continues and in May 2023, she was appointed to serve on a 17-member Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) that advises Congress on Medicare policy.

Gina was a Science teacher as a US Peace Corps volunteer in Botswana and returns regularly.