NORTH CAROLINA

Pandemic Recovery Regional Focus-Group

REPORT February 28–March 21, 2024

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NCPRO
NC Pandemic Recovery Office

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ncIMPACT Initiative

NC ARCOG
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About This Report

In General

Through the use of focus groups and interviews, the ncIMPACT Initiative proudly partnered with the North Carolina Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO) to identify issues of highest concern about pandemic-recovery efforts in North Carolina communities. ncIMPACT used the boundaries of the state's regional councils of government (COGs) as a framework for this effort, conducting sixteen focus-group sessions and six expert interviews.

The focus-group gatherings were designed to examine and test insights from past survey results; assess the success of state, local, and federal programs created in response to the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic; address community concerns; and help formulate recommendations for continuing to build resilient communities across the state.

Focus-group participants across the state considered concerns surfaced in (1) NCPRO's Community Engagement Survey (CES) and Business Engagement Survey (BES), (2) the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission, (3) NCPRO's Resilience Index, and (4) the Social Vulnerability Index created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). The information gathered through this effort will inform and support recovery plans and actions for future economic, social, or physical disasters.

About the Partners

ncIMPACT Initiative. This statewide initiative was launched by the UNC School of Government in 2017 to help local communities use data and evidence to improve conditions and inform decision-making. ncIMPACT works to support civic leaders across the state, from elected and appointed local government officials to non-profit and business-sector leaders who are working every day on cross-sector collaborations that improve their communities.

The North Carolina Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO). NCPRO was established under Session Law 2020-4 (which ratified House Bill 1043) to administer and coordinate North Carolina's fiscal response to the COVID-19 pandemic. NCPRO is responsible for overseeing

the distribution of the $3.6 billion in **Coronavirus Relief Funds** (CRF) the state received from the U.S. Department of the Treasury to provide support to state agencies, local governments, non-profit entities, hospitals, educational institutions, and research organizations. NCPRO established a robust and efficient system for distributing, tracking, auditing, and providing guidance on the CRF funds that were allocated to more than 2,000 recipients in North Carolina.

In addition to duties related to CRF monies, NCPRO is responsible for oversight, administration, and federal reporting obligations for seven additional COVID-19 recovery programs: (1) the Governors Emergency Education Relief (GEER) program, (2) Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA), (3) the Homeowners Assistance Fund (HAF), (4) Economic Development Administration Tourism Grant Funds, (5) Economic Development Administration Strategy Funds, (6) Capital Projects Fund, and (7) American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) State Fiscal Recovery Funds (SFRF). NCPRO provides technical guidance and support to all county and municipal governments that received funds from ARPA Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (LFRF).

Methodology

Community leaders were encouraged to participate in our pandemic-recovery assessment by attending a focus-group session held in their region (we conducted sixteen sessions in all). A collaborative outreach effort—driven by ncIMPACT, NCPRO, the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners, and other partner organizations and utilizing e-mail marketing tools, social media campaigns, and individual communication gestures—was used to encourage registration. Twelve of the focus-group sessions were held virtually, and four were held in person; the format selected depended on the preferences of both the COGs and the participants. While virtual focus-group sessions allowed for greater participation by removing barriers related to transportation, they presented challenges regarding how and when participants engaged in the conversation. When visualizations from the NCPRO Business Engagement Survey were not available for a given session, we used data from the N.C. Commerce Department/NC Works Commission's 2022 Employer Needs Survey as a resource for business concerns. Similarly, we used visualizations from the CDC/ATSDR Social Vulnerability Index until NCPRO's Resilience Index was available.

Each of the focus groups with which we partnered sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

To answer these questions, **ncIMPACT** and the **N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office** (NCPRO) sought to directly engage with participants from across the state.

For more details, see the section below titled "Methodology."

Executive Summary

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Introduction

We had more than 500 people indicate interest in participating in one of our regional focus-group sessions. Ultimately, however, many could not make the date and time of the session in their area. That said, the one hundred+ people who participated came prepared to share their perspectives.

Focus-group members noted that pandemic-era programs had many positive outcomes for communities throughout North Carolina. In a period of great need, people received support for basic needs such as housing, food, and healthcare; students were able to continue their education; many workers kept their jobs; and businesses remained operational.

While there was some discussion as to whether certain federal programs accomplished their goals, the conversations were more focused on how different people (e.g., local-government officials and school leaders), groups (e.g., churches), and communities that had to work together under unprecedented challenging conditions managed to create new civic infrastructure for communication and collaboration. Many focus-group participants noted that these partnerships and relationships strengthened over time and still remain in place to this day, continuing to do work that benefits their communities. Keeping these relationships going into the future, and avoiding silos (real or imagined) that existed in the past, was a wish expressed by participants.

A member of the Mid-Carolina region's focus group reflected on the cross-community relationships formed during the pandemic:

> [W]hen we were in the throes of the pandemic, all the what-ifs and concerns [made us question] exactly how strong we [were] . . . but I don't think there's any question [about it] anymore. I think we know what we're capable of doing, especially when we work together. So, like everyone says, we came out with a new skill set. [And] that's a positive [because] we are resilient as a community.

Members of the Southwestern Commission's focus group agreed that their community drew together during the pandemic in an effort to help people in need. Several participants

said that food distribution was a top need at the time, not just for the elderly, but also for parents trying to feed their families. Here is a typical comment:

> We were very versatile about trying to make sure everybody had what they needed, especially food.

Food distribution was only one of many ways in which community groups achieved historic positive impact in the COVID era. On the less-than-positive end, focus-group participants noted that the pandemic exposed cracks in the existing social fabric. By way of illustration, they pointed to the following matters.

Areas of Discussion

Housing

Housing was identified by all sixteen focus groups and in each interview as a primary concern for communities across the state. Participants talked about different dimensions of housing, including affordability, quality, quantity, and the need for renter protections.

Focus-group session participants discussed how housing was addressed during the pandemic through rental assistance and eviction moratoriums. They noted that while pandemic-era housing programs saved many from homelessness, they were a short-lived solution for a longer-term crisis. Interestingly, almost half of focus-group members noted that the cost of housing in their communities had been inflated by people with second homes or by people moving to North Carolina from outside the state. They also opined that the tight affordable-housing market was likely to persist far beyond the expiration of pandemic assistance programs and wanted to see efforts made to incentivize more affordable-housing production. Members of the High Country and Piedmont Triad focus groups, respectively, put it this way:

> In our area we have a lot of pressure on housing . . . . [W]e're trying every day to work with unique solutions. . . . [H]ousing access [and] housing affordability [issues] drive[] a lot of things in our area.

> [The] whole region needs to think creatively about affordable housing in ways we have not seen in [North Carolina]. [Let's create] housing trust[s]. Land trust[s]. We can't rely on the private market. That's [a] radically new [idea] for this part of [the state].

A commenter from the Land of Sky region addressed the impact of nonresidents coming into the community:

> [Y]ou [have] this tremendous flow of people with resources and money [who will] pay a million dollars for a house that's worth . . . half a million. . . . It's just stacking the pressures up on our longstanding communities[,] and [people] with that level of financial resource[s don't exist in this area]."

A participant in the Cape Fear focus-group session had this to say about the housing issue:

> We [created] a motel sheltering program . . . to be able to relieve some of the capacity issues at the shelters[,] and [we] also work[ed] closely with the hospitals so that folks who are homeless and COVID-positive weren't discharged back to the streets.

During COVID, participants often connected access to safe and affordable housing to other challenges, including workforce development, transportation, and Internet access.

A few focus-group members expressed concern that available affordable housing was, with increasing frequency, located farther away from city centers, disconnecting residents from jobs and services. According to a Land of Sky participant,

> [T]oday all of our employers are talking about housing, and it's not just for our lowest-wage workers. It's across the spectrum because they see how the lack of housing and the fact [that] our housing is so expensive is inhibiting their ability to recruit workers.

A Central Pines focus-group member had this to say on the matter:

> Housing is so important to this conversation about transportation. [We need to look at] how our communities are laid out and [at] planning and zoning, and [we need to start] thinking about where we can place housing in a way that more people can live on transit routes to get to their jobs and live their lives.

A few participants focused on how, within the context of COVID-19, affordable-housing shortages were related to and affected the spread of disease. In areas with large homeless populations, for example, it was difficult to isolate individuals with active or suspected COVID-19 infections who lived in group shelters. As a result, this population was more likely to contract and spread the disease when not relocated to a hospital or hotel for treatment and/or quarantine, said participants, including one from Mid-Carolina and one from Centralina, respectively:

> One of the things that we had a hard time with was, of course, isolating people who are homeless. So, with . . . federal funds, we were able to put people up in hotel rooms. And . . . that made a big difference.

> I don't think they [the City of Charlotte and its city council] really realized how quickly that pandemic could have spread even more rapidly if we [hadn't] moved towards trying to get the people without homes into hotels. We[] had to learn a lot about that, because it did not always go well. . . . [T]here was fallout from the hotels when they did not get paid on time.

Almost all the focus groups noted that pandemic-era housing programs created a "cliff" that has resulted in an unprecedented spike in rental costs and evictions. Many participants, including one from the Kerr-Tar region, expressed hope that future housing programs would offer a more gradual decline in support (as opposed to an immediate cessation of services) or offer more ways to help renters, in particular, prepare for what happens when a program ends:

> We need to try to avoid a cliff. Whether it's rental assistance or unemployment, we need a transition plan for people so that we don't just cut them off.

Finally, it is important to note that many of the focus-group conversations considered the dire impacts of high housing expenses on the elderly. Participants wondered aloud how people on fixed incomes could deal with rising housing costs. Interestingly, this concern was not

confined to urban areas. Focus-group members from suburban and rural areas were as likely to raise it, as exemplified by this comment from an Eastern Carolina participant:

> You know, the rental costs are just going up. [It's happening] at an even higher rate [than we could have imagined]. . . . [F]olks on [fixed] incomes[, like the] elderly and others, just have a hard time keeping up.

Access to High-Speed Internet

Participants in ten of the sixteen focus-group sessions raised access to high-speed Internet (often referred to as broadband) as another top concern. High Country focus-group members specifically stated that the loss of a pandemic-era affordable-connectivity program was going to have a negative impact on their region:

> Everything's happening online since the pandemic, and that hasn't really changed. [S]chool, work, [healthcare,] you name it. Having that access and that little extra bit of help each month has enabled folks to tap into that resource. It's economic development and community development wrapped into one program.

Many focus-group members elaborated on the importance of a reliable Internet connection for meeting education, business, and healthcare needs in their regions. Short-term local efforts to address affordability issues primarily focused on connecting students to Wi-Fi to complete their lessons and assignments. These efforts included programs such as hotspot distributions and the mobilization of fully equipped buses and other vehicles that would park in public lots so that students could complete their work from a vehicle. Longer-term efforts focused on building local infrastructure to help increase Internet access. Focus-group session participants, including one from the Upper Coastal Plain region and one from the High Country region, among others, noted the importance of reliable and accessible Internet service:[o]

> Wilson County school system, they did a really good job of making sure that the kids had hotspots . . . that really was a saving grace for our students, all the way from elementary on up, to make sure that they had what they needed. But then you found parents were trying to use it as well. Everybody was trying to use the hotspot to get everything done that they needed.

> While the official maps of broadband coverage showed us [having] good coverage, they were sadly mistaken. And so w[e] used [pandemic funding] to really beef up the broadband coverage in the county[.] . . . I don't know if you'd say that[was] the most effective [use of resources], but it was certainly the biggest chunk of money spent here.

Across all focus-group sessions, it was common to hear participants say that Internet access and affordability issues existed in the region before the pandemic but that COVID-19 highlighted inadequacies in service provision. There was consensus that this should be a local and state priority, as reliable Internet access is crucial for information sharing, education, remote jobs, accessing services, telehealth, and other critical needs.

Food Insecurity

Food security, food deserts, food affordability, and other related concepts were mentioned in all of the focus-group sessions. Participants discussed rising food costs and the difficulties that both families and elderly people on fixed incomes faced in meeting their nutritional needs. Food insecurity for fixed-income seniors, in particular, was noted as an issue that existed prior to the pandemic. Participants also observed that challenges in this area were exacerbated by challenges such as product shortages and transportation access.

It was common to hear participants discuss the expansion of food-delivery services during the pandemic to meet local needs and the formation of cross-sector partnerships to ensure that available resources were utilized efficiently to meet the nutritional needs of communities. Some focus-group members noted that, of all pandemic-era recovery programs, the efforts that reached the most people in an equal way in their communities were those surrounding food distribution. Here is a sampling of comments on this issue:

> We were very versatile about trying to make sure everybody had what they needed, especially food. (Southwest Commission)

> We were using every resource possible to get access to the fresh fruits and vegetables. Having our SNAP [benefits] increase during that time period was instrumental for us. (Land of Sky)

> One thing I saw in the pandemic was that there was no discrimination when it came to food insecurity. (Kerr-Tar)

> Being able to partner [with others] and get [food] out into the community has really been a help. (Albemarle)

Childcare

Participants in six focus-group sessions discussed the pressing need for expanded childcare services in their regions. It was common for participants to note that, without adequate childcare, many working-age individuals are kept from participating in the workforce and that, to effectively meet workforce challenges, the issue of childcare must be addressed.

It was also noted that low pay for childcare workers and strict industry regulations limit the supply of childcare centers and negatively impact workforce participation, particularly for parents of young children. Participants, including one from the Foothills region and one from Land of Sky, said that, without the emergency funding that kept childcare centers open throughout the pandemic, many establishments would be unable to meet salary needs and retain workers:

> Teachers and childcare workers left. . . . These [people] are essential pieces for the workforce to be healthy and able to go to work.

> Here's [the] situation[: . . .] that money that flowed into childcare [during the pandemic] allowed for this system to stay intact and for the staff not to bolt. . . . But here's what we're facing now. A lot of these staff across the state received raises because the funding was available to do that, which desperately needed to happen. [But that funding won't last forever.] . . . [Y]ou mentioned the key word[s:] . . . huge cliff.

In three focus-group sessions, what was referred to as a pending "cliff" for childcare subsidies left participants questioning how many childcare facilities would have to close in the future and what that would mean for local economies. Here are comments from, respectively, Southwestern Commission and Upper Coastal Plain focus-group members:

> [Childcare is] still lacking in our area. And it's a huge impact on our workforce.

> [W]hat we [are] deal[ing] with today is [the fact that] . . . we lost a lot of daycare facilities [during the pandemic]. . . . [E]ither their federal aid has expired or will expire. And, you know, affordable childcare is a big concern in our . . . region, and it directly impacts a parent's ability to go to work.

Transportation

In nearly half of the focus-group sessions, transportation was cited as a barrier to workforce participation. Participants noted that infrequent schedules and lack of publicly available transportation services, among other factors, contributed to unreliability. Here is a collection of comments:

> For people in [nearby rural areas who] want a job in Greensboro, [the question becomes,] how do you get there? You have to have a car [to have a job]. (Piedmont Triad)

> We . . . don't have [sufficient] public transportation . . . for some . . . individuals to try to get into the workforce. (Southwestern Commission)

> You [have] service workers [who] are having to live outside the county just to be able [to afford housing and other expenses]. And . . . they're having to drive in[to the county], [to drive] that much further, just to be able to work. (Eastern Carolina)

Business Supports

There was a consensus among focus-group members that the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) worked better for larger businesses than it did for smaller businesses, particularly those owned by people of color. Participants also noted general confusion about the specifics of that program, such as the amount of funding available and when it would start and end, applicable regulations, changing rules over time, and navigability of the program's website, which was prone to crashing. Here are some comments on the PPP:

> The bigger businesses, from the PPP loan standpoint, were able to take better advantage [of the program]. But I think the bigger organizations, where the infrastructure was in place and

> people are used to dealing with federal money, were more able to mobilize and access . . . and deploy funds[.] . . . I would just say that . . . it would be an awfully good time for the federal government . . . to take a look at ways to streamline these emergency programs in ways that would [make them] easier to deploy without having to rely on the complicated federal funding infrastructure that's [currently] in place. (Cape Fear)

> I really do think [the PPP] was a lifeline, for not only the business[es], but also the employees. (Southwest Commission)

Cliffs

Even for programs that were lauded as successful, focus-group participants worried about the impact that current and future "cliffs" might have on those programs. They spoke passionately about the need to more gradually transition families, organizations, and communities (discussed as "the three levels of support") off of assistance funding and services. Sometimes the conversations were about all three levels of support. For example, in at least five of the focus-group sessions, someone raised the issue of salary supplements and noted that families, organizations, and communities need to be prepared for when those supplements go away.

Community Health Workers

Many participants, including one from the Lumber River region and one from Kerr-Tar, said that community health workers provided valuable services to community members during the pandemic. They checked on the elderly and offered ongoing care without requiring travel to a clinical setting.

> I really saw the value of the community health worker program (CHWP)[.] [Its staff were] able to check on their elders, and not just [related to the] pandemic, but for basic health needs. . . . Folks don't always want to go to clinical sites for care. . . . [T]hose trained community health workers [are] not paid a lot of money. A lot of them are . . . volunteers.

> Community centers took care of the community. And people knew they could go there, and it was a safe place.

Organizations Focused on Helping Elderly Residents

Members in five different focus groups mentioned the importance of meeting the specific needs of the elderly populations in their communities. Participants said that local services targeted at this population, such as food delivery, home visits, and transportation assistance, expanded during the pandemic. It was common to hear participants observe that the limited incomes of their elderly populations led to increased food insecurity during the pandemic. The social isolation for this population, whose members often live alone, was noted as a serious concern during the pandemic.

Participants stated that in order to meet the needs of elderly citizens, more centralized information, and the means to understand and access it, must be provided. Without access to

and familiarity with the Internet, many older residents found it hard to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate services during the pandemic, when they were being inundated with mailers for both reputable and not-so-reputable services.

Participants noted that the support of local services and trusted "champions," such as churches, community health workers, and others, was crucial to providing information to their communities' elderly populations, to connecting them to services, and to ensuring that their physical and mental needs were met.

> We ran a grocery reimbursement program for seniors. We distributed well over $750,000 to assist seniors. It was extremely popular. It was certainly extremely needed. (Eastern Carolina)

> The senior center delivered necessities, including toilet paper, when doing Meals on Wheels. (Albemarle)

> [H]opefully . . . the multi-sector aging plan that the governor . . . initiated . . . will help guide some of this work. [F]or years you've heard about the coming silver tsunami. Well, it's upon us, and the attention has [thus far] not been put there. . . . [A]s a state, we need to look at prioritizing more funding for our older adults. [W]ith the COVID programs there were a lot of special funds that were directed to services, and as those expire, a lot of those programs are facing a cliff. (Lumber River)

Intersections of Areas of Concern

Members in several focus groups noted the interrelated nature of the concerns they emphasized. For example, participants in the Albemarle region's focus group mentioned that access to reliable, permanent high-speed Internet will help with both education and economic development. Central Pines region participants noted that the unhoused are often unable to access jobs or food.

Centralina region focus-group members pointed out that elderly citizens who used public transportation were unable to travel to buy food when the pandemic forced them to avoid enclosed spaces, highlighting how transportation and food insecurity were linked in their community. Focus-group members in the remaining regions implicitly discussed the interconnectedness of their community's challenges.

Several focus-group sessions targeted the importance of meeting people's basic needs—e.g., housing and food—before other issues could be addressed.

Although in facilitating the focus-group conversations ncIMPACT specifically asked participants about concerns that existed during the pandemic era, many participants were able to thoughtfully tie those concerns to challenges facing their regions both before and after COVID-19.

Effectiveness of Government Agencies

The feedback from the sixteen focus groups about the pandemic-era performance of government agencies was mixed. Some focus-group participants lauded their local governments, while others lamented a lack of leadership and coordination. In one focus-group

session, a participant talked positively about the role played by a city in their region in sharing information about COVID-19. Another participant in this session noted that their city and county made no similar outreach efforts to residents in their community. We heard from a handful of focus-group participants about the work of regional councils of government (COGs), NCPRO, and the UNC School of Government during the pandemic, including the following comment from a Southwestern region participant:

> I don't think that folks recognize the capacity and the value of the COG, and, if there is a silver lining, it is the trust and authenticity and the work of the commissioners across the region. It's incredible. And I think that's something that needs to be acknowledged.

Ten Lessons Learned for the Next Crisis

1. **Housing security is paramount.** All sixteen focus-group sessions devoted a majority of their meeting time to discussing the housing crises in their regions. This suggests that the most precarious asset in communities during times of crisis is housing. Rental-assistance programs and the federal eviction moratorium were heralded as having saved tens of thousands of people in North Carolina from homelessness.

2. **Many people in North Carolina are living on the edge of hunger.** Most focus-group sessions involved discussions about the need for food during the pandemic and how the level of that need was not widely known among citizens. While some participants did not think that food-assistance programs were efficiently run during the pandemic, all indicated that such programs were needed.

3. **Childcare is community care.** Childcare was raised as a concern in almost every focus group and as a barrier to economic development in eight of the focus-group sessions. Participants observed that parents cannot work if they are unable to secure affordable, quality care for their young children.

4. **Eldercare is community care.** Unlike with childcare, no focus-group participant talked about assistance to the elderly as being an example of economic development, but, in almost every focus-group session, elder residents were cited as being an especially vulnerable group during times of crisis. We heard a lot about the need for affordable housing and food security for this group of North Carolinians.

5. **Capacity matters.** Communities that have more capacity to respond to physical, social, and economic crises are better able to bounce back from those, and other, difficulties. Participants in the focus-group sessions made clear that, as a state, we must continue to work to build the capacity of local governments, non-profit entities, and other organizations to respond to community crises. While many communities were able to build capacity during the pandemic, there was a prevailing sense among participants that those communities with low capacity levels at the beginning of the pandemic had a harder time accessing federal programs. Focus-group members did not specify any programs they believed

had helped to build capacity in places that most needed it. To the contrary, some participants were concerned that the infusion of funding that could not be sustained post-pandemic would lead to less capacity overall.

6. **Social capital works both for and against residents of the state.** Participants in our focus-group sessions talked a lot about the importance of social connections. Community health workers, for example, were able to effectively work with residents on vaccine programs. In addition, people who knew people knew about resources. That said, those outside of networks learned about available resources more slowly and/or needed more time to trust those resources. This was particularly true of business-support programs.

7. **Communication and collaboration are key.** Participants acknowledged that the pandemic was an unprecedented event. They appreciated that programs to address resulting concerns were quickly developed. They noted, however, that some communities had the communication and collaboration infrastructure needed to effectively share information about such programs while many did not.

8. **Infrastructure connections are critical.** Some focus-group participants said that in rural communities, physical connections were built through the use of transportation programs. Others pointed out the benefits that reliable regional infrastructure, including water and sewer, had on people's lives. A third group emphasized how broadband investments had allowed for the creation of virtual connections.

9. **Technical assistance is a must.** There were many conversations in the focus-group sessions that revealed confusion about who did what on specific pandemic-era programs. However, participants did report that community leaders appreciated the role of the state, including NCPRO, during the crisis. Experts noted that North Carolina fared better and recovered more quickly than many states, and they expressed special appreciation for the contributions of, and partnerships across, NCPRO, the N.C. Department of State Treasurer, the regional councils of government, the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners, the North Carolina League of Municipalities, and the UNC School of Government. Experts stressed the need for continued capacity building through technical assistance that includes a focus on providing robust data to communities. Business-specific experts interviewed mentioned the value of the North Carolina Rural Center.

10. **It's complicated.** The most consistent theme across focus groups was the interrelatedness of issues. People can't take advantage of job retraining programs if they don't have access to childcare, for example. It may be difficult for programs that are funded through different sources to respond to that interconnectedness, but focus-group participants made it clear that future programs will be less effective if they don't do so.

Methodology

Sign-Up Dissemination

Participants were able to sign up for our assessment through the ncIMPACT website. Details of the study were shared through the ncIMPACT newsletter and social media, NCPRO social media, direct communications by both organizations' team members with local and regional community leaders, and targeted outreach by an advisory group. Partner organizations like the UNC School of Government, local chambers of commerce, and non-profit organizations also shared the details through newsletters, listservs, and social media.

Due to the quick turnaround time between sign-ups and focus-group dates, our sample may have been impacted. Residents who lived and/or worked in a defined council of government (COG) area were eligible for participation. Efforts were made to have a sample of eight to ten individuals at each event, representing a diversity of sectors. This was accomplished for seven of the sixteen focus groups.

Format

Each focus-group session was structured to be seventy-five minutes long, utilized a set protocol that was reviewed by the NCPRO team, and included an advisory group made up of a COG representative and individuals from across multiple universities and private research groups. The protocol was changed modestly five times to accommodate data visualizations as they became available. Sixteen focus groups were conducted from February 28, 2024, to March 21, 2024. One group used the first protocol, five used the second, four used the third, four used the fourth, and two used the final protocol. Each protocol relied on data visualizations to stimulate conversation among focus-group participants.

Differences in Focus-Group Format

Given the ambitious timeline of the project, the focus-group sessions were held both in person and virtually. Implications for data collection are discussed below. Twelve of the sixteen focus-group sessions were conducted virtually to meet the preferences of COGs

or participants. This difference in format presented both strengths and challenges for the ncIMPACT focus-group team and for participants.

Virtual Focus-Group Sessions—Pros

- More people were able to participate. We eliminated the barrier of transportation. Some focus-group participants disclosed the fact that they were disabled, and virtual focus groups decreased barriers to engagement for these participants. Others simply found the format more convenient.
- Some notetakers found this format to be easier for notetaking, as they were able to spend more time watching faces and body language to gauge engagement.

Virtual Focus-Group Sessions—Cons

- The virtual platform sometimes made it difficult for participants to follow the conversation. Without face-to-face interaction, multiple participants used the raise-hand feature, which made it difficult to group conversations by topic.
  - The ncIMPACT team found that sharing the session prompts both in the platform's chat area and verbally helped online groups better follow the discussion.
  - Some ncIMPACT facilitators found that the virtual format led to a less natural conversation between participants, who may have been more careful to "take turns" virtually than they would have been had they participated in person.
  - Other facilitators noted that they did not have this challenge because they had primed the group at the beginning of a session by acknowledging the slight awkwardness of the format and letting participants know that they did not have to "wait their turn," use the raise-hand function, etc.
  - If this challenge had been anticipated, a separate version of the protocol would have been created for the virtual focus groups in an attempt to be responsive to the different environment.
- Participants would often leave their cameras off, limiting the ncIMPACT team's ability to capture body language or perceive age, race, and gender information.
- Participants also joined and left the conversation throughout the virtual sessions, rather than staying for the duration of the calls.
- Participants multitasked during the virtual meetings, sometimes noting that they were stepping away or taking another call. This more limited engagement may have affected the quality of their answers and recall ability.
- Technology issues led to some participants disengaging from the conversation or leaving the focus-group session entirely.

Tools and Results Presented

Business Concerns

Because we could not obtain visualizations from the **NCPRO Business Engagement Survey**, we used data from the **2022 Employer Needs Survey** produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission.

Community Engagement Survey

The NCPRO **Community Engagement Survey** (CES), conducted by researchers at East Carolina University, seeks to have community leaders in each county across the state share their perspectives on regional and local trends related to quality of living topics, such as housing, broadband, food access, education, and more. The survey's design was inspired by the U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey, which provided statewide data on how these topics were impacted by COVID-19. The CES was administered from 2022–2024. For the first seven focus-group sessions, pre-identified categories of concerns (pulled from CES results) were shown to participants. For the next nine sessions, we were able to use visualization to identify the top three concerns in each region.

Resilience Index

In conjunction with the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, the University of North Carolina School of Government, the East Carolina University College of Business, and numerous state agency representatives, NCPRO conducted a quantitative analysis of more than 100 variables relevant to community resilience as identified by key stakeholder groups. Following quantitative and qualitative analysis, a weighted index comprised of nine dimensions and fifty-four distinct variables emerged (the Resilience Index) and informed the numeric scores we assigned and used. The goal was to identify which places in North Carolina might have more trouble recovering from a disaster event than other places in the state. We were only able to use the Resilience Index for two focus-group sessions. For the others, we used the **Social Vulnerability Index** created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). The point of this index is to identify places and populations that may need more resources to improve the effectiveness of their physical, economic, and social disaster preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery abilities.

Data Collection

Six ncIMPACT team members provided facilitation and notetaking services for the focus-group sessions, with support from one private contractor for six of the focus-group sessions. Feedback from ncIMPACT team members indicated that the protocol helped structure and pace the conversations with participants. Across the focus-group sessions, participants' conversations centered more on general community experiences with COVID-19 and

challenges facing the participating regions rather than on experiences with specific COVID-era programs. Few participants shared details related to specific programs beyond rental assistance, the federal eviction moratorium, food support programs, and the federal **Paycheck Protection Program** (PPP).

Notes on Data-Collection Limitations

- Visualizations from the CES, the Business Engagement Survey, and the Resilience Index were delayed, leading to variation in the visuals presented to participants.
  - The first six focus-group sessions did not use any visualizations from the tools presented due to delays in data cleaning and presentation.
  - Resilience scores were used only in the final four focus-group sessions. The resilience map was used only in the final two focus-group sessions, where there were no visuals available.
  - Due to these limitations, the CDC/ATSDR Social Vulnerability Index was used to give participants a visual to which they could react. At one focus-group session, the facilitator forgot to distribute this index to participants.
- Participants sometimes found the Social Vulnerability Index and/or the Resilience Index difficult to understand.
  - Given the limited timeframe (seventy-five minutes) of the focus-group sessions, it was difficult to adequately explain the multiple technical elements presented, while still leaving ample time for participant responses and reactions.
- NCPRO representatives were present for three focus-group sessions, which may have affected participants' answers about the effectiveness of programming and availability of information.
- Recruitment for focus groups was more difficult than expected. People are busy, and it is difficult to get their attention. Additionally, the reason for the focus groups was unclear to some.
  - More than 500 people expressed interest in the focus groups, but many couldn't make the dates and times of the sessions. Some people showed interest in the focus groups generally but wanted to attend a session that was not being held in their region and/or asked if we were going to conduct another session in their region.
- Different facilitators may have approached the protocol differently. Additionally, as the focus-group sessions progressed, facilitators may have become more comfortable with the facilitation process, leading to improved data collection.

Regional Summaries

Albemarle

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 14, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO). Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.

INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

Eight people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The **Albemarle Commission Council of Governments** (COG) represents Camden, Chowan, Currituck, Dare, Gates, Hyde, Pasquotank, Perquimans, Tyrrell, and Washington counties. Currituck, Dare, Gates, and Tyrrell counties did not have any individual representatives present at the session. One person from the business/health sector represented all of the counties in the COG. Four people represented the local government sector. There was one person from emergency services and one person from the healthcare/social work sector. The average age of participants appeared to be between 40 and 65. Of the eight participants, three appeared to be men and five appeared to be women. Four of the participants kept their cameras off. One participant seemed to have had a language barrier because he asked for information in the chat and typed in all of his responses. The on-camera participants appeared to be mostly white; there appeared to be one Black and one Hispanic participant. This group was lively, and participation was great.

The conversations were centered on the following three major questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants also discussed details of pandemic-era programs, funding, and what will happen in the future when certain funds no longer exist.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Albemarle Commission Council of Governments Service Area
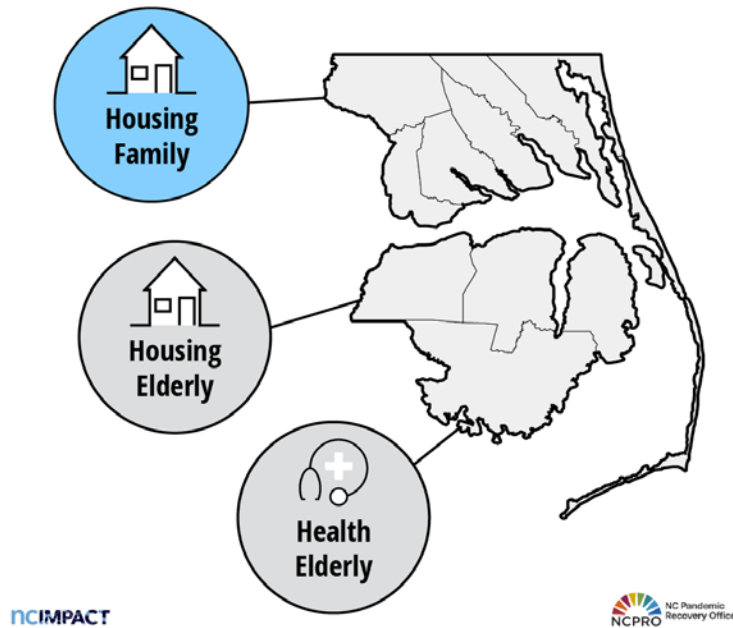
WHAT MATTERS TO COMMUNITY:
Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Participants in our assessment indicated agreement with CES's ranking of food for the elderly as a top concern. Housing was also mentioned, but further specificity about housing for the elderly and/or housing for families was not.

Broadband

The group said that remote learning caused issues early on in the pandemic, specifically related to high-speed Internet access. Through grant funding, several counties were able to purchase Starlink™ units for use by administrators and students. Local communities installed Starlink devices in library parking lots and community centers. One participant expressed gratitude for the free Wi-Fi that popped up around the community to help kids do their homework, while another mentioned future access plans:

> We had grants to get forty-seven Starlink units for administrators and students . . . . Those were great programs. . . . [I]t showed us that if we did have good broadband access in Hyde County and in rural communities in the east[ern part of the state], . . . we would facilitate better learning and economic development.

> [Our county manager] is actually thinking of putting another [Starlink unit] at one of our parks.

One participant said that they appreciated the statewide rollout of broadband-expansion funding but expressed frustration that some rural communities were still waiting for high-speed connections:

> There still hasn't been a single foot of fiber [installed] in [my] county, and so we're going into year four, and I know there's a schedule, but one of the problems for [us] is we got less than a million dollars in [American Rescue Plan Act] funds.

Housing

Both housing vouchers and emergency rent programs were used a lot in all ten of the counties in this COG, according to one focus-group session participant. Another participant said that the need for housing support during the pandemic was stark and evident. The entire region is prone to flooding, and this is of great concern to residents, in both the housing and other contexts.

Healthcare

Participants agreed that funding to help the region access supplies (masks, tests, and medical supplies for home delivery of vaccines) helped to speed along implementation of the vaccines and curb panic related to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Another participant said that health departments giving similar supplies to churches helped widen distribution.

One participant mentioned that the establishment of drive-up clinics was helpful to emergency medical services (EMS) personnel and other healthcare workers, whose capacity was already stretched. This particular effort saved EMS personnel from having to go house-to-house to distribute masks, perform COVID-19 tests, or administer vaccines.

Food Insecurity

One participant underscored the importance of connecting people with access to food and other essentials during the pandemic. Food banks, churches, and non-profit organizations were part of this network of support. Comments on this issue included the following:

> Being able to partner and get [food] out into the community has really been a help.

> The senior center delivered necessities, including toilet paper, when [providing] Meals on Wheels.

Transportation

One participant emphasized the importance of intercounty transportation systems, which delivered tests and vaccine doses to elderly members of the community.

Open modes of transportation were of particular importance to the group, which agreed that there was more concern during the pandemic about access to roads than access to vaccines or toilet paper. One participant said that issues related to updating the ferry system created barriers during the pandemic. Perhaps of utmost importance, one participant underscored community concern about reliable roadways, given the increased frequency of local flooding that blocks tourists from reaching the region to spend tourism dollars in the local business community:

> A great example is the Outer Banks and what's happening [out there]. Because this year we're already seeing a huge decline in traffic. And since our community is tourism-based, if people can't get here, it's a big hit for our community. It's a big hit for businesses. It's a big hit for [our] county. . . . The most popular route in the whole ferry division is the route between Hatteras and Ocracoke. And since that's the most popular and the most expensive, that's where the cuts have been made. And it's really affected our community.

According to one participant, community resilience grants from the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality's Division of Coastal Management helped the community complete projects that protect the area from flooding, which also protected the tourism industry:

> You know, we want to stay, keep our heads above water . . . literally.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Business-Specific Concerns

Participants indicated agreement with the ranking of top concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission, particularly lack of workers generally and lack of qualified workers. Access to capital was not mentioned.

Helping local businesses stay open was a top concern shared by the group. While small-business loans have been essential in keeping businesses operational, the lack of workers in each county in the COG is of great concern to participants. One participant shared concerns that salaries in the region aren't competitive with the rest of the state. Another worried that it's difficult to find employees willing to take on work that is driven by compassion, like becoming an emergency medical technician (EMT) and serving clients who live in poor conditions.

Workforce Development

The need for more trained employees was raised by more than one participant. A collaboration between the local community college with middle and high schools was celebrated as a good existing opportunity to expand on and build the workforce pipeline faster:

> I actually went [to the schools] with some of the . . . emergency medical technicians and some others on . . . career day, getting these kids exposed to that early enough so that they may want that as their career.

MOVING FORWARD:

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a [Social Vulnerability Index](#) of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They were not surprised by visualized differences in vulnerability levels across the region. They noted that their population is shrinking and that limited access to jobs and broadband are barriers to living in the region. One participant stated that better communication is needed to help others realize all of the positives of living in the counties in the COG.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Pre-existing capacity for communication and coordination matter in a crisis.** The people of this region are optimistic about what the future holds for them. It was reported that communication and collaboration improved following the pandemic.
2. **Physical connections are critical.** To support employers and those seeking employment, leaders in the region hope to resolve long-term transportation issues and improve access to remote work through local work centers. One participant commented as follows:

> Regionally, I don't think there was any competition, and folks just jumped in to do whatever they needed to do. So, I think there was a great sense of cooperation.

Cape Fear

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 20, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO). Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.

INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

Six people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The Cape Fear Council of Governments (COG) covers four counties: Brunswick, Columbus, New Hanover, and Pender. One participant was a representative of the COG. Two participants lived and worked in Pender County, two lived and worked in New Hanover County, and one lived and worked in Columbus and Brunswick Counties, respectively. The majority of participants were 45 to 60 years of age, with one participant disclosing that they were over 65. Three participants appeared to be white, two appeared to be Black, and one left their camera off and did not share personal information, so their age range and race are unknown. The group represented a diversity of sectors, including education, health, local government, and the private sector.

Participants engaged in a robust conversation as they explored the following questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants also discussed the importance of federal programs in meeting local needs during the pandemic, as well as the shortcomings of these programs, especially in the communication of program specifics. The uneven distribution of recovery dollars and the potential for widening opportunity gaps in the region was also discussed. The group agreed that communication and coordination between local entities can be effective in addressing ongoing challenges.

**Top Areas of Concern for Residents in
Cape Fear Council of Governments Service Area**
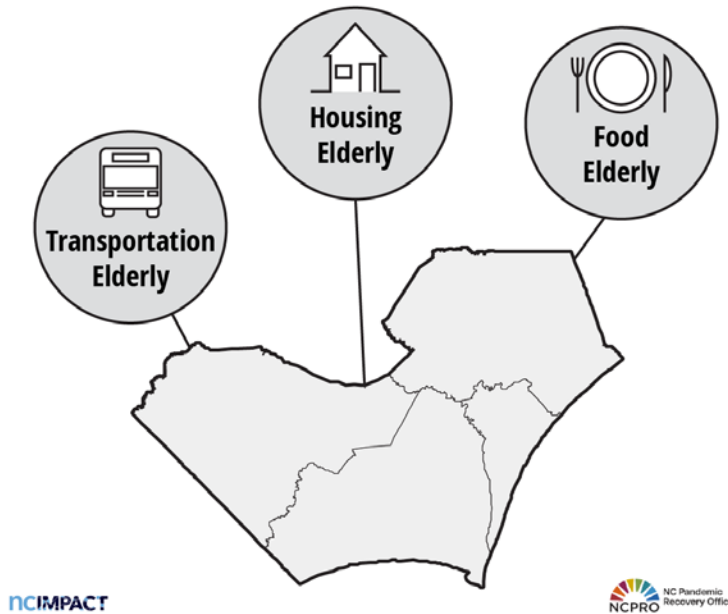
Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Overall, the group was surprised by the results of the CES. Multiple participants said that they wondered if more elderly people had filled out the survey, skewing the results and omitting concerns of younger adults, such as job readiness and employment.

Support for Small Businesses

Participants said that loans from the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and R3 funds were helpful.

However, others noted that the PPP loans came too late for businesses that had already closed and were not helpful to business that didn't have the ability to pay back the loans. Communication about if and when the loans were coming would have been helpful, they said.

Housing

Participants mentioned that it was difficult to follow distancing requirements within group shelters for the homeless during the pandemic. To help mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the COG worked with hospitals to ensure that homeless individuals who tested positive for the virus were not discharged immediately. Participants also pointed out that housing costs have "skyrocketed" and that there is a need for affordable housing in the region. As one commenter noted,

> We [created] a motel sheltering program . . . to be able to relieve some of the capacity issues at the shelters and also work[ed] closely with the hospitals so that folks who [we]re homeless and COVID-positive weren't discharged back to the streets.

Food Distribution

Food distribution was expanded during the pandemic with the help of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's emergency food-assistance program. The counties in the COG focused on food distribution for the elderly, showing potential alignment with the CES results. Federal American Rescue Plan Act funds and other pandemic-relief funds were targeted at home-delivered meals.

Information Sharing/Program Startup

Participants noted that because pandemic-era programs began so rapidly, it was difficult to be responsive and get organized fast enough to take advantage of funds, especially for organizations in rural areas that may lack capacity. The impact of a funding program ending was also mentioned, as was the fact that there will be negative effects since the needs covered by the program will go unmet.

Participants observed an unfortunate cycle that seems to be present in funding responses to disasters or other short-term crises, as it's challenging—especially in a rural area—to ramp up funding and programming and then disassemble soon after when funding expires. "It's difficult for the agencies that are trying to find and replace funds to continue the good work that they're doing," one participant said. There was strong agreement within the group with the following statement:

> The bigger businesses, from the PPP loan standpoint, were able to take better advantage. But I think the bigger organizations, where the infrastructure was in place and people are used to dealing with federal money, were more able to mobilize and access funds and deploy funds, and I would just say that . . . it would be an awfully good time for the federal government to take a look at ways to streamline these emergency programs in ways that would be easier to deploy without having to rely on the complicated federal funding infrastructure that's already in place.

This statement also produced strong agreement among participants:

> Everybody had to spend so much time . . . focus[ing] on how to properly spend the funds and not get [the] Treasury [Department] breathing down your neck, and so much effort went there rather than doing the work that the money was intended for, and [this] probably scared away a lot of agencies from accepting funds. . . . Particularly in our part of North Carolina, [there's a sense] that the little guys are always gonna be left behind unless the programs are designed not to do that.

Unequal Recovery

There was a discussion among participants about the unequal distribution of pandemic-recovery funds and how this disparity may exacerbate existing inequalities. While food may have been distributed all across the COG, not all community members were aware of funding opportunities for food distribution and other services:

> It's amazing to see the amount of money that was in Pender County. And then we, the small-guy community [Maple Hill,] . . . didn't get that. . . . Is there a way to rectify this? . . . I wanna understand, how is it that we miss an entire community of people? And yet they were millions of dollars . . . . Where? Where were we? In that? And I hate sounding cross. I don't wanna sound cross. It's just the idea of hindsight [being] 20/20. . . . Here we are in 2024—communication should be the least of our issues.

Role of Local Government

Participants wanted to see greater coordination generally from their local governments. However, it was later expressed that investments in infrastructure (water and sewer) may have been a positive thing, as these updates will outlast fund expiration, unlike human services.

Mental Illness

Multiple participants said that mental illness, and the stigmatization of mental illness, needs to be addressed. The opioid crisis was mentioned. The fact that more young people are seeking help was also mentioned.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Business-Specific Concerns

Participants indicated agreement with the ranking of top concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission, particularly lack of workers. Lack of qualified workers and access to capital were not discussed at length.

Lack of Workers

Participants noted that business owners faced difficulty recruiting workers. They pointed out that while many business owners believed that this was potentially due to unemployment benefits that were being distributed during the pandemic, it may have actually been due to the wages offered:

> I think what happened and what we've all seen is, the wages had to go up. . . . They were fine when they paid a higher wage.

It was observed that both of these concerns were issues before the pandemic and that it is difficult to know how much or whether to attribute the problems to COVID-19.

Participants said that while high schools and community colleges play a role in dealing with this concern, their efforts might not effectively address employers' needs, especially local employers.

It was noted that there may be a language barrier for some residents in the area whose first and/or only spoken language is Spanish.

It was also noted that it is difficult to recruit for the non-profit sector because applicants expect a higher rate of pay than what's available.

Tourism

Participants pointed out that while the region experienced positive economic impacts due to tourism during the pandemic, not all towns or counties, nor all residents within all counties, benefited equally from this:

> Southeastern North Carolina, I think, did surprisingly well during the pandemic. I think the tourism industry actually sort of thrived [from] people who were able to work remotely. Kids were in school remotely. [People] were able to vacation if they had the means year-round. . . . But [this benefit] wasn't shared equally.

Broadband

Participants mentioned that the lack of a reliable connection to the Internet is a concern for businesses, especially in rural areas.

MOVING FORWARD:

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a Social Vulnerability Index of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) as well as the resilience score for their COG and individual counties within it from the NCPRO Resilience Index. Participants agreed with the issues raised by the CDC/ATSDR index but said that their region's Resilience Index score did not reflect their perception of the area (see immediately below).

Resilience Index

There was strong agreement among focus-group participants that Cape Fear's Resilience Index score did not represent the reality of the region because using a county as a measure is not a granular-enough scale. Participants felt that the data should instead be viewed at a subcounty or community level.

Race, Ethnicity, and Equity

It was noted that differences across counties in the COG can best be understood by taking into account differences in resources and services afforded to each county's residents. Two focus-group participants mentioned that lack of information about pandemic-era programs may exacerbate inequities in the region:

> Does the legislature care about the Black and brown people who are in the area?

> How do we have those conversations to make it equitable? . . . Equity, equity is what we're looking for. Equity. Give me the same stuff you got and let's see how I roll. Give us the same chances and let's see if we can do something, or [if] we can build something from there.

LESSONS LEARNED:
Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Preexisting capacity for communication and coordination matter in a crisis.** It was noted that despite the power of partnerships, ongoing funding would be needed to address identified areas of concern. Participants expressed concern about funding ending, the need for increased local capacity, and the continuation of partnerships formed during the pandemic:

   > I'm tired of sending our clients to New Hanover County for help. We need to step up to the plate and take care of our own. But this is going to take some work. But we'll keep thriving and keep going, doing what we need to do, making new friends every day. New relationships.

   > Great work was happening. And I think the key now that everybody's facing is okay, how do we make that sustainable . . . .

   > There are a lot of good people working in this region helping people. . . . We know we're gonna face more natural disasters. And hopefully, the partnerships and the relationships and the knowledge and expertise that's been developed will be somewhat retained and available for the next time, whatever it looks like.

2. **Widening gaps among people and places.** Participants said that they hoped their community would focus on underserved populations in the area that did not benefit from tourism dollars during the pandemic, and they called for greater unity in the region.

Central Pines

Focus-group session conducted in person on March 7, 2024, by [ncIMPACT](#) and the [N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office](#) (NCPRO). Hosted by the [North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government](#).
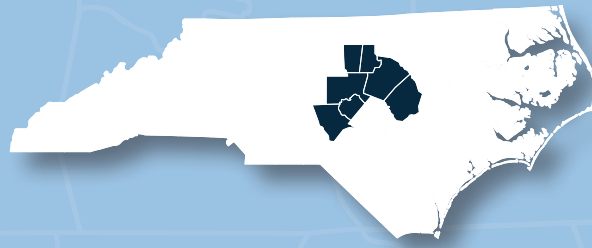
INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

Seven people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The [Central Pines Regional Council](#) represents Johnston, Wake, Durham, Orange, Chatham, Lee, and Moore Counties. Four participants were from Durham County, two were from Wake County, and one was from Orange county. One was an elected official who served in state government. One worked for state government. One was an entrepreneur, and another was transitioning to the business sector from non-profit work. One was unemployed but had previously worked for non-profits. Two worked in higher education. Five appeared to be women and two appeared to be men. Two appeared to be Black, one appeared to be Latina, and the rest presented as white.

Participants engaged in a robust conversation as they explored the following questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants shared a great deal of information about community concerns, as well as potential solutions, including a wealth of information about how the region may move forward. They were eager to discuss how to utilize existing resources in the region to meet ongoing and emerging needs.

**Top Areas of Concern for Residents in
Central Pines Council of Governments Service Area**
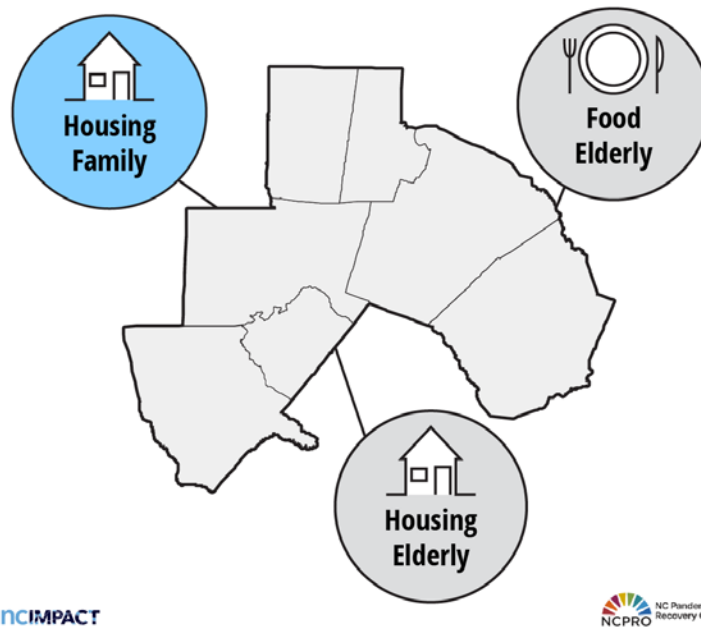
Housing
Family

Food
Elderly

Housing
Elderly

ncIMPACT

NC Pandemic
Recovery Office
NCPRO

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Focus-group participants indicated agreement with CES's ranking of housing as a top concern, although housing for families and the elderly were not explicitly mentioned. Food insecurity for the elderly was also not mentioned.

Housing

Housing was the biggest pandemic-era and post-pandemic concern for participants, who noted that housing is so interrelated with other issues that many people who were displaced were unable to access other needed resources, such as jobs and food. Focus-group members noted that the continued migration to the region makes it difficult to protect affordable housing. One participant argued vehemently that housing should not be viewed as a commodity on which individuals make a profit. Others noted that renters need access to better information on resources. The group also mentioned tiny homes and hoteling as alternative housing options. Here are some sample comments:

> A lot of our people got displaced. They ended up in the hotels, they ended up in the woods, they ended up on the bridge, or at the bus stop.

> Even with rental assistance, a landlord can make more money on the regular market. Your problem is a landlord can make money on the regular market because [the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development] has set a two-bedroom apartment at $1,315.

> When [sticking] eviction notices on doors, we should also be giving info about rental assistance.

> If we continue to treat housing as if it's a luxury commodity and not a complete necessity of our people, then we will continue to have people who take out giant loans to become landlords. As a business strategy. That should not be a business strategy when we have people sleeping on the streets.

Education

Participants lamented the extent of the student learning loss during the pandemic and pointed out that while traditional schools online were free, the Virtual Academy was not. Participants also noted that children of color suffered disproportionately during the pandemic. Many of those students had working parents who were unable to support their remote learning. Others had parents who did not have the computer or academic skills to support their children's learning.

Participants observed that, for many students, the inability to be in school had costs beyond learning (e.g., physical safety, food, social supports). These costs explain why Durham put learning academies in place and other people pulled together informal learning hubs to help students log in and participate in remote learning. Participants said that learning recovery has not been very effective.

Childcare

The dearth of childcare centers and the expected loss of additional centers when federal subsidies end generated significant conversation in the focus-group sessions. Participants specifically mentioned the significant impact of the child tax credit. They also focused on perceptions of over-regulation:

> The preschool that my son goes to is closing because they operate out of a church and the church no longer meets the fire code. A lot of half-day preschools and other preschools depend on these affordable spaces through non-profits and other organizations like churches.

Job Training

Participants noted that while many programs offered unprecedented opportunities for job training, the realities of the pandemic made it impractical for some people to take advantage of the programs. They pointed to limited public transportation, childcare

responsibilities, and general stress as reasons why many people did not take full advantage of the opportunities.

Participants also pointed to things like debt as barriers to retraining:

> Their focus is "[H]ow [am I] going to keep a shelter over my head and my children's head[s?] I can't focus on all that other stuff.

> How are you supposed to go to a job interview when you can't take a shower?

Transportation

The lack of efficient transportation came up regularly in the focus-group sessions. Participants appreciated the impact of funding to make buses free of charge but wondered how local governments could continue to afford offering the service when funding went away. They also wondered whether local-government planning efforts would prioritize integrating housing and public transit:

> Housing is so important to this conversation about transportation. What you're saying around . . . how our communities are laid out[,] planning and zoning, and thinking about where we can place housing in a way that more people can live on transit routes to get to their jobs and live their lives [is important].

Internet and Cell Phones

One participant emphasized the importance of having a smartphone and Internet access to take advantage of many pandemic-era services. As another said, "social services went online" during COVID-19. In this focus-group session, participants generally agreed that affordability was a more salient concern than access. There was some concern raised, however, about the availability of phones for low-income residents. One participant noted that if a phone was lost, its owner would need to replace it at cost or wait months before becoming eligible for a replacement.

Overall, participants in this focus-group session did not think that concerns with this issue were particularly widespread in the region.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Business-Specific Concerns

Participants indicated agreement with the ranking of top concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission, particularly lack of qualified workers and access to capital. Lack of workers generally was not mentioned.

Employability Skills

Participants agreed that this topic presented challenges but did not spend much time discussing it. After a brief conversation about the need to support those re-entering the region from incarceration, participants returned to talking about housing.

Lack of Access to Capital

Participants stated that this issue was a perennial concern for many small-business owners. They noted that pandemic programs rewarded those with know-how and relationships to financial institutions. They also pointed out problems in the way some businesses handled taxes to limit liability and cultural concerns about government intrusion among people who did not take advantage of programs although they qualified for them. There was a robust conversation about fraud in pandemic programs. Here are some sample comments on the issue of capital:

> There are people who, who are struggling, who could use [help accessing capital], [help with how to] use it correctly, [who] and are struggling to access it.

> There's also a disconnect between some individuals and understanding how [access to capital] works.

MOVING FORWARD:

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a **Social Vulnerability Index** of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). Several participants asked for more details on the Social Vulnerability Index. The index served the purpose of sparking conversation. Participants noted that some places in their region had higher capacity for recovery from disasters than others.

The following crucial needs of the region emerged as the primary themes of the resilience conversation:

- a true regional strategy for affordable housing that considers workforce housing for organizations, such as UNC Health, that want to continue growing;
- to think more creatively about using public transit to get people to where the jobs are;
- to pay childcare workers more and increase opportunities for people with disabilities;
- a process for supporting potential workers who are re-entering the region after incarceration.

LESSONS LEARNED:
Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Utilize community resources to meet workforce needs.** This region has significant resources, and participants were clear that during and after the pandemic, winning strategies were needed to capitalize on existing assets. They talked about the robust current workforce and noted that the people were the strength of the region. Participants sought to have small businesses and families connected to the prosperity of the region. They expressed concerns about childcare workers, those in public K-12 educational institutions, people re-entering the region after incarceration, and those cut off from opportunity due to a lack of access to public transit.

2. **Support for small businesses.** Regarding business programs, participants noted that who you know determines what you know. They explained that some small businesses did not know about programs that could provide assistance or did not have confidence in their ability to access them.

3. **Importance of meeting basic needs.** This focus-group session emphasized that shelter and food during a disaster supersede all other needs. They lauded programs that provided food to the community. They were less generous in their praise for programs that provided shelter.

Centralina

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 19, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO). Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.
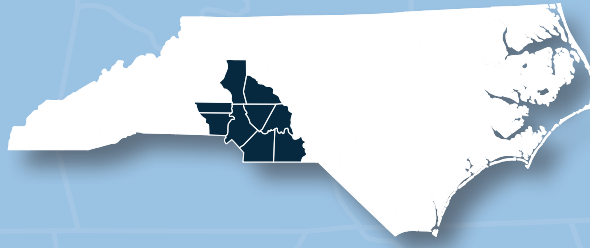
INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

Eleven people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The **Centralina Regional Council of Governments** (COG) represents Anson, Cabarrus, Gaston, Lincoln, Iredell, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly, and Union counties. One participant was a representative of the COG. Eight participants worked and lived in Mecklenburg County. One participant worked and lived in Anson County, and one worked and lived in Cabarrus County. All participants appeared to be working age (24 to 65). Nine appeared to be women, and two appeared to be men. Five participants appeared to be Black, four appeared to be white, and two appeared to be Latina. The group represented the education, business, non-profit, local-government, and self-employed sectors.

Participants engaged in a robust conversation as they explored the following questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

The participant group discussed the needed support provided by, and the shortcomings of, federal aid programs. They noted that the community concerns discussed in the focus-group session predated the pandemic and that many have worsened over time. The group is optimistic about the region's ability to meet ongoing community challenges provided collaboration forged during the pandemic continues.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Centralina Regional Council Service Area
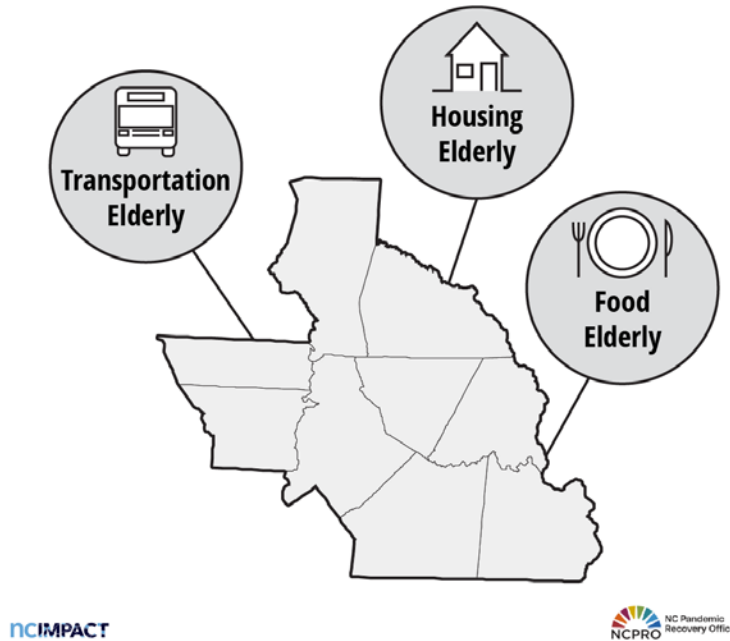
nCIMPACT

NCPRO NC Pandemic Recovery Office

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Focus-group participants indicated agreement with CES's ranking of concerns, especially with regard to the difference in housing and food-security experiences among the elderly in the region, which are largely dependent on wealth.

Food Insecurity

There was agreement among participants that food insecurity was a primary concern not only during the pandemic, but also beforehand, especially for elderly people with limited incomes.

Even though this issue existed before COVID-19, participants noted that the pandemic may have presented unique challenges for elderly residents with access-to-food needs:

> Our elderly depend on local stores, [places that are nearby so that] they don't have to drive very far, or [they need] someone [who] can take them [to the store]. [Not having this may have] caused some of those numbers to be driven up.

> I think, for the elderly in particular, that the transportation situation, which has worsened in [my] county . . . for those people who depend on public transportation to get to food . . . may have impacted more on the elderly.

Religious organizations and non-profits in the region worked with county departments of health and human services and within the school systems on access-to-food issues during the pandemic. Participants noted that the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services (DSS) used its additional COVID-19 funding to help address food insecurity in families. There was strong agreement among participants that DSS did an effective job in meeting this need.

One participant, who runs her own non-profit, said that the need for food during the pandemic was so great that her organization, based in Anson County, provided food for a half-dozen surrounding counties. Prior to the pandemic, food delivery was not the focus of her organization. She offered the following comments:

> Cafeteria workers . . . created [what were] basically to-go packages. . . . [T]he school[s] allowed the school buses and teachers and principals to . . . go out and . . . lay eyes on their students by . . . going and delivering the packages, homework, or school packages along with the meals. . . . That was good for the day. But what happens over the weekend? . . . We stepped in and [were] able to be part of the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's] Farmers to Families program, and so we had it where the truck delivered the food on a Thursday or Friday. . . .That way [families] had food for the weekend. . . . [W]e were doing this every week, giving out 1,200 to about 3,000 boxes of food every week, from August of 2020 to May of 2021.

Housing

A couple of participants in the focus-group session noted that while the results of the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) indicated that housing for the elderly was a top concern in many communities, this was not the case in their region because many of the elderly in the area have higher incomes. However, there was agreement that housing for the general population was an issue, especially for communities already facing income insecurity.

A different perspective was shared by a participant who worked at a local emergency housing non-profit organization during the pandemic. This person said that there were many elderly individuals applying for housing assistance at that time and that when elderly individuals contacted the organization, it was clear that they were also dealing with other issues, such as domestic violence and food insecurity.

Participants agreed that family housing insecurity was a major concern during the pandemic, noting that for some individuals, assistance did not come in time to

help. A state leader shared his first-hand experience with fielding calls from North Carolina residents:

> I know the state was overwhelmed. But there should have been a better process and place to get those emergency assistance funds . . . out for the people that needed them so they could stay in their home[s]. Because I know that for a lot of those people that was a big thing, and [they are] probably still today in hotels.

There was agreement that, while the federal eviction moratorium helped folks stay in their homes longer, many people in the region had to live in hotels as a means of shelter following eviction. It was noted that getting people into hotels, rather than homeless shelters, helped slow the spread of COVID-19:

> I don't think they [the City of Charlotte and its city council] really realize how quickly that pandemic could have spread even more rapidly if we [hadn't] moved towards trying to get the people without homes into hotels. We've had to learn a lot about that, because it did not always go well. . . . [T]here was fallout from the hotels when they did not get paid on time.

Participants expressed appreciation for the sheriff's office holding off on removing people from their homes. This was beneficial, especially as private businesses, such as hotels, sought to remove families who could not pay for this temporary housing solution.

Role of Non-Profits

Participants observed that it seemed like Mecklenburg County recognized that, although the county may have had funding, grassroots organizations are able to respond more effectively to emerging challenges:

> Accounting realized that, yes, we have . . . millions of dollars. But it's the organizations, the grassroots organizations, these non-profits that are closest to the people . . . [that] know exactly what the people need at this moment. I really believe that that was one of the most effective initiatives when they realized we need to get this money off . . . to these non-profits. Because the people that are closest to the problems are closest to the solution[s].

For example, people were able to benefit from the funding that Mecklenburg County allocated to workforce-development programs.

Healthcare

A participant from the Mecklenburg County Health Department described efforts the county made to be responsive to the needs of the community by doing checks in hotels, going into neighborhoods, and providing educational information in different languages:

> No other state had a team . . . like [North Carolina's] ambassador program. . . . I have to give kudos to Mecklenburg County, because no one else had that. . . . We went from apartment complex to apartment complex[,] . . . and all of us know how many

> **different languages and peoples and diversity that we encounter[. B]ut to have those tools in different languages also actually getting out and getting people vaccinated [was invaluable].**

Schools hosted health fairs where families could drive up in their cars and get information about COVID-19. A food truck was onsite to distribute food.

Education

There were already educational concerns in the region before the pandemic. COVID-19 highlighted them by revealing learning gaps and the need for technology distribution.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Business-Specific Concerns

Participants indicated agreement with the ranking of top concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission, particularly lack of workers, lack of qualified workers, and lack of access to capital.

Lack of Qualified Workers

It was difficult for employers in the region to find qualified employees during the pandemic. Participants noted that, with pandemic-era assistance ending, there will also be challenges for schools to meet the needs of students, especially when it comes to training them for jobs that employers are seeking to fill.

Access to Capital

One participant who acts as a consultant for non-profits said that many of his clients received small-business loans during the pandemic. Another participant, who owns her own business, said that without pandemic-era government assistance, she might have gone out of business:

> **My sales were literally cut 75 percent. . . . Charlotte did a good job . . . supporting . . . small businesses to ensure that we stayed afloat, and then I was able to pivot and do other innovative things.**

The non-profit consultant observed that many organizations are grappling with how to function once pandemic-era programs expire and they lose funding.

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a [Social Vulnerability Index](#) of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). One participant said that the index made them feel bad due to the high vulnerability rating for the region and that it was disheartening to have such pressing needs in a nation with so many resources. This person stated that because Union County has a lower vulnerability rating and is located beside Mecklenburg County, which has a higher vulnerability rating, resources and ideas should be shared so that Mecklenburg County can learn and evaluate its own programs in the hope of replicating the success of Union County. Participants also noted that these rating disparities are due to differences in access to resources and that this conversation intersects with racial inequalities, demographic change, and the need to advance equity as the region recovers from the pandemic.

There was significant agreement among participants with the following statement:

> **I live in Charlotte, but I'm from Eastern North Carolina, and I know what it's like out there[. W]e, you know, we cannot have this conversation without talking about demographics, without talking about race and without talking about socioeconomics.**

There was also a great deal of agreement on the need to change the mindsets of county leadership around "the big picture" and to push for change.

Participants said that pandemic-era relief programs may have provided a false sense of security and that it will be difficult to continue to meet needs such as childcare and food distribution without such assistance. They also noted challenges surrounding increasing food prices as well as eldercare:

> **Our population of adults over the age of 65 is actually our fastest growing demographic. . . . So it's not just a rural condition or an urban condition. . . . [O]ne of the major challenges we're facing on the older-adult services side is that the additional funds that the federal government made available, specifically through the Older Americans Act, to provide emergency transportation, nutrition, and housing supports, all of that is ending. It's ending in September, and we call that the "Covid Cliff." . . . We already have waiting lists. . . . [W]e are very concerned about . . . [what] the impacts might be to our older adults across the region.**

LESSONS LEARNED:

Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Build systems that work for more people.** Participants expressed hope that community organizations will continue to be forward-thinking and proactive. They want these organizations to be innovative and to rethink what systems can look like to better meet residents' needs.

2. **We need to extend the capacity of our not-for-profit organizations.** Here are one participant's comments:

> The opportunity that . . . [American Rescue Plan Act] funds provided to local governments was really [crucial. It was] interesting to see who took advantage of some of the creativity and the flexibility that those funds provided, and [which] local governments chose to take the easy way.

Eastern Carolina

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 18, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO). Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.

INTRODUCTION:

This Focus Group

Eight people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The Eastern Carolina Council of Government (COG) represents Carteret, Craven, Duplin, Green, Jones, Lenoir, Onslow, Pamlico, and Wayne counties. One participant was a representative of the COG. One participant represented the Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board, which covers Carteret, Duplin, Lenoir, Pamlico, and Wayne counties. One participant was from Jones County. Two participants were from Craven County, one participant was from Lenoir County, one participant was from Onslow County, and one participant was from Duplin County. The majority of participants appeared to be 40 to 60 years of age, with two participants appearing older than 60. Five participants appeared to be women, three appeared to be men. Seven participants appeared to be white, and one appeared to be Black. The group represented the education, local-government, health, state government, workforce-development, and faith-based ministry sectors.

Participants engaged in a robust conversation as they explored the following questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants were eager to discuss community concerns and emphasized the interconnectedness of challenges such as housing and workforce participation. The group discussed the ongoing challenges created by hurricanes and inadequate disaster responses by government, which compound other community needs. Participants were enthusiastic about the continuation of partnerships between local organizations formed during the pandemic to meet community concerns.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Eastern Carolina Council of Governments Service Area
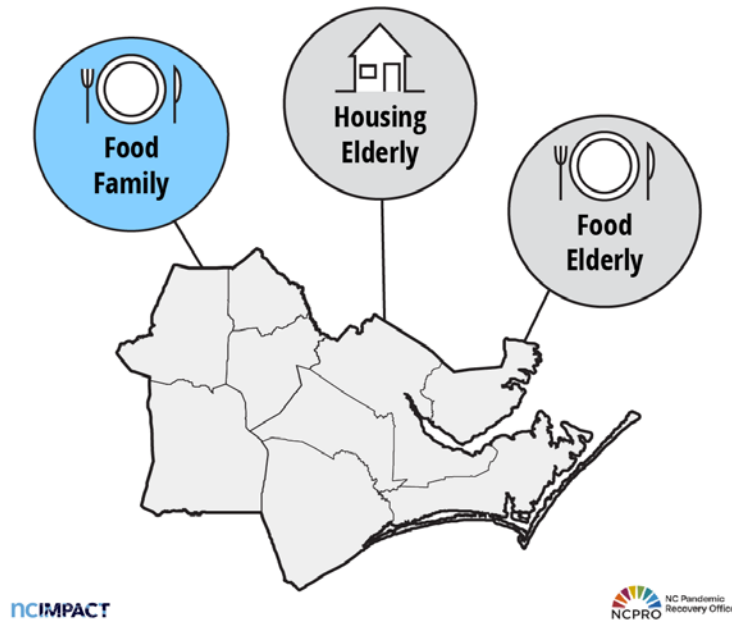
Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Focus-group participants indicated agreement with CES's ranking of housing for the elderly as a top concern. Housing for families and food insecurity for the elderly were not explicitly mentioned by focus-group members.

Participants were surprised that transportation and healthcare were not featured more prominently in the CES results. They also shared concerns about daycare availability, which were not reflected in the CES results. Participants were not surprised by results that indicated concern over the issue of food insecurity for the elderly. As one person put it,

> We ran a grocery reimbursement program for seniors. We distributed well over $750,000 to assist seniors. It was extremely popular. It was certainly extremely needed.

Housing: Affordability and Availability

Participants noted that rental costs in their region are rising and that the elderly and others on fixed incomes cannot keep up. They also pointed out that the region includes people who live elsewhere but have second homes in the region. "Prices have gone up astronomically," said one participant. Most housing being built is out of reach for

median-wage families in the region. Hurricanes and other natural disasters have also depleted the inventory of available housing. Here are one participant's comments:

> With our [military] base increasing, it's only gonna bring more and more people here[,] . . . which is only gonna increase the amount of rent, because if they can rent to somebody in the military, that's secure money [compared to other renters in the region].

Starting teacher salaries in North Carolina are below the family-sustaining wage calculation for multiple counties in the COG. It's hard to recruit teachers to the region when housing costs are out of reach. Teachers in the area have had to take on second or third jobs in order to make enough money to afford housing, or they find adult housemates or roommates to help share costs.

Connection between Education and Workforce

Participants discussed funding being used to develop educational programs to meet workforce needs, for example, the local community college system received funds to offer short-term courses to provide training and help people gain employment or move up in their current positions. Focus-group session participants also discussed partnerships to expand employment services and the flexibility of employers to work with employees to expand the labor pool. As one described it,

> We partnered with local businesses and the Volt Center here in Craven County, which is an extension of Craven Community College[,] and [created] a fast-track program to allow individuals without experience [in] manufacturing to gain manufacturing experience in a two-to-three-day crash course. . . . [W]e put . . . at least forty individuals in jobs where they did not have experience. [T]hose [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act] dollars help the employer offset the cost of onboarding those individuals. . . . [O]ne of the individuals [was] wearing an ankle [monitor]. His battery was about to die, and he told his supervisor and the business [about it] . . . . [They] got him an extension cord to make sure he was plugged in and recharged so he wouldn't get in trouble with parole and probation [officials.]

Role of Community College System

Multiple participants mentioned that comprehensive services provided through the community college system may have been administered ineffectively. The system strove to distribute funding to many students to make sure their needs were being met but, in the process, some students who did not need financial support received it nonetheless:

> Community colleges had an opportunity to give debit cards to [their] students, to . . . be spent as . . . needed[, such as on] food, transportation, keeping the Internet going so they could do online learning. . . . But high school students received those [debit cards] as well if they were dual[ly] enrolled. . . . [The money] was dispersed across the board[, and] . . . many families . . . didn't necessarily need it.

Other challenges mentioned by participants included teacher shortages and broadband access issues. Hotspots were distributed during the pandemic, but many people are now losing those resources.

Infrastructure Updates

It was noted in the focus-group session that the regional airport had been updated:

> In . . . county government[, w]e don't see . . . the business loans, . . . [the federal Paycheck Protection Program funds], or anything like that. But what we did see . . . [were] changes at our airport. . . . [W]e're very appreciative of that.

Health Services

The Jones County Health Department provided food boxes and vaccination clinics during the pandemic. Participants noted that having funds to expand health services, such as in times of emergencies brought on by natural disasters, would have been beneficial and that lessons should be taken from this experience to be better prepared in the future.

Non-Profit Capacity

Participants said that the speed at which pandemic-era programs were launched negatively impacted the ability of some organizations to utilize them, as they did not have the administrative capacity to do so.

Effects of Natural Disasters

Participants noted that they themselves, along with others in their community, have not fully recovered from the natural disasters that affected their region. Long-standing challenges with housing, in particular, were exacerbated by the pandemic, as many families were living in small spaces together due to lack of housing. According to one participant,

> A lot of people in our community, myself included, had not been properly helped to recover from [hurricanes] Florence and Michael. . . . And you had multiple people living in homes that were not made to accommodate fifteen or twenty people. . . . [W]hen you add the pandemic to it, it was a nightmare. . . . So now you had an outbreak of COVID. You had people dying. . . . [P]eople were literally dying from COVID, and folks were in the other room. . . . And we're still recovering. . . . So [when]ever the next pandemic or disaster comes, we'll still be limping along.

Business-Specific Concerns

Participants indicated agreement with the ranking of top concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission, particularly lack of workers generally and lack of qualified workers. Lack of access to capital was not discussed.

Lack of Workers Generally and Lack of Qualified Workers

Participants emphasized that lack of qualified workers, an aging population, a large number of "Opportunity Youth" (16- to 24-year-olds that are not working and not in school), and businesses having difficulty recruiting due to housing challenges were top regional concerns. Demographic trends indicate that basic issues of affordable housing and food insecurity in the region must be addressed. Here are one participant's comments:

> We have an employer over in Newport that . . . bought a tract of land and is putting [up] housing for [its] workers. . . . [I]t's interesting[. I]f you go back . . . [and look at] the mill towns that took care of . . . all their employees, . . . for a while that worked, I guess, and it helped build, build our economy here in North Carolina. But then it got frowned upon because it was a company . . . having . . . too much control over the workers. . . . And so how do we implement these things without making it easy for people to be taken advantage of? And [how do we enable] those vulnerable populations to make decisions[?]

One participant noted that lack of public transportation, especially in rural areas, compounds workforce recruitment challenges in the region, as does lack of working-age and young adults in the area:

> Until we turn that tide, somehow, it's gonna be awfully hard to recruit industry here. . . . I'm told by the economic developers [that] if you were to try to recruit an industry that had much over a 500-employee requirement it would be . . . next to impossible.

Participants mentioned the loss of an affordable connectivity program as a major challenge to meeting business concerns, as the need for reliable and fast Internet connections is crucial in many modern jobs.

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a Social Vulnerability Index of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They noted that Pamlico County may be more prosperous due to its retiree population and that, across the region, retirees likely skew the data.

Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Governments need to be proactive.** Participants emphasized the need for federal and state bodies to be proactive in designing responsive services, thereby increasing the capacity of non-profits to utilize federal funds. One participant noted that updating data systems was a key part of this strategy:

   > There are about ten health departments across North Carolina that have dedicated a little bit of the [pandemic] funding that [they]'ve received to doing a data modernization project that . . . [our region is] piloting for the State of North Carolina. . . . [W]hen we were trying to collect our early statistics to understand how COVID was impacting communities and the state, we had data systems in place. But with all of this new information, the data systems just were not able to handle it. . . . We want to use this as a moment to improve and get better.

2. **Improve local communication channels.** Participants said they got their information primarily through TV and social media and that folks without access to either medium would be at a disadvantage, so improving information-sharing channels should be a priority.

3. **Workforce-development opportunities should be expanded.** Leaders in the region expressed a need to increase both educational attainment and upskilling levels in the population.

4. **Pandemic-era partnerships should continue.** Participants expressed hope that partnerships formed during the pandemic will continue on and enable them to address challenges together with partners, despite a changing funding landscape. Here is a comment on that issue:

   > I'm really hopeful that we will maintain and leverage those partnerships that we built during the pandemic. I don't think we had ever worked with as many partners as we did [then], because we had to, . . . as a force multiplier [and for other reasons.] . . . [It was key to have] those trusted messengers to get information out to the community. If we keep reaching out . . . there's usually . . . a way to get there. The funding might not last, but if the collaborations and the communications do, we can still do great things.

5. **Affordable housing is a must.** One participant summed up the importance of this issue:

   > What I hope to see in my community is affordable housing, real, affordable housing. You have people [who] are on disability [and] only receive $700 [to] $800 a month. We really need affordable housing. We need to dig into it [and ask questions like] what [is] the definition of affordable housing [and] how can we help keep . . . people in the houses that they're in now[?]
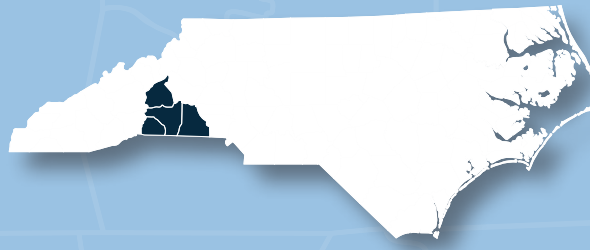
Foothills

INTRODUCTION:

This Focus Group

Thirteen people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The **Foothills Regional Commission Council of Governments** (COG) covers Cleveland, McDowell, Polk, and Rutherford counties. Eleven of the participants appeared to be women, and two appeared to be men. Four participants voluntarily shared that they were white women, and two shared that they were Black women. Those participant ages that were shared ranged from 46 to 61. All participants left their cameras off, so further age and race information could not be obtained. Five attendees lived and/or worked in Polk County, four lived and/or worked in Cleveland County, and one worked in Buncombe County but lived in McDowell County. The group included a representative from the COG plus workers from the education, non-profit, local-government, health, and private sectors.

Participants engaged in a robust conversation as they explored the following questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

The group discussed local needs and concerns and barriers to fully utilizing pandemic-era programs, which were caused by confusion around program specifics. There was strong appreciation among participants for the pandemic response and coordination by/between local governing bodies.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in
Foothills Regional Commission Service Area
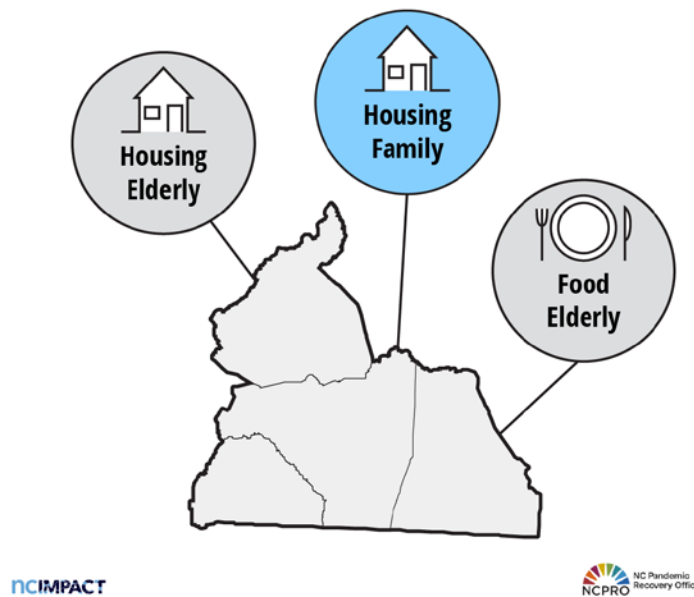
Housing
Elderly

Housing
Family

Food
Elderly

ncIMPACT

NC Pandemic
Recovery Office
NCPRO

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Participants noted that it was hard to disagree with the top concerns outlined by the CES. Specific topics mentioned by multiple participants as being worthy of inclusion in ongoing dialogue were broadband and mental health.

Difficulty Understanding Programs

A small-business owner shared that it was difficult to navigate staffing decisions due to uncertainty about the availability of federal assistance. When services did arrive, they were difficult to understand, and the websites for the services often crashed. The participant said that for small businesses like hers, it was hard to understand and figure out the processes for accessing available programs:

> I laid off my entire staff because we didn't know when we were going to reopen, and we . . . had heard that there were some unemployment benefits that would possibly be coming that could help. . . . [I]t was also a really challenging system to navigate. . . . But the benefit was great . . . when you look back and contemplate how things happened. We also were able to take advantage of the small-business loan [program]. . . . [I]t was a little confusing [too]. . . . [I]f we were to go through something like this again, it would be great for there to be a tried-and-true process that was easier to understand.

Another small-business owner shared similar frustrations:

> It was simply overwhelming. . . . There was a lot of pressure to get it right for our employees to be able to get money, they need to live. And so[,] a very, very challenging thing to navigate. . . . . The [federal Paycheck Protection Program] was . . . very challenging. There were a lot of restrictions, one of which kept us from being able to get any of the money.

One participant noted that they believed programs went on for too long, organizations and individuals became comfortable, and they are now facing difficulties knowing how to operate again.

Housing

Lack of affordable housing in the region is a problem, especially for families with school-age children. The following quote is from a participant with educational leadership experience in one of the counties in the COG:

> We have around sixty to sixty-five students living at a local hotel right now, just . . . in our county. And when you . . . talk to [a student's] parent or . . . grandparent, that's the issue, the cost of living. . . . We don't have housing that is affordable for these low-income families.

Education

Pandemic-era funds allowed local school systems to be innovative and meet needs in new ways as they partnered with other organizations and had funding to buy supplies that may have typically been out of reach. Of note, the schools provided meals to people and were able to purchase a thermal scanner to prevent the spread of disease. Here is a comment on this issue:

> Without that funding[,] we certainly would not have been able to do innovative work with other agencies in our county. . . . Our local health and human services agency[,] and our local county government also, we . . . worked together because they had money as well, and that allowed us to be a little bit more creative.

Childcare

A new Boys and Girls Club was opened in Cleveland County to help fill the gap of childcare for workers who were unable to stay home during the pandemic.

Role of the COG

Participants noted that funding helped build capacity at the Council of Government (COG):

> The money we got was through our State COG Association. So there are sixteen COGs in the state, and the money we got through the [American Rescue Plan Act] funds was divvied out per region. . . . We've gotten a lot more contracts than we ever have before, because we were able to get on in our community more and just become more relevant.

Healthcare

Participants said there were challenges meeting staffing needs across the healthcare sector during the pandemic. People working in hospitals got sick and also left their jobs for higher-paying opportunities, such as travel nurses. ARPA funds helped to pay those travel fees. One person employed at a hospital summed it up this way:

> We had many people in healthcare. We were essential, and we had nurses that . . . didn't want to even be a nurse anymore during COVID. So, of course, that affected everything. [W]e had . . . agency staff . . . [and] traveling agency companies [come in] because of the demand to take care of COVID patients. They were raising their rates. So people were leaving the hospital . . . to go work [at] other places and make three, four times what [they] would [make] at the hospital.

Partnerships

The importance of partnerships was noted by participants:

> [F]unding . . . was provided through the state tourism entity[,] which was phenomenal because it allowed us to tap into additional marketing resources that we wouldn't otherwise have had access to. . . . Our county leadership did an incredible job. . . . [I]t was very common for there to be an event that the health department was putting on for vaccinations or [for] sharing kits of supplies and things like that, and different people from different departments would come and be a part of that. . . . So, there was funding involved. But there were also these opportunities for us to all better understand other departments and other parts of our county and our community.

There was strong agreement among participants that there was no competition between local governing bodies, only cooperation:

> I really didn't feel it was competition. I feel like our officials pulled together and worked well with one another, reaching across the table to . . . anybody that they could help.

Participants noted that health departments worked with hospitals and schools and that everyone made efforts to disseminate up-to-date information.

It was also noted that the pandemic caused the healthcare sector to form new partnerships in the community, allowing for a more strategic approach as the community continued to recover:

> [W]e started doing far more consistent focus groups with our faith-based leaders [and worked to improve] our relationship[s] with our schools [and the] Boys and Girls Clubs that we just historically have not had a great foundation with. We fostered those relationships, and it helped us communicate and build trust in the community[,] which was [very] effective. . . . Some of that[,] just fostering those relationships[,] has helped us . . . post-pandemic as well.

Essential healthcare personnel in the region, such as mental healthcare providers, received a 5 percent bonus for reporting to work during the pandemic. However, not everyone was able to take advantage of this benefit.

Business-Specific Concerns

A participant noted that the ranking of top concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission aligned with what is being heard from local employers and that they would add cost of living and cost of housing as additional concerns—people can't afford to live where they work.

Lack of Qualified Workers

Participants observed that the state's credentialing requirements exacerbated workforce shortages for positions in fields such as childcare and law enforcement, making it more difficult for people to work. One participant pointed out that service-oriented or public-facing jobs like nurses and social workers are facing similar shortages:

> People are tired. . . . [T]hose hard jobs are a lot harder for people to keep. . . . We have people leaving [who] say, "I want a different career." . . . [S]ome of that has come out of the pandemic[, with] people . . . saying, "I'm not sure if I want to do this anymore" or "this is too hard to do." . . . [T]here's just no pipeline. . . . [Y]ou gotta have the people to do the work, and I'm telling you it is very hard to find them right now. Very hard.

Participants also mentioned that there was a shortage of service workers, preschool teachers, and teachers in the region and that the lack of a living wage for teachers was likely a contributing factor. One participant said that unemployment benefits may have prevented people from wanting to come back to work. It was also suggested that this lack of workers may also be due to overarching demographic trends—like an aging population—that were occurring long before the pandemic.

Lack of Workers—Childcare

Participants noted that a lack of access to childcare kept some people from working. Pre-K centers and other educational centers have strict requirements that limit supply, and few people want to join the workforce to fill this need due to low wages and challenges managing children who have not been socialized during COVID-19.

Participants mentioned that some business closed during the pandemic due to a difficulty in navigating federal assistance programs, with one participant stating that she has yet to reopen her business after closing it in 2020:

> We had a restaurant at the time, my husband and I. . . . [We had to put] a quick halt on everything, and we thought it would be [for] two or three weeks. . . . So our business closed [in March 2020,] . . . and we are still closed today with no clear way to really get . . . back. I mean, it would be too hard to start all over again.

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown their region's ratings on the NCPRO Resilience Index and on the Social Vulnerability Index created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They were not surprised by the results presented. Participants noted that the region needed more affordable housing to improve resilience:

> **If you look at the state map . . . you can tell where most of the money is in the state, and I think that's no surprise to anyone on this call that the regions with the highest incomes are the regions that are more resilient.**

For areas with high resilience ratings, participants noted that an influx of retirees might be skewing results upward, making the region appear more resilient than what is actually experienced on the ground.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Capacity for communication and collaboration should be expanded.** Participants said that they hoped for a more straightforward process of accessing and utilizing available resources, especially for small businesses and for continued collaboration. As one focus-group member described it,

> **I've seen this whole new [thinking around] collaboration that didn't necessarily exist prior to the pandemic. People have actively come out of their individual silos to create a united front. So I want to be able to see the continued collaboration for our community.**

2. **Communities must be able to meet workforce needs.** Participants worry about the region's ability to meet the needs of the healthcare and mental healthcare sectors, as they are concerned about meeting the mental health needs of residents. Participants are also concerned about the region's ability to supply adequate teacher salaries.

High Country

Focus-group session conducted virtually March 12, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO). Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.
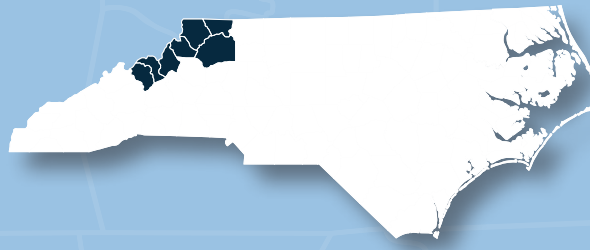
INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

Eight people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The High Country Council of Governments (COG) represents Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, Wilkes, and Yancey counties. No representatives from Yancey County were present in the focus-group session. The focus group consisted of three men and one woman from Watauga County, ranging in assumed ages from 24 to 65. The other four participants were from Ashe, Alleghany, Wilkes, and Avery counties, respectively, and each was assumed to be between 50 and 75 years old. The majority of the participants were from the local-government sector. Two participants did not turn on their cameras. Those who did appeared to be white. Overall, the participation level was very good.

Participants explored the following questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants also discussed the country's and the region's paths forward and how improved communication and collaboration can bolster the resilience of the region.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Focus-group participants indicated agreement with CES's ranking of housing as a top concern, although the issues of housing for families and the elderly were not explicitly mentioned by participants. Food insecurity for the elderly was also not mentioned.

**Top Areas of Concern for Residents in
High Country Council of Governments Service Area**

Housing
Family

Housing
Elderly

Food
Elderly

ncIMPACT

NCPRO NC Pandemic
Recovery Office
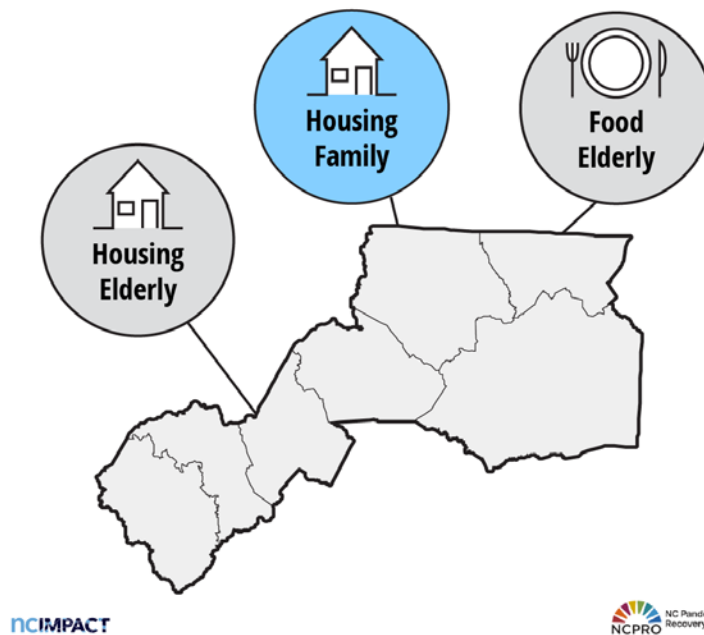
High-Speed Internet

Several of the participants stated that having money to expand access to high-speed Internet in the region was a huge benefit during the pandemic. One participant noted that pre-pandemic coverage maps were not representative of broadband coverage in the region, requiring a heavy investment to help local residents access the Internet:

> While the official maps of broadband coverage showed us with good coverage, they were sadly mistaken. And so [pandemic funding] was used to really beef up the broadband coverage in the county[.] . . . I don't know if you'd say that's the most effective [use of funding], but it was certainly the biggest chunk of money spent here.

To ensure than learning would continue during the pandemic, children having access to the Internet was a major priority in the region. With remote work happening and a lot of people moving to the area to work remotely, broadband expansion was massive. It was pointed out that the discount connectivity program (service was offered at a cost of $30/month) was and is advantageous for families in the region. One participant felt that the funds that were used for this purpose will continue to serve generations to come:

> Everything's happening online since the pandemic, and that hasn't really changed. Including school, work, you name it[. Even] healthcare. Having that access and that little extra bit of help each month has enabled folks to tap into that resource. It's economic development and community development wrapped into one program.

Transportation

Focus-group session participants said that the North Carolina Department of Transportation (DOT) needs to have more funding because it is a complicated system and, by the time money gets to this region, its impact is watered down. One participant noted that, initially during the pandemic and after big storms, the DOT got kind of "sideways for a while," which became an issue for the region, where road access is everything:

> Especially here in the Northwest, being road-dependent, only you know [the implications of that situation]. No airports, no interstates up this way. So you know the impact of the pandemic initially[,] . . . how the gas tax money dropped off. And then you had a . . . couple of big storms [that caused further impacts].

Childcare, Education, and the Elderly

The timing of the pandemic-era child tax credit and stimulus checks was helpful to families in the region. During the pandemic, schools were offering free meals, including breakfasts. Once the aid for childcare centers ends, it will have a big impact. Focus-group session participants said that they believed teacher pay is a real problem in the area, as it is nationwide. The additional checks going out to college students during the pandemic made a difference in the community college system. The American Rescue Plan Act included funds for aging services, which was also helpful. The impact of aid programs was described as follows:

> I think that the child tax credit, or whatever that was called, those stimulus checks[,] . . . were helpful from a timing perspective . . . . I think . . . things [were] timed out [fairly] well, you know, [like] when stimulus came, when [Paycheck Protection Program money] came, when those tax credits came. It felt like that was at a good time, right before, you know, school got back in session again, and people were thinking about some of the elevated costs of education at that point in time.

Housing

Affordable housing is an issue in this region. Without available, accessible housing, it is hard to recruit businesses to your area. For the Wilkes County participant, the housing issue definitely speaks to an inability to fill jobs. Some of the county's ordinances are being revised to allow for the building of innovative housing.

The Avery County participant referenced that county's tremendous second-home market. "There's a dichotomy of culture and social economic balance [on the issue.] [T]he way people see this issue is widely varied. . . . Avery County has a tremendous tax base from second homes." In addition to second homes, the county has a lot of resorts, and both forms of housing create a lot of tension. "If you go to any town in North Carolina, there are buildings closed down but not . . . second homes[.] . . . [I]t's difficult to

get affordable housing when the average home price is a lot higher [than most people can pay]. It's difficult when people see such a different culture."

One participant stated that affordable housing in the region is almost non-existent:

> In our area we have a lot of pressure [around] housing. . . . [W]e're trying every day to work with unique solutions . . . [to ensure that there is] housing access . . . and affordability[. It] drives a lot of things in our area.

Healthcare

Participants labeled healthcare as another major concern in the region. During the pandemic, participants felt that the area did a good job with the dissemination of information. They also said that opioid settlement funds have been a valuable tool from a treatment standpoint. Clinics were set up for citizens to get testing and vaccines once they became available. AppHealthCare was also cited as having been helpful with messaging about the importance of hand washing and normalized outreach. The region also received some funding from AppHealthCare during the pandemic. There were a lot of visitors to the area at that time, so the signage developed by Alleghany, Ashe, and Watauga counties helped those from other states understand the region's rules.

In February 2020, Avery County opened a new community center, and its first usage was for testing and, later, vaccinations. During that year's Christmas season, seasonal workers came to the area, and the county put together a medical trailer to serve them.

Despite these positive things, participants still worried about healthcare issues:

> The provider I use is retiring, so everyone is panicking. One person [leaving results in a] 10 percent [drop in] available providers.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Business-Specific Concerns

Participants indicated agreement with the ranking of top concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission, particularly lack of workers generally. Lack of qualified workers and access to capital were not mentioned.

Small Businesses

The PPP helped small businesses keep their employees in the region. There are a lot of arts and crafts businesses and restaurants in the area. Participants thought it was amazing that only a few small businesses in the region were lost during COVID-19. A job-retention grant from the state Department of Commerce was said to be helpful for businesses that were not eligible for a federal PPP allocation.

Employment

Focus-group members discussed the lack of workers in the region and how raising the minimum wage had been debated pre-pandemic. One had this to say on the matter:

> You may disagree that the minimum wage needs to be higher. But that's what the market is demanding right now, and higher salaries are helpful. The people, especially those who are having trouble finding housing or affording child care, [need the help].

Participants felt that being able to use tools like Zoom was a good development that produced both time and money savings. Recruiting and training employees, such as school employees, was cited as a critical need.

MOVING FORWARD:
Understanding Resilience across the Region

Unlike other focus-group members, participants in this session were not shown the Social Vulnerability Index created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) due to facilitator error. They were asked about the region's resilience generally. The group said that Americans are incredibly resilient and innovative when compared to the rest of the world and that their region will adapt to handle whatever comes its way:

> [We are technically discussing pandemic-]recovery needs, but they impact everything to do with the local economy and economic development.

> I think the [pandemic-]recovery needs and the [region's] long-term needs are one [and] the same. In many cases.

LESSONS LEARNED:
Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Communication is key.** Participants reported that communication between local governments and their citizens is much better post-pandemic. Here's a typical observation:

> Local governments have found new ways to interact with people and get feedback, and it seems like the amount of public participation has increased [since the pandemic]. I'd like to see that continue. I think that's healthy, and I'm sure our local governments would agree that they enjoy hearing from folks 99 percent of the time.

2. **Collaboration improves outcomes.** According to focus-group session participants, the counties in their region have more collaboration and open lines of communication since the pandemic.

3. **The commitment of community leaders is crucial to a community's success.** Members of this focus group are invested in their communities and vow to continue to do the work necessary to be successful:

> **A part of this area's DNA is to rise above challenges.**

> **There is a famous quote by Daniel Boone [about how] he was never lost, but he was a mite bewildered for three days. That's the way we are. We're not lost[, we're] bewildered. We are not victims. We are overcomers. We are hard workers. That hopefulness was the thing that was kind of lost [during the pandemic]. We are positively going to be okay. We can instill that confidence as opposed to fearfulness. From a leadership standpoint, that is what we really have to be cognizant of.**

Kerr-Tar

Focus-group session conducted in person on March 4, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO). Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.
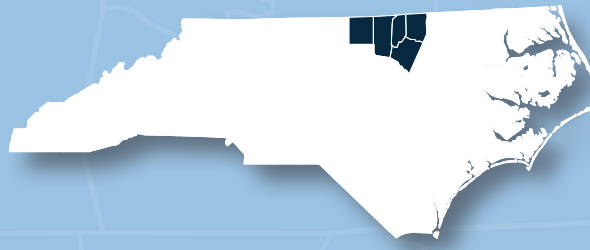
INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

Five people volunteered for this focus-group conversation and offered strong participation. The Kerr-Tar Regional Council of Governments (COG) represents Franklin, Granville, Person, Vance, and Warren counties. Two participants came from Granville County and two came from Franklin County. One of the participants represented a regional organization that covered Franklin, Granville, Person, Vance, and Warren counties. Based on facilitators' observations, we had four women of traditional working age (24 to 65) and one woman of traditional retirement age (65+). Three participants were from the local-government sector and two worked in state government. The group appeared to be somewhat racially diverse. Two focus-group members appeared to be Black. The others appeared to be white. There were no other apparent races or ethnicities present.

Participants were active in joining the conversation exploring the following questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants shared information about their differing experiences across the region, especially where program implementation was concerned. There was great agreement around lessons learned and the need to learn from COVID-19 to prepare for future crises.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in
Kerr-Tar Council of Governments Service Area
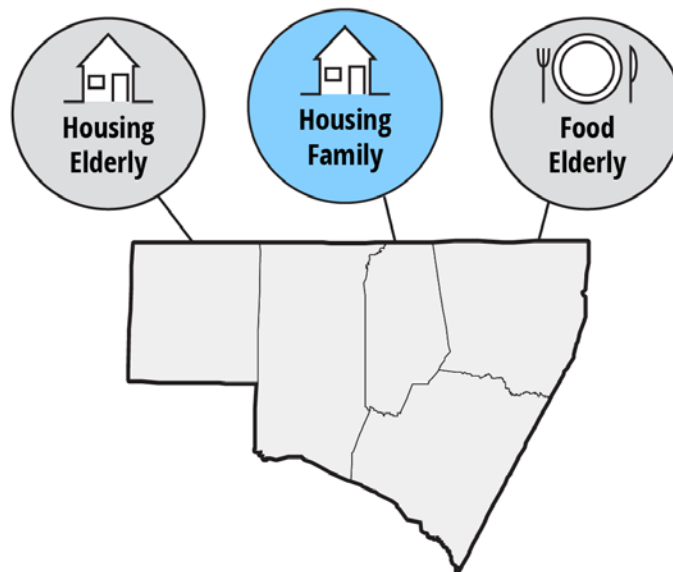
Housing
Elderly

Housing
Family

Food
Elderly

ncIMPACT

NCPRO NC Pandemic
Recovery Office

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Focus-group participants indicated agreement with CES's ranking of housing as a top concern, although the issues of housing for families and the elderly were not explicitly mentioned. Food insecurity for the elderly was also not mentioned.

Food Insecurity

Participants noted that food-delivery programs were part of the local pandemic-recovery effort. One participant said that the food made available through food-box deliveries was sometimes inadequate. Another participant disagreed, stating that community members were thankful for what they were given:

> [People were] at home with no food, in isolation with five kids, in a pandemic[.] I didn't have anybody call me back[,] and we were delivering over eighty boxes a day[,] . . . say[ing] . . . "We don't want that [box of food] because we don't eat that."

Another participant said that they thought food-distribution programs were equitable during the pandemic:

> One thing I saw in the pandemic was that there was no discrimination when it came to food insecurity.

Housing

Housing was cited as the area of greatest concern in this suburban and rural region. Participants agreed that rental-assistance programs did a good job of responding to the widespread need for help during the pandemic, covering rental-housing costs at a time when so many people had lost their jobs. Focus-group members worried, however, that the need for housing support outlasted programs that addressed the issue and resulted in homelessness. One participant said that housing support ended abruptly as people went back to work, leaving some people without enough time to save up for monthly housing costs. Here are other comments from participants:

> We should have maybe looked at a transitional step in there so that we didn't have people falling [through] the cracks.

> [For] utilities, you gave people [an assistance] plan. This would have been valuable [for housing costs].

> We need to try to avoid a cliff. Whether it's rental assistance or unemployment, we need a transition plan for people so that we don't just cut them off.

Participants said that landlords often ignored the federal eviction moratorium, leading more people in the region to become homeless.

Adequacy

Focus-group members expressed frustration when the discussion turned to poor housing conditions. One participant talked about the need for more consistent housing standards, stating that rental conditions in some counties were substandard. Another said that more support was needed to enforce the standards that are in place:

> People are paying crazy rates for shacks. [Landlords are] not required to [follow] a minimum [housing] standard.

Affordability

Participants agreed that rental-housing rates have continued to rise post-pandemic, contributing to homelessness. One person expressed fear about how many people are vulnerable to being forced into homelessness due to a change in debt or income status.

Several participants talked about community interest in tiny homes and the opportunities for increasing low-income housing with grant-funding support. One stated that more affordable-housing options were needed in their region to help people avoid homelessness:

> Yeah, [we need options] so people can have [a choice]. [They should be a]ble to buy a [tiny] home if they want to.

There was a rigorous debate around the question of whether some people want to be homeless.

Physical and Behavioral Health

Equitable healthcare and access to mental health services were rated as top needs by participants. One noted that the expansion of Medicaid would bring better access to healthcare. Another agreed and emphasized the need to make it more accessible in rural areas.

One participant noted a shortage of community healthcare workers, who were heavily relied upon for healthcare services during COVID-19:

> Community centers took care of the community [during the pandemic]. And people knew they could go there, and it was a safe place.

The need for increased and specialized services for the region's aging population was discussed, with particular emphasis placed on mental health services.

Internet Access

Participants agreed that lack of Internet access in the region continues to be a barrier to gathering information and accessing resources, particularly in rural areas.

One participant said that social services were more difficult to obtain without Internet access, noting that older adults faced increased ramifications due to a higher need for help in accessing food, healthcare, and social enrichment.

Public Safety

While most of the focus-group session conversation focused on other issues, one participant noted that public safety was a top concern in their community.

Collective Community Commitment

In this focus-group session, participants had varied experiences with their respective local governments. They made note of who was not in the room for the session and indicated that the absence of some leaders reflected a disconnection to collective need and action:

> Never once did the local government ever contact me the whole time during the pandemic.

> You counted the number of people here. That may tell you a lot more than anything we can say.

Business-Specific Concerns

Participants indicated agreement with the ranking of top concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission, particularly lack of workers generally. Lack of qualified workers and access to capital were not mentioned.

Lack of Workers Generally

When the focus-group session discussion pivoted to the ongoing challenges facing businesses in the region following the pandemic, participants focused on the changing workforce and the need to increase employability skills among job seekers. They also noted the importance of high schools and community colleges in preparing people for skilled jobs. They mentioned their perception of a decrease in work ethic as being a struggle for employers, who are experiencing a higher number of employees who don't show up for their assigned shifts. Here are some participant comments on this issue:

> I was asked on my job application, "Will you show up to work?"

> We need to make sure that we are strongly supporting education [and] workforce development with these people, creating good pipelines.

> Our community colleges are such a great groundwork for getting people in. They offer so many certificates and programs.

> As [our state] moves toward clean energy, we need more [specialized] people . . . in manufacturing.

Remote Work

Focus-group members discussed remote work as having varied impacts on the workforce. One participant said that remote work is making it easier for people to explore new ways to earn income. Another said that the shift to remote work is a challenge for filling customer-facing jobs because more people are looking for remote work.

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a Social Vulnerability Index of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They appeared to understand the visualized differences in vulnerability levels across

the region and pointed to socioeconomic factors they believed were contributing to the variability in resilience. Several participants offered local examples of wealth in relationship to resilience as visualized in their region.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Preparing for the Next Crisis

When the discussion pivoted to assessing the effectiveness of specific pandemic-recovery programs or sources of funding, there was little specificity among participants beyond mentions of rental-assistance programs and the federal eviction moratorium. Participants seemed to believe that local efforts were the most effective efforts.

1. **Trusted brokers are important.** The Community Health Worker Program (CHWP) was mentioned as a champion of pandemic recovery, supporting work being done by local, state, and federal governments. Participants mentioned the importance of the role community health workers played in the implementation of community vaccinations, the sharing of information as trusted messengers, and the provision of equitable services. One participant said that the CHWP was uniquely positioned to reach vulnerable, marginalized, and underprivileged community members.

2. **Integrated programs offer high value.** The Duke Social Support Program was also mentioned as being successful across the board and equitable to all.

3. **Local implementation matters.** The success of pandemic-era food-distribution programs in the region was a point of contention for the group. One participant classified these programs as inefficient, stating that food recipients weren't able to use some of the food they received. Another said that recipients who encountered new or different foods were responsive in asking for help understanding how to prepare those foods.

4. **Learning recovery continues to be a struggle.** Support for schools was identified as a high priority with significant repercussions. Participants noted that students came back after the pandemic to short-staffed schools without enough substitute teachers. The transition from remote learning to in-person instruction presented struggles with socialization, truancy, and learning loss.

5. **Moving quickly has upsides and downsides.** There was agreement about the effectiveness of business support during the pandemic. While one participant expressed frustration with the Paycheck Protection Program, claiming that some unqualified businesses were funded, the group agreed that the situation was unprecedented and that many businesses were helped by the program.

6. **More collective support is needed.** Local experiences varied based on community, but all participants agreed that there needed to be greater community connection among local governments, the COG, and community-based organizations.

Land of Sky

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 18, 2024, by [ncIMPACT](#) and the [N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office](#). Hosted by the [North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government](#).

INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

Thirteen people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The [Land of Sky Regional Council](#) represents Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania counties. Eleven participants came from Buncombe County; one came from Transylvania County; and one came from Madison County. Seven of the participants represented a regional organization that covered Buncombe, Madison, Henderson, and Transylvania counties. The group appeared to include six women and five men of traditional working age (between 24 and 65). One person worked in local business and one worked as a local health leader. Four people worked in local government and five worked in regional government roles. All seven of the on-camera participants appeared to be white, and five of them appeared to be women.

The conversations were centered on the following three major questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants also discussed details of pandemic-era programs, funding, and what will happen in the future when certain funds no longer exist.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Reactions to the [NCPRO Community Engagement Survey](#) (CES) Results

Participants agreed with results in the CES identifying housing and food as top concerns. Housing for the elderly and/or families was not explicitly discussed and neither was food insecurity for the elderly.

**Top Areas of Concern for Residents in
Land-of-Sky Regional Council Service Area**
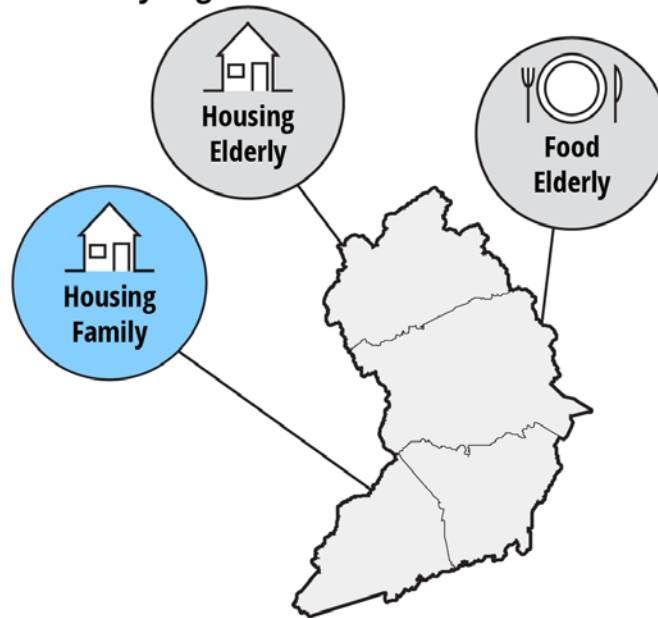
Housing

Housing was, by far, the area of greatest concern. One participant said that the regional housing stock was low because supply had not kept up with demand. A lack of workforce housing was emphasized by one participant. Another participant shared that housing for the elderly was a growing concern.

One participant said that as homes are being built farther from city centers in rural and other exurban areas, services are becoming more expensive for communities to provide. Participants also said that there is an increased need for worker housing in city centers where more jobs exist. Here are some sample comments:

> **We haven't built to accommodate growth. And now we're seeing a lot of people kind of fighting over the units that we do have.**

> **Without that housing, everything else kind of falls apart.**

According to one participant, managing public health resources was a challenge during the pandemic that continues to put pressure on the region. This person said that the influx of high-wealth individuals relocating to the area didn't slow during the pandemic, which made the demand for issuing well and septic permits difficult to manage:

> **[Y]ou put this tremendous flow of people with resources and money [who will] pay a million dollars for a house that's worth . . . half a million. . . . It's just stacking the pressures up on our long-standing communities and folks that don't [have] that level of financial resource.**

Affordability

One participant shared that rental assistance was helpful during the pandemic, but rent has continued to rise in the region. Another participant said that rental-assistance support is still greatly needed, especially since there are fewer agencies and non-profit organizations available to manage the increased demand. It was also shared that an increased awareness of rental-assistance funding had caused landlords to raise their rates. The group agreed that rising housing costs have been exacerbated by the influx of high-wealth individuals, creating even more of a barrier to potential homeowners.

Food Insecurity

The group agreed that helping with food access during the pandemic was essential. One participant said that government benefits were instrumental in helping the region avoid an economic meltdown:

> **We were using every resource possible to get access to the fresh fruits and vegetables. Having our SNAP [benefits] increase during that time period was instrumental for us.**

Childcare

Support for families needing childcare was a top concern shared by participants. One participant said that pandemic funding allowed a childcare facility in her community to keep employees paid during the temporary closures, an option that is no longer possible:

> **Here's a situation we're facing now . . . that money that flowed into childcare allowed for this system to stay intact and for the staff not to bolt. . . . A lot of [the] staff across the state received raises because the funding was available to do that, which desperately needed to happen. . . . [But right now we're facing a] huge cliff.**

Another participant agreed that pandemic-era funding allowed for staff retention and for much-needed pay raises, both of which are at risk now that funding is gone and facilities are left with a deficit. It was also shared that some local commissioners have been working to set aside funding to help with that deficit.

The options of telehealth and remote work were noted as the top reasons that parents are able to balance their work and childcare responsibilities:

> **When parents have a sick child, they can now work from home that day, if it's possible. . . . That was not something that existed previously. That has been a really nice benefit that came out of the pandemic.**

Worker Retraining

The group agreed that retraining workers is a top concern in the region. Participants said that work-based learning grants have been helpful in upskilling incumbent workers and that the funds were easy to implement in companies across sectors, regardless of their size. One participant elaborated on this issue:

> [We currently have] 15 companies who have participated [with a total] of probably 210 [workers], plus $1,000 that we have granted for short-term training for upskilling incumbent workers.

Transportation

Helping people move safely throughout the region was a challenge during the pandemic. One participant said that concerns about communicable diseases slowed the use of public transit. Other participants said there was an increased need for ride-sharing opportunities during that time. Some participants noted that the expense of commuting was a roadblock to home ownership. They said that public-transportation improvements could encourage people to drive their cars less and save their money to buy homes. Another participant shared that while rural areas have been slow to use pandemic-era funding for transportation, urban areas have depleted that funding quickly. Here are some sample comments:

> People are spending so much money on commuting that they can't afford a house in the region, and it's a catch-22.

> Costs are definitely up, and ridership is not back at pandemic levels.

Broadband Access

Participants agreed that access to the Internet was problematic during the pandemic. One participant said that the limited availability of technology like laptops was also a problem. Another participant shared that American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and state funding for broadband expansion has been a great benefit. One participant said:

> We really felt the education issue and workforce remote worker issue with COVID. We had a lot of children that didn't have access.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Business-Specific Concerns

Overall, the group agreed with the main concern presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission: a lack of workers. The lack of qualified workers and the limited access to capital were not specifically discussed.

Lack of Workers

As the discussion turned to the ongoing challenges facing businesses after the pandemic, participants championed local collaboration as the primary reason the region was able to pivot quickly to alleviate individual needs and community concerns. But employers still struggled to fill workforce needs, possibly due to the growing number of retirees who left their jobs during the pandemic. Participants expressed a need for training in employability skills, especially for younger workers who enter the workforce with fewer of the human "soft skills" that take time to build. Here are some sample comments:

> It felt like the first time a lot of us were sharing information [about] how we could do what people needed.

> Our prime working-age population is not meeting, or even exceeding, the growth of our retirement population.

> [T]oday all of our employers are talking about housing, and it's not just for our lowest-wage workers. It's across the spectrum because they see how the lack of housing and the fact [that] our housing is so expensive is inhibiting their ability to recruit workers.

New, stricter food-safety rules and inspection rules from the federal government were noted as causing bottlenecks and delays for the state's environmental department and the businesses it serves.

Participants noted that minority business owners struggled during the pandemic because they had fewer relationships in the banking industry and experienced difficulty in navigating the **Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)** loan process.

MOVING FORWARD:
Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a **Social Vulnerability Index** of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They were not surprised by the vulnerabilities it showed across the region. The rapid influx of high-wealth individuals into the area was again noted for its impact on economic and social disparities.

One participant noted that the CDC/ATSDR Social Vulnerability Index failed to address some of the specific needs in their region. Others agreed that it might not be the best way to recognize the resilience of their communities.

Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Maintain collaboration.** Participants pointed to regional government collaboration and non-profit leadership as critical to mapping out ideas and opportunities for increasing access to affordable housing:

   > [We will continue to] work with our communities and housing non-profits to see what we can put in place to assist . . . [and] meet that need at a regional level [while trying] to leverage all the work our communities are doing.

2. **Meet transportation needs.** The group emphasized that there will be no progress in the region without improved public transportation. They reiterated the importance of increasing public transportation options in rural areas.

3. **Support workforce development.** Participants noted the need to connect supply with demand. They called for more workforce promotion to help people connect with available jobs and training opportunities. They lamented the gap in employability skills among younger workers and urged an increase in middle- and high-school career programs that will help bolster the workforce pipeline by increasing the number of skilled trade workers. One participant noted the extensive openings in one county:

   > Buncombe County [has] over 5,000 openings just in [the skilled-trade] sector.

Lumber River

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 15, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office. Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.

INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

The Lumber River Council of Governments represents Bladen, Hoke, Richmond, Robeson, and Scotland counties. The focus-group session included five volunteers, and each one was from a different county. The participants represented the following sectors: health, education, and local governments (including tribal governments). The age range of the participants appeared to be between 30 and 65. Two participants appeared to be male, and the other three appeared to be female. Three participants were assumed to be and/or stated that they were Native American, one was white, and one was Black.

The conversations were centered on the following three major questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
1. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
2. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants also discussed concerns for the inclusion of the Lumbee Tribe community in decision-making processes and collaborative efforts that might address the region's needs in the future.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

The participants agreed with the concerns presented in the CES regarding housing and food for the elderly and housing for families.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in
Lumber River Council of Governments Service Area
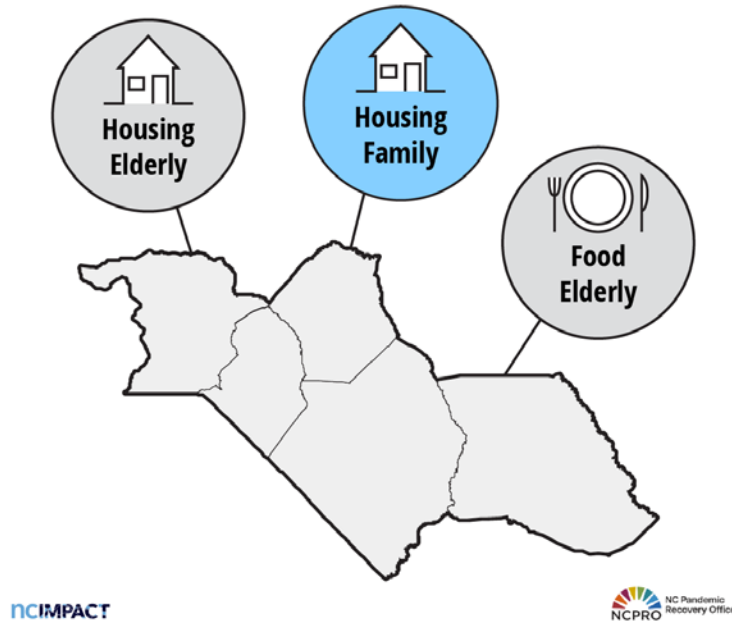
Housing

Quality

One participant said that the Lumber River Council of Governments' list of home repairs needed for the elderly is typically 200 to 300 people long, so many folks are forced to wait:

> We maintain a waiting list, and this is just for minor home repairs . . . [including] wheelchair ramps, bathroom repairs, window replacement, maybe help with storm doors, grab bars.

In light of this list, participants mentioned that the state should take an increased role in addressing safe and affordable housing.

Affordability

It was noted that although costs of living are lower in the Lumber River area, housing is still expensive because the materials used to build homes cost the same as they do in other, more affluent areas. The lack of affordable housing makes it difficult to recruit workers to the region.

Aging Population and Eldercare

The group's discussion of aging-related issues emphasized housing affordability and the need for an adequate supply of housing for the elderly and a workforce that includes healthcare workers. The group mentioned that many local families currently have to

provide in-home care to aging parents. They said that two significant challenges they are facing are recruiting and retaining a workforce that includes skilled health workers, such as certified nursing assistants (CNAs), and finding ways to continue state grants. Here are some sample comments:

> With the elderly you've got a lot of . . . young couples working and taking care of mom, and they want to take care of mom because they want her in the home . . . but they need a little help. There [were] . . . funds coming from the state, for in-home care . . . [and they helped] to keep the moms at home. That's what our community wants to do more of. But [we] just need a little help.

> The COG administers an in-home aid program across all five counties, and one of the big challenges that we're seeing there now is the lack of ability to recruit and retain CNAs to deliver those services. And that is presenting a significant challenge.

The Lumber River COG has received additional funding to provide services for the elderly that either expand existing programs or create new ones, and the group expressed hope that the state will continue to be responsive to this ongoing need:

> [H]opefully . . . the multisector aging plan that the governor has initiated . . . will help guide some of this work. But for years you've heard about the coming silver tsunami. Well, it's upon us, and the attention has not been put there. . . . [A]s a state, we need to look at prioritizing more funding for our older adults. [W]ith the COVID programs, there were a lot of special funds that were directed to services, and as those expire, a lot of those programs are facing a cliff.

Broadband

The need to increase broadband access across all five counties was noted by participants from the education, health, and local-government sectors. High-speed Internet is not affordable in the region, and more funding is needed to create accessible hotspots.

Although this need existed before the pandemic, it became heightened during that time. Some students had to complete their schoolwork in the parking lots of businesses just to access a Wi-Fi connection. Many people found it difficult to take full advantage of online medical services because of their lack of access to broadband service. One participant said:

> When it comes to equity and inclusion, broadband in the region is the affordability component. It's still extremely expensive. . . . If we're going to move forward, we need to build on those partnerships that have come about with the broadband deployment [that occurred in] the pandemic.

Education

Participants described how community partners worked together during the pandemic to provide students with Internet access and local hotspots. Some buses were even equipped with Internet connections.

Healthcare

The local hospital received funding through the **Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act** (CARES Act). In addition to helping purchase personal protective equipment (PPE) and increase staff pay for recruitment and retention, the money was used to set up mobile clinics on Interstate 95 and kiosks in multiple communities so that people without access to broadband could use them for virtual appointments.

One participant noted the importance and value of the state's Community Health Workers program in which health workers checked on elders in the community and provided them with regular care outside of a clinical setting:

> I really saw the value of the community health worker program (CHWP) . . . to be able to check on their elders, and not just during a pandemic, but for basic health needs. . . . Folks don't always want to go to clinical sites for care. . . . [T]hose trained community health workers [are] not paid a lot of money. A lot of them are still volunteers.

Lumbee Tribe

Members of the Lumbee Tribe participated in contact tracing, vaccination campaigns, and mask and hand-sanitizer distribution to supplement the efforts of the county health department. However, they felt that the services they received were not of the same quality as those received by other historically marginalized populations in the state, such as Black and Latino populations.

It was noted that there is sometimes a disconnect between the county health department and the Lumbee Tribe when it comes to making decisions or marketing public health services. Bringing these two entities together often requires someone to step up and make it happen.

Decisions that affect the Lumbee people usually must be taken before the Tribal Council for a vote. But during the pandemic, rules and regulations changed quickly, so the process wasn't always inclusive of the Lumbee population and their government:

> The marketing that went out . . . didn't look like [the Lumbee]. We [were] trying to convince people to get vaccinations, and yet the people that we were using to inspire them to get vaccinations didn't look like [the Lumbee people].

The healthcare representative in the focus group did note that when the tribal chairman and his wife received their vaccinations, their photo was taken and shared to encourage other Lumbee Tribe members to get vaccinated. It was agreed that there is still a need for increased representation of American Indians in healthcare and in public health.

Community Enhancement/Development

Pandemic-era funding programs allowed for the expansion of walking trails and parks, downtown revitalizations, and the opening of farmers' markets.

Business-Specific Concerns

Overall, the group agreed with the top business concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission: a lack of workers, a lack of qualified workers, and a lack of access to capital.

Lack of Workers and Lack of Qualified Workers

One participant noted that pandemic-era funding programs allowed targeted responses to the needs of both individuals seeking jobs and employers, which will have long-term benefits for the region:

> Our workforce program received some funding through the Department of Labor through the National Dislocated Worker Grants program to expand training. . . . We did some COVID tracer employment placements with . . . health departments . . . [and] were able to send . . . about 150 folks through CDL [Commercial Driver's License] training, which led to long-term sustainable employment.

Access to Capital

Participants discussed the limited access that small businesses had to the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) due to a lack of financial institutions in the region that could respond quickly to the new programs. One participant noted that this challenge especially affected small, rural businesses that do not have relationships with financial institutions:

> I'm sure we had businesses across our region that got [PPP loans]. But it's not something you really heard about. . . . I think the [programs that were] more targeted . . . to providers, healthcare entities, local governments . . . through federal, state, and regional local government entities . . . were more successful because they were adding . . . where that infrastructure was already in place to reach new people versus when you're trying to start . . . new programs. . . . [In] the future, using that existing infrastructure for deployment of programs and services [would be more helpful].

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a Social Vulnerability Index of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR).

They were surprised that more areas, especially the rural areas, did not receive higher vulnerability scores, and they postulated that it could have been due to the prominence of the Fayetteville area and/or low population counts. The participants noted that their counties are among the twenty-five most distressed counties in the nation, and they said they feel like a "forgotten region" of the state in terms of economic development and resilience.

Participants expressed the desire for state decision-makers to understand that their region is distinct from Fayetteville; has the potential for economic development given the natural resources in the area; and needs localized solutions. Here are some sample comments:

> What we need to help with . . . economic development is additional funding [so that] folks realize that when a new industry is available, we have abundant natural resources. We have abundant land available. We have the ability to develop a workforce to meet the needs of employers. Our folks are hardworking.

> I think when people think of southeastern North Carolina, they think Fayetteville and Wilmington, and they have very different economies. They have very different mindsets than [those that] exist in our region. . . . We have different, unique challenges. Our five counties . . . are very similar in nature. They're all very rural, they're all very self-sufficient. I think that's how we've [been able to make such] strides.

LESSONS LEARNED:
Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Increase local capacity.** Along with increased communication across the region, new partnerships have formed. The participants said that they feel they are "self-sufficient," which has helped them make good progress. They just need funding.
2. **Maintain communication and collaboration.** During the pandemic, regular virtual meetings between partners helped with information sharing, which was important since not all of them had the ability to update their websites quickly when information changed. Participants noted that the state should continue to recognize the important role of local organizations in mobilizing responses to challenges.
3. **Meeting existing community needs.** The participants said that assisting "Opportunity Youth," people whose ages are between 16 and 24 and who are not in school or employed, is important. They also said that the region needs more funding for substance use and addiction as well as mental health services.

Mid-Carolina

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 14, 2024, by [ncIMPACT](#) and the [N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office](#). Hosted by the [North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government](#).

INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

Five people volunteered for this focus-group conversation, but two had to leave before the questions began. The [Mid-Carolina Regional Council](#) represents Cumberland, Harnett, and Sampson counties. Two of the participants represented Harnett County and one represented Cumberland County. All three appeared to be of traditional working age (between 24 and 65). One worked in local government, one in education, and one in health via a local government agency. Two participants appeared to be white females, and the third, who sounded male, responded off camera.

The conversations were centered on the following three major questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants discussed their communities' concerns during the pandemic and the barriers that made addressing those concerns challenging. The importance of meeting citizens' basic needs was emphasized, as well as the need for ongoing communication and collaboration between local entities.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Reactions to the [NCPRO Community Engagement Survey](#) (CES) Results

The participants agreed with the top-identified CES concerns of housing and food. They did not, however, specifically address issues related to housing for families and/or the elderly or food insecurity for the elderly.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Mid-Carolina Council of Governments Service Area

Housing Family

Housing Elderly

Food Elderly

nCIMPACT

NCPRO — NC Pandemic Recovery Office
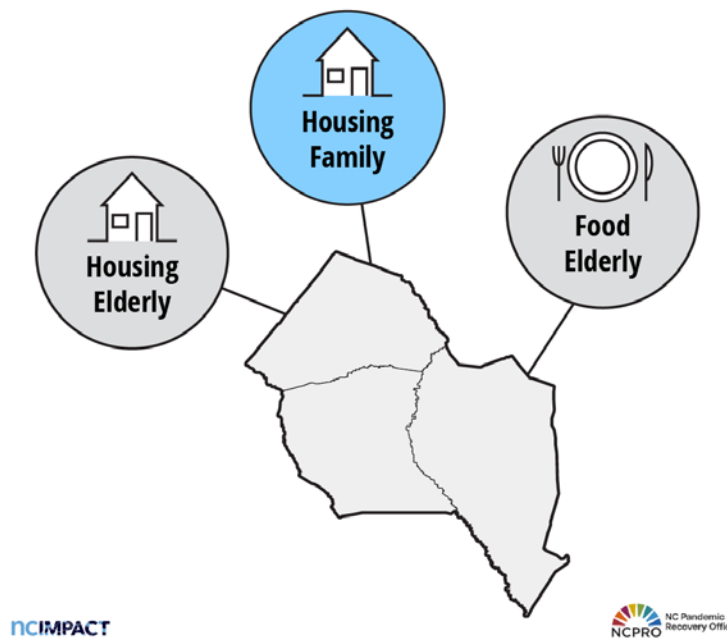
The stimulus checks issued during the pandemic were identified by participants as a key support for community members. Families who experienced negative consequences from job losses were able to use these funds to cover their essential expenses such as bills, housing costs, and food. One participant suggested that this also may have had an indirect benefit for families' mental health by reducing their stress.

Some of the participants said that the federal funding made available to local-government entities was invaluable. As a resident of a smaller town, one participant said that funding from the **Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act** and the **American Rescue Plan Act** (ARPA) helped the community navigate budget concerns. However, the lack of guidance indicating when funds would be released and the inconsistent updates did cause challenges in deciding how the money would be allotted.

Housing

All three participants named housing as the top priority or challenge facing their region, especially given its implications for future economic growth and prosperity. Issues related to homelessness were also mentioned, including the limited amount of shelter space and an ordinance in Cumberland County that prohibited people from

living in tents on county property. The importance of federal funding was noted by one participant:

> One of the things that we had a hard time with was, of course, isolating people who are homeless. So with the federal funds, we were able to put people up in hotel rooms. And so I mean, that made a big difference.

One participant said that **NC Care 360** has been helpful in providing rental assistance:

> During COVID, we also were able to help the community with funding and things like that. Also, we are part now of NC Care 360, and that's how we were able to help a lot of people with assistance programs, rentals, utilities, mental health. That has been a huge help for our community members [because it's] one less barrier for them. And so we've done that as well. And that's been a success.

Healthcare

The impacts of COVID-19 encouraged partners within and across communities to communicate and collaborate more effectively. It also helped strengthen the overall system. The participant from the health sector noted that the region now has a greater ability to share information across community agencies, urgent care facilities, hospitals, and public health organizations.

One participant said that the mental health of aging parents was a growing concern during the pandemic and that the stimulus checks helped alleviate this concern for some families:

> The stimulus checks as far as . . . the families of our students go . . . took [away] a lot of stress and [brought] relief. Mental health issues were a [major] concern.

However, as public health professionals have noted, some communicable diseases (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases and infections) worsened when the pandemic's social distancing protocols were lifted.

Participants indicated a need for more mental health providers.

Education

Participants agreed that collaboration and information sharing between local schools, counties, the public, and others have improved as a result of the pandemic experience.

One remaining area of significant concern with regard to education is burnout and attrition among teachers and school personnel. The participant from the education sector noted that teachers struggled during the pandemic to do their jobs effectively while also looking after their own families, and as a result many have left the profession or moved to nearby districts where salary supplements are higher.

Recovering from learning loss for students is another challenge that is especially concerning given the expiration of federal funds. Even though after-school programs,

tutoring, summer programs, and similar support systems are required to address learning loss, fewer resources are now available.

Food

Food access was a recurring theme and area of concern. The participants said that the region faced challenges with food access during the pandemic and identified it as an ongoing need. One participant noted efforts by local agencies to provide food when the need was urgent. Another participant said that the region has a high poverty rate, making food a challenge for many residents. This was especially true during the pandemic as people navigated the loss of their incomes. Here are some sample comments:

> Food was a big factor. And that's just based on when we did investigations, we called people. Food was always the number one thing. Like, "How am I going to get food?"

> Food costs have skyrocketed, and that's causing a strain on the area.

Transportation

Participants agreed that transportation is an important issue with wide-ranging implications. For example, in Cumberland County, free bus passes made it easier for residents to go to medical appointments. Now that pandemic programs are expiring, public health officials are thinking about alternatives to help make sure that people can access care:

> They had free bus passes for anybody, everybody. And I think that's over with. And that helped a lot of patients get to where they needed to get to here in Cumberland County. And now we're . . . having to go back to the scene [and figure out] how we can get transportation for people, how we can help them, you know, maneuver around for appointments. So I remember that . . . people loved the free transportation on the buses.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Business-Specific Concerns

Participants mentioned some issues that aligned with the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission, but they did not specifically reference a need for qualified workers or access to capital. While participants did express some concern about the Great Resignation and its effects on staffing—particularly in the

education sector and in health professions like nursing—they seemed optimistic about the region's general capacity for job training and workforce development:

> **If I had to pick some place we're making good strides in, it would be job and training access and employability skills. We have a strong CTE (Career & Technical Education) program, and we do a lot of academies, and work with FTCC (Fayetteville Technical Community College) on credentialing. So I feel like we're making headway there.**

> **Going back to the relationship and the collaboration piece between our commissioners and our schools and our local governments, our town leaders—we are all very focused on job training, creating workers, and economic growth. I feel like that's everyone's focus a lot of times. And that's one place we do come together and agree.**

MOVING FORWARD:
Understanding Resilience across the Region

Because the region is growing quickly, participants expressed concerns about the location and accessibility of specific resources. Fayetteville and Cumberland County have greater access to transportation networks than some of the more rural locations like Harnett County. Though the region has broadband capabilities, many parts of Harnett are still using dial-up Internet. Some local schools are unable to compete with nearby districts for personnel because the property tax base is lower, which leaves less for teacher salary supplements.

Participants were shown a Social Vulnerability Index of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They did not seem surprised by the region's vulnerability scores. One participant talked about how being a rural county impacts a community's needs and how it might also affect folks who are thinking of moving there:

> **I mean . . . these are . . . things that people look for in places when they move places.**

The participants said that in order to be more resilient, their communities need more housing options and healthcare access:

> **I think there's only one shelter that we have here that is for men. And so if it's full, it's full.**

> **We've got the hospital healthcare access, [but] even with Medicaid expansion, it's just so difficult for people. And . . . we just don't have enough mental health–care providers or people for mental health. And that exacerbates all the issues.**

> **It all goes back to the quality of living. So your housing access, your healthcare access, and your childcare access: they're going to be . . . three key components in the growth of your community and your resilience.**

Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Communication is crucial.** Participants felt strongly that communication and collaboration between organizations within their communities had been strengthened as a result of programs implemented and needs identified during the pandemic. One participant mentioned that social media had been helpful and that text messaging made contact tracing easier. These collaborative practices will better equip the region to respond to future crises.

2. **Collaboration and partnerships are key.** The participants were less concerned with recovery efforts because the region now has strong collaborative efforts in place, especially in the area of workforce development and training. Strength in unity was emphasized:

   > If there's no communication, no collaboration, it's "if one entity falls, we all fall," right?

   > [W]hen we were in the throes of the pandemic, all the what-ifs and concerns [made us question] exactly how strong we [were] . . . but I don't think there's any question [about it] anymore. I think we know what we're capable of doing, especially when we work together. So, like everyone says, we came out with a new skill set. [And] that's a positive [because] we are resilient as a community.

3. **Address ongoing community concerns.** Participants emphasized that the region is growing, and regional partners must continue working to meet needs related to housing, healthcare access, food, education, and other identified core issues to maintain the quality of living that makes the area appealing.

Mid-East

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 20, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office. Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.

INTRODUCTION:

This Focus Group

Thirteen people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The Mid-East Commission represents Beaufort, Bertie, Hertford, Martin, and Pitt counties. There were participants from all of the counties. The age of the participants appeared to range from 30 to 65. The group appeared to be mostly white, with five Black participants and two participants who did not appear on camera. Four participants represented the education sector; four participants represented the commission sector; two participants represented the local government sector; two participants represented the health sector; and one person represented the economic-development sector. The group appeared to consist of four men and nine women.

The conversations were centered on the following three major questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants discussed how the pandemic highlighted preexisting community concerns and disparities in the region. They also shared lessons learned and their hopes of improving local capacity and partnerships to meet ongoing community needs.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

The participants agreed with the top-identified CES concern of housing, but they did not talk specifically about housing for families and/or the elderly. Food insecurity for the elderly was not mentioned either.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Mid-East Commission Service Area
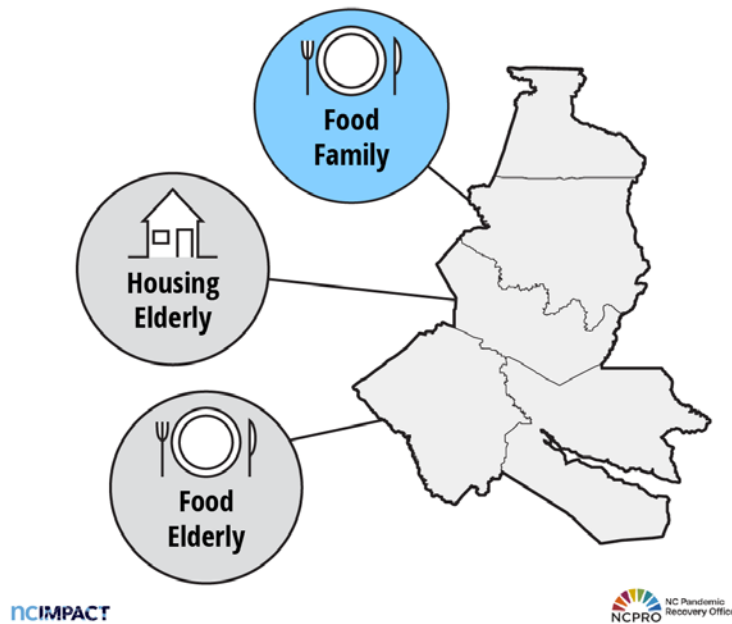
Education

The group agreed that schools became a hub for community needs during the pandemic, taking the lead in connecting food-insecure students with meals through food pick-up programs. Participants said that this effort continued through the school year and into the summer. One participant mentioned that some schools set up smart classrooms using Webex to help students access lessons and stay connected.

Another participant said that learning loss from the pandemic has been noticeable. Because younger students, especially those in early elementary school, missed out on crucial foundational years of education, they lacked socialization skills and were unprepared to move to a higher grade level after the pandemic:

> [If] you started kindergarten during the pandemic, when you came back, you were almost in the third grade, which is [when] you're now supposed to be ready to test.

A participant who works with a local community college shared that the transition to online learning helped everyone shift their assumptions about education, allowing the emergence of hybrid opportunities that help students balance their classroom education with hands-on skills training for jobs in the automotive and construction industries. Pandemic-era funding made possible an increase in the number of classes offered at a community college, which helped reduce class size and increase safety.

Community/Local Government

The participants said that collaboration among local governments during the pandemic was successful and helped expedite relief for the region. The Mid-East Commission, which is the regional council of government, offered grant-writing support to local governments to help them take advantage of funding opportunities. One participant noted that local infrastructure recovery funds were earmarked to upgrade water treatment facilities and lift stations throughout the Town of Aurora. Another participant shared that local government efforts to help citizens maintain their utilities and access social services increased during the pandemic. The group agreed that food access was a challenge during and after the pandemic, especially for the elderly. As one participant noted:

> Aurora is situated in a food desert, still, and even though great strides were made with the Recovery Act funding . . . that's not bringing [a] grocery store to my town.

Broadband

A lack of access to broadband hindered recovery in this region, according to participants. One participant expressed frustration that social connections today tend to happen online rather than in person, which affects people who don't have Internet access:

> I also know that there are things that are actually hindering any capacity building, such as lack of broadband. . . . It shouldn't be [like this] in 2024, [when] everyone should have access to the same [methods of communication] but we don't.

Another participant said that partnerships with local churches resulted in park-and-learn locations, allowing people in the community free Internet access. One participant acknowledged that Internet-access issues put rural students at a disadvantage when schools shifted to online learning.

Transportation

One participant mentioned that the pandemic made clear how transportation barriers can prevent rural students from accessing training at local community colleges and participating in the workforce. Another participant said that recovery funds helped cover costs related to masks and other protective gear for bus drivers and passengers, helping people feel safer as they moved about during the pandemic:

> We continued to keep the drivers somewhat safe, as well as passengers, particularly those who had to go, say, [to] dialysis and things like that. So it was very, very helpful.

The group agreed that transportation became a bigger issue for the region during the pandemic than it had ever been.

Healthcare

One participant who was involved with the distribution of masks, COVID-19 tests, and hand sanitizer said that funding to increase access to these items was important—especially the funding to support vaccinations. The group agreed that there was an increased need for mental health resources in the region, which has to led to more communication about how people can seek help. One participant noted improvements in mental health care:

> Especially that mental health piece. I have seen that across the board that has increased tremendously after the pandemic. I know it has. I know I have been receiving more communication of mental health first aid being offered at no cost.

Housing

Housing-related support was discussed by the group as necessary and helpful during the pandemic. One participant said that the region's workforce includes many jobs in the restaurant industry. Service-related jobs like these were suspended during the pandemic, so those employees needed help to pay their rent. In addition to rental-assistance funding, the stimulus checks allowed service-related employees to pay their monthly bills, such as rent and utilities. As one participant noted:

> [In] any one of our five counties . . . you suddenly had all these renters who can't pay their rent, and then landlords can't pay their payments on the rental property they own. So it [shows how] not being able to pay your rent affects a lot of people.

One participant said that while there was a growing need to help the elderly find housing, the pandemic uncovered an even wider need:

> I'm able to help individuals gain a career opportunity. But [sometimes] they need a job, [and] they're pretty much homeless. And [this problem is] not just affecting the elderly. [It] is affecting every age group, population. That is what I've observed.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Business-Specific Concerns

Overall, the group agreed with the concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission: a lack of workers, a lack of qualified workers, and a lack of access to capital. They did not necessarily place them in any particular order, however.

Lack of Workers and Lack of Qualified Workers

Participants spoke of the low employability rate in the area. They also seemed to feel that society has changed and the knowledge of "soft skills"—effectively speaking with people, for example—is no longer useful. They noted that the extra workers hired to assist with social services during the pandemic will probably not be able to stay in their jobs because of the salaries required.

MOVING FORWARD:
Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a Social Vulnerability Index of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They generally agreed with the resiliency scores for the region and the individual counties. The participants said that because most of the region is in a very rural part of the state, it is not able to compete with more urban areas.

LESSONS LEARNED:
Preparing for the Next Crisis

Participants seemed to feel that the region is very resilient, and they shared the following insights to help prepare for the future.

1. **Communication and collaboration are crucial.** There is better communication across the region since the pandemic. Collaboration among the various local governments has also improved.
2. **Increase centralization of information.** The participants said that many resources were left untapped because people weren't aware of them, especially in the education community. Looking ahead, it would be helpful to have a central hub that helps community members access key services and resources.
3. **Support workforce and business needs.** The progress that was made to help people stay connected with jobs through the pandemic can strengthen efforts to bring new businesses to the area and continue building a workforce pipeline.
4. **Utilize existing funding opportunities.** Pandemic impacts, along with an increase in hurricane-recovery and resilience needs in recent years, has left the area in great need, which means it is in a position to take advantage of new funding opportunities as they become available:

> Our needs are tremendous. [They range] from housing to transportation to our food deserts. But . . . we're trying to . . . tackle [them], trying to overcome them. . . . [T]hinking outside the box [will] help us get to where we need to be. So I'm very optimistic about our region. And [I] certainly take pride in our five-county region.

Piedmont Triad

Focus-group session conducted in person on February 28, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office.
Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.
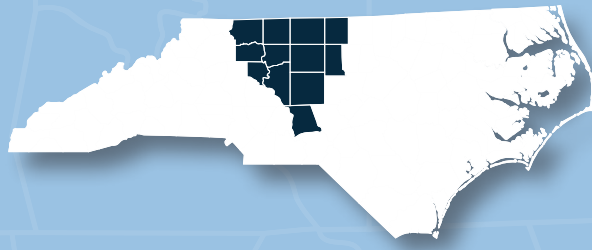
INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

Eleven people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The **Piedmont Triad Regional Council** represents Alamance, Caswell, Davidson, Davie, Forsyth, Guilford, Montgomery, Randolph, Rockingham, Stokes, Surry, and Yadkin counties. Two participants were from Davidson County, two were from Alamance County, three were from Guilford County and four were from Forsyth County. (One of the participants from Forsyth County represented a regional organization that covers Forsyth, Davidson, Davie, Stokes, Surry, and Yadkin counties.) Based on our observations, the participants appeared to be nine women and two men of traditional working age (between 24 and 65). Four worked in local government; three worked in non-profits; two worked in higher education; and one was a small-business owner. Three appeared to be Black. The others appeared to be white.

The conversations were centered on the following three major questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants discussed the pandemic-era programs and funding that made a significant difference in their communities and raised concerns about conditions that are worsening or will worsen when these programs and their associated funding end. They spoke with great optimism about the future.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in
Piedmont Triad Council of Governments Service Area
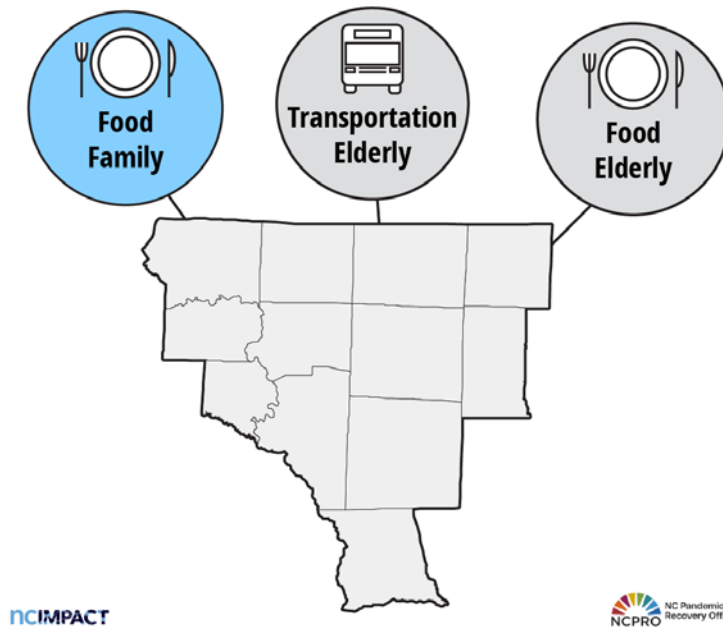
Food Family

Transportation Elderly

Food Elderly

ncIMPACT

NCPRO   NC Pandemic Recovery Office

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Participants agreed with the CES that the top concern in their region is housing, and they specifically mentioned housing for families. Housing for the elderly and food insecurity for the elderly were not mentioned.

Housing

Housing was, by far, the area of greatest concern.[1] Participants emphasized the success of rental-assistance programs during the pandemic. Everyone agreed that the programs were responsive to a pressing need and averted a crisis of unprecedented homelessness. However, there were mixed emotions about the success of the eviction moratorium. Some participants said there were landlords who ignored the moratorium. Participants noted that the end of these programs caused a sharp rise in challenges to many households. Families that were behind on rent were evicted.

The group discussed issues related to homelessness. Participants mentioned the lack of affordable, adequate, and available housing as the greatest risks to thriving local communities.

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1. We did not have the disaggregated data available for this focus group, but we did share the statewide data over time.

Affordability

While some participants commented on the need for more and deeper subsidies to make the existing housing stock affordable, most of the conversation focused on the need to expand the supply of new, affordable housing units:

> [The] whole region needs to think creatively about affordable housing. In ways we have not seen in N.C. Creation of housing trust. Land trust. We can't rely on the private market. That's radically new for this part of N.C.

The participants also discussed possible ways to incentivize corporate landlords to provide affordable housing units. One participant described how the housing market is changing:

> [P]eople [are] selling in droves to large corporate people who come and renovate and then jack the rent up so it's no longer affordable housing.

Adequacy

Participants shared deep and sometimes alarming concerns about the inadequacy of housing. Some noted that landlords were unlawfully making tenants pay for repairs while others mentioned that tenants were afraid to report minimal housing-code violations for fear their severely limited but affordable housing would either be deemed uninhabitable by the local government or torn down by the landlord, who would then use the land for something more profitable. Here are some sample comments:

> The condition of the housing that's available: [inadequate] heating, water issues, [broken] toilets, etc. Landlords demand tenants pay for [repairs].

> When people report something to code enforcement—[the officers] say this house is not livable so you must move out immediately.

> [W]e are a small rural community. We see it. A lot of landlords say, if there are repairs then we'll just tear it down and move on.

Availability

Participants expressed special concern about housing needs for the elderly and young people in foster care or aging out of foster care:

> Another data point that we can use is, when it comes to youth in foster care, there's a huge chunk of them that their living space right now is (literally) the Department of Social Services.

Childcare

After housing, the second major concern for participants was the end of pandemic-recovery programs for childcare:

> I think when childcare subsidies end, providers are going to see another dramatic cliff of [losing] thousands of childcare centers. You're going to lose women in the workforce. Just like during the height of the pandemic.

Physical and Behavioral Health

The group noted that the advancement of telehealth options could improve physical and behavioral health in North Carolina. However, they emphasized that healthcare is still not fully accessible or affordable and that increasing access to medical resources is important.

Community Safety

Community safety was not a strong theme in the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey, but participants raised significant concerns about broader issues related to violence against individuals and their property. They also mentioned that some community structures are unsafe for disabled individuals. Participants noted a heightened sense of vulnerability:

> Even in Walmart, you're thinking about somebody starting to shoot. Even at Joel Osteen's church.

> People are saying they do not feel safe in their communities. Gun violence, gang violence. Living on a second floor if you're in a wheelchair. Safety is in the eyes of the beholder. Don't want to define it holistically for folks and miss a group.

Civic Engagement through Volunteerism and Religious Activity

Participants noted a post-pandemic downturn in civic engagement. This was a surprising observation given that they had previously talked about how different sectors came together during the pandemic to support communities. Religious and non-profit efforts have been affected:

> In the non-profit sector, we have seen a downturn in volunteerism.

> I keep thinking, what happened to the people that used to come to church? Where are they?

Transportation

Participants spent a significant amount of time noting how a lack of transportation access affects other issues like jobs. The quotes below focus on Greensboro, but they reflect a broader set of concerns:

> In Greensboro there is a bus line. It's not easy to get from one side of Greensboro to the other without going to the main depot, which is insane.

> **Jobs are out in counties like Randolph County. For people in Greensboro, how are they going to get out there?**

> **For people in [nearby rural areas who] want a job in Greensboro, how do you get there? You have to have a car.**

Income Inequality

As participants talked about cell-phone and Internet access and affordability, they agreed that the overarching challenge was one of income inequality. The group also agreed when one participant observed that many of the region's ongoing challenges are related to income inequality:

> **All the affordability pieces go back to income inequality, which is the overarching issue.**

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Business-Specific Concerns

Participants made comments that aligned with concerns raised in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission. They did not, however, specifically mention a lack of qualified workers or access to capital.

Lack of Workers

When the conversation turned to the ongoing challenges businesses are facing after the pandemic, participants acknowledged that employers are having a hard time finding and retaining workers. They shared thoughts on how employers might solve these challenges. They also noted the need for businesses and workforce-development institutions to be more creative in engaging potential workers:

> **Employers have started to offer on-site childcare, on-site health care and their own affordable housing. There's a community where the largest employers are building their own affordable housing units because otherwise they can't attract employees.**

> **If a business doesn't expose itself to early learners and start showing different facets of that business, [youth] can't start thinking about who they are and what they'd like to offer to these businesses. Businesses should do a better job of going into education and sharing what they do.**

> **We need our partners to think about getting outside of the bricks and mortar. Technical schools going to rec centers [and introducing people to their opportunities] is going to where the need is.**

Several participants noted that employers who pay low wages cannot find workers because of those low wages.

MOVING FORWARD:
Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a Social Vulnerability Index of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They were not surprised by the vulnerability scores the region received. They noted, however, that some counties that appeared less vulnerable did not present that way in pandemic-recovery work.[2] Even the least vulnerable counties had very vulnerable subpopulations.

LESSONS LEARNED:
Preparing for the Next Crisis

Perhaps not surprisingly, with respect to the effectiveness of specific pandemic-recovery programs or funding sources, there was little discussion of rental assistance or the eviction moratorium. Participants did not mention institutional support at the state, regional, or local levels. Instead, they spoke of these other issues:

1. **Increasing capacity for communication and collaboration matters in a crisis.** Participants pointed to work by non-profits and the faith community as having the greatest impacts locally. They called for greater and better communication between local government and other sectors. One participant said:

   > It was wonderful to see the communities coming together during the pandemic. Let's encourage our communities. We still need what you did.

2. **Being sensitive to cliffs that members of the community still face.** The participants expressed concern that the volume of federal funding may have left residents with the sense that only government has the answers, and that may have dampened their calling for volunteer work. One participant spoke of confusion:

   > I'm not clear on programs that are being taken away. That's the issue here. I think we've given the government too much attention and not enough attention to the community.

3. **Addressing a perceived drop in civic participation.** One participant noted the need to bridge gaps:

   > We have our concerned citizen groups that want to tell us what the problem is but don't want to be part of the solution. . . . We've got to figure out a way to bridge that gap that we're missing right now.

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2. We used the Social Vulnerability Index for this part of the conversation rather than NCPRO's Resiliency Index because the NCPRO data was not available.

Southwestern

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 19, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office.
Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.

INTRODUCTION:

This Focus Group

Seven people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The **Southwestern Commission Council of Governments** covers Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. The participants appeared to be of traditional working age (between 24 and 65). It appeared as if this group was mostly white with one Native American. Each county had some form of representation. One woman from the healthcare sector and one woman from the university sector represented all seven counties. Three women from Haywood and Jackson counties represented the government sector. One man represented the local-government sector in Graham as well as the EMS and health department. One woman was from the community planning sector. NCPRO had two representatives present as well.

The conversations were centered on the following three major questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

The group discussed the role of federal funding in meeting community needs during the pandemic and the importance of a comprehensive regional strategy that will continue to meet those needs. Communication and collaboration between local organizations was a common theme throughout the discussion.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Southwestern Commission Service Area
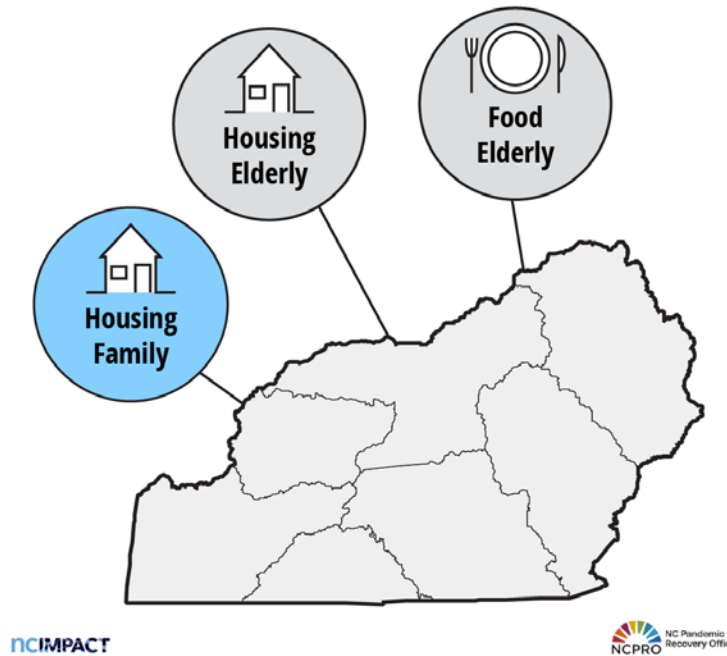
WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Participants agreed with the top concerns in the CES related to housing and food, but they did not make specific reference to housing for families and/or the elderly or food insecurity for the elderly.

Communication and Collaboration

Participants said that their communities came together during the pandemic in an effort to help people in need. Several participants noted that food distribution was crucial not just for the elderly but also for people trying to feed their families:

> We were very versatile about trying to make sure everybody had what they needed, especially food.

> I don't think it's just food [for the] elderly. I think it's food for families everywhere, because you still have a lot of . . . food banks that are going on, that families are going to because there's such food insecurity in this area.

Housing

Housing was a top concern shared by participants. One participant said that the struggle many faced to maintain housing during the pandemic could be seen at local food banks, where people were not only asking for food but also for help with housing assistance. Another said that while the opportunity to defer mortgage payments helped homeowners stay put during the pandemic, ultimately many of them lost their homes when the deferment period ended. A participant who is in social work said that while many families were able to avoid being displaced thanks to rental-assistance programs, many of them were unprepared for the financial disruption caused by those benefits ending. Here are some sample comments:

> Families could not come up with additional funding [that would] replace what they needed to be able to keep . . . their homes. And we've had quite a few people lose their homes because they didn't understand how that impact was going to affect them in their life.

> The understanding level of some of the people involved in [rental-assistance programs] was not [understanding]. When everything ended, that meant they had to actually figure out what they were going to do.

The group agreed that there is a need for workforce housing.

Business

Participants agreed that the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) was immensely helpful in saving small businesses and keeping people in their jobs. For people who were unable to stay in their jobs, the expansion of unemployment benefits was crucial. Participants talked about efforts to continue supporting small businesses in the post-pandemic era. One participant mentioned that American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding through the N.C. Division of Workforce Solutions has funded new incumbent worker training sessions for businesses with twenty-five or fewer employees. Here are some of those comments:

> I really do think that that [ARPA] was a lifeline, for not only the business, but also the employees. There. So I mean, that was just such an awful time.

> Expanded unemployment benefits were very valuable. It was a very concerning and frightening time for people.

Healthcare

Participants agreed that the solutions to delivering healthcare during the pandemic were creative and collaborative. One participant said that community testing sites were successful and well-received by local residents. Social media made it possible to

streamline and expedite communications about the availability of pandemic-related community events and services:

> I remember Haywood Community College having a place where everybody could go collectively and be tested . . . so I felt like that was a really good community effort.

Another participant said that essential-worker pay was supplemented during the pandemic, which helped support healthcare access. The group agreed that the increase in telehealth services was not only beneficial during the pandemic but continues to make access to medical care easier for people in the region.

Childcare, Education, and Eldercare

Childcare and intergenerational care were noted as top concerns for the region. Supplemental funding for childcare facilities was helpful during the pandemic, but when it ended, some centers had to close their doors. As one participant noted, the impact of childcare shortages on the workforce is a concern that continues today:

> [Childcare is] still lacking in our area. And it's [had] a huge impact on our workforce.

One participant added that support for older community members is a growing need in the region. Broadband access, in particular, is an issue that can complicate older people's access to healthcare:

> But with our older adults some of them do not have broadband, so they don't have telehealth, or they don't use a computer, not everybody is on the computer. So . . . especially with our older adult population . . . it's a big challenge for sure.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Business-Specific Concerns

Overall, the group agreed with the concerns presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission: a lack of workers, a lack of qualified workers, and a lack of access to capital.

Lack of Workers and Lack of Qualified Workers

There was a great deal of discussion about the lack of workers in the region, which led to a discussion about the lack of housing for workers. The difficulty of earning a living wage is another issue that workers in this region face:

> It's difficult to get people into our region because there's nowhere for them to live. . . . And then [there are] the ones that we do have, our homegrown talent, the people who live here, that we're trying to get into the workforce.

Continuing to increase the employability skills of people in the region was also noted as a top priority.

Lack of Access to Capital

One participant mentioned access to capital as a barrier to local businesses.

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a Social Vulnerability Index of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They generally agreed with its results. Participants said that access to transportation was a concern in the region since a lack of adequate public transportation can prevent workers from getting to their jobs. They noted that the region's vulnerability was related to a lack of flat, open areas of land that are enticing to larger corporations.

LESSONS LEARNED:
Preparing for the Next Crisis

This region is committed to the ongoing process of working together to build on what they learned during the pandemic.

1. **Communication and Collaboration.** Participants noted that the improved communication that developed during the pandemic has continued to benefit collaborations in the area, though infrastructure funds are needed to help avoid potential transportation barriers. As one participant said:

   > I think a lot of communities were playing Whac-a-Mole with . . . difficult infrastructure. It's like, oh, where's the water main break today? And then that's what we deal with. . . . [S]ome of the funding that has come down has allowed [people] to think a little . . . more broadly about redevelopment kinds of projects and projects that would move a community ahead economically.

2. **Economic Development.** The group affirmed the importance of regional councils of government. One participant expressed a desire to bolster supply chain and food distribution processes:

   > Greater regionalization . . . is something that we really need to think very hard about, [and] whether we are able to support ourselves with food and drinking water and that kind of thing.

Upper Coastal Plain

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 21, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office.

Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.

INTRODUCTION:

This Focus Group

Ten people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. Many left their cameras off. The others appeared to be of traditional working age (between 24 and 65). The Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments (COG) represents Edgecombe, Halifax, Nash, Northampton, and Wilson counties. Two of the participants held roles with the COG. Four people were from Wilson County, three were from Nash County, and one was from Edgecombe County. One said they were from Nash and Edgecombe counties, and one said they represented Nash, Edgecombe, and Wilson counties. The participants worked in the local-government, non-profit, education, and private sectors.

The conversations were centered on the following three major questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

Participants shared concerns about their communities' ability to meet people's needs after federal funding expires. The availability of adequate resources was a concern for all, but they expressed confidence in the region's ability to collaborate and respond effectively to local issues.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments Service Area
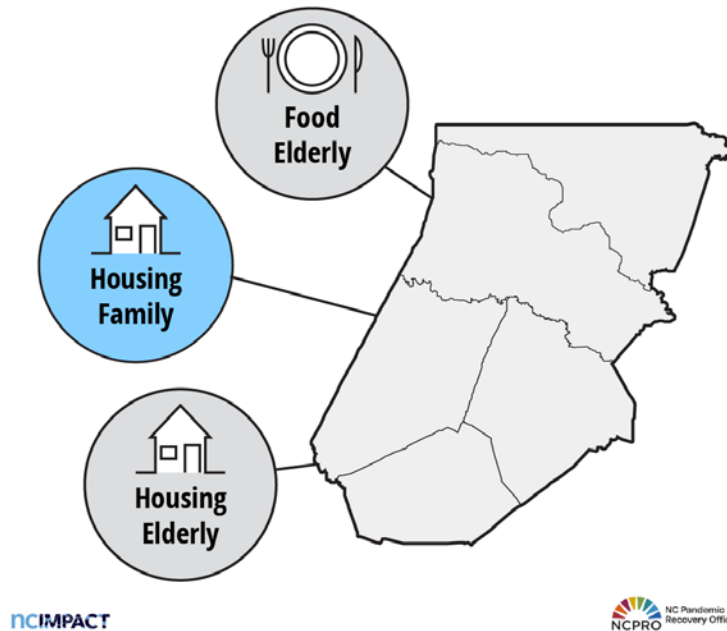
Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Participants largely agreed with the results presented in the CES.

Eldercare

One participant said that the support network for elderly citizens broke down during the pandemic because much of it is based on transportation or services that are available at senior centers. When those resources shut down, the elderly population was affected. Some participants observed that since the elderly population is predicted to grow in coming years, transportation and housing for them will likely be ongoing issues.

Pandemic funds helped provide services to the elderly when senior centers and public transportation were unavailable. The COG representative said that NCPRO and the American Rescue Plan Act (APRA) were especially beneficial. These funds allowed agencies to provide more in-home services to older people, including delivering sanitary supplies and meals.

Homelessness

Targeted funding to prevent homelessness was leveraged to keep people in their homes by paying for utilities and rent. However, the end of rental-assistance funding is a concern, because now rents have increased. One participant spoke of the challenges many face:

> I know so many people that benefited from the rental assistance during the pandemic. . . . Also, when that assistance stopped a lot of their rents were sky high. They had increased so much. And even now I know several people that had to regroup, try to figure out . . . somewhere to live that is more reasonably priced. [They] are having the hardest times finding decent housing that is affordable, and they are working, they never stopped working, and they still have those issues.

Participants said that because housing is deeply interrelated to other issues and concerns, no single program can address it. Rental assistance and food programs filled great needs, but they didn't address the lack of access to high-speed Internet. Two participants elaborated on this:

> Housing insecurity increased because people couldn't go to work. And with the schools closed down and the daycares closed down, even more people couldn't go to work. . . . The broadband became an issue because . . . some people could technically work remotely or maybe even do some side hustles remotely if they had better access to the broadband.

> I agree with the mental health issues, too, because . . . some of these kids did not go to school at all, and they came to school in second grade, and they had missed . . . kindergarten, they had missed the first grade. So there was so much missing social interaction . . .. I'm thankful for the education department giving us the money to hire the CARES [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security] Act interventionists. . . . [The program] is ending this year. And I'm not very happy about it.

Communication and Collaboration

Multiple participants noted the importance of collaboration during the pandemic with other non-profits and community-based organizations to meet needs related to food insecurity and mental health.

One participant noted that communication was especially challenging since information was coming from a lot of different sources. People didn't know what was trustworthy and what was a scam. Some elderly folks received mailers about particular services, but if they were unable to access the Internet, they weren't able to confirm which were legitimate. Community-based efforts would have helped clarify confusion:

> It's great to have a state approach, but what they lacked was more of a grassroots effort. . . . I think it could have been more effective if there had been a better grassroots effort.

Mental Health

Participants said that mental health was a top concern during the pandemic, noting that members of their communities still struggle with mental health issues and need better access to counseling and treatment:

> I agree [that] the top three [issues are] food, housing, and transportation, but in our community, Nash and Edgecombe counties, [there are also] crime and mental health issues. I think those two [are] right up there with the other three.

> We were able to leverage some mental health grant funding to provide counseling during that time frame as well to folks who were suffering from stress, anxiety, and some of the other mental health issues that people are continuing to deal with today.

Infrastructure

ARPA funds were used to make various infrastructure improvements. One entity was awarded a grant from the Department of Environmental Quality to improve its water tank and well.

Childcare

Participants noted that the lack of childcare has negatively impacted people's ability to work, especially women.

Broadband

Students had difficulty completing their schoolwork due to a lack of Internet access. Hotspots were distributed by the school system, but they often ended up being used by entire families due to their lack of Internet access:

> Wilson County school system, they did a really good job of making sure that the kids had hotspots . . . that really was a saving grace for our students, all the way from elementary on up, to make sure that they had what they needed. But then you found parents were trying to use it as well. Everybody was trying to use the hotspot to get everything done that they needed.

The lack of access to high-speed Internet also affected seniors in the region. When there is only one Internet provider in a particular community, the fees are expensive:

> We were doing a lot of printing for people. . . . Referring everybody [to] a website was just kind of a nightmare during that time when you had people trying to work from home, you know, kids trying to go to school from home. Broadband was not where it needed to be, at least not in our community.

Local Government Capacity and Response

As noted elsewhere, the ability to access information in a centralized location varied depending on the program. There was confusion. The necessity of utilizing existing infrastructure, such as the COG system, was discussed.

Transportation

Participants again noted that when transportation was reduced or halted during the pandemic, elderly people lost their connection to food access and community services:

> I mean, [it] still operated at some level, but transportation is a big part of delivering food out to the populations in our regions.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Business-Specific Concerns

Overall, the group agreed with the main concern presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission: a lack of workers. They mentioned the region's lack of qualified workers and lack of access to capital.

Lack of Workers and Lack of Qualified Workers

Participants said that there seem to be more qualified workers than job openings and discussed the challenges job seekers are facing:

> I've had a lot of my residents come in and tell me that they've applied for jobs . . . [and] a lot of them are university educated and they can't get hired. . . . They just want a job. . . . [T]hey may have more skills than [are] required and [employers] won't hire them because they're afraid that they'll leave.

> They [applicants] don't have the . . . specific skill set that they're asking for, for that job, but . . . they've done other administrative work that they could be trained for. . . . There's been a lot of frustration for me hearing my residents come in and saying, "I'm applying. I'm applying. I'm interviewing," but then in the end, [the company is] not actually hiring people. . . . I don't know what to tell my residents about that . . . [since] they desperately want a job. . . . They may have come from this huge company and [now] they can't even get hired at McDonald's . . . because they're overqualified, but they just want to work somewhere and try and bring a paycheck in to help support their families.

Participants also noted that the lack of childcare means some people can't work. One participant mentioned that the service industry, in particular, is lacking workers.

There was strong agreement with this statement: "We need to [be] more active in the community. We need to get these businesses to be more active. More job fairs, free classes at the community college that offer some type of vocational skill."

MOVING FORWARD:

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a [Social Vulnerability Index](#) of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They discussed the region's demographics and said that the young adults who are needed to fill some positions are just not moving to the area. Amenities need to be created that will incentivize young adults to move to—and remain in—the area.

Participants said that it will be difficult to provide the following services after their funding expires: some daycare services, housing assistance, some senior and health services, and enhanced transportation services.

Participants emphasized that, in addition to funding, partnerships are needed to address these challenges. One participant noted that employers in particular should take a larger role in addressing shortages:

> Government can't solve everybody's problems. . . . We have to have partners. . . . We [the COG] administer the workforce program for the region . . . [and] businesses [say], "We need workers, we need this, we need that," but government funding can only go so far. And extra government funding eventually runs out, but the problems that I see everybody talking about throughout the region are pretty common: if a business wants workers, then they need to pay a wage [that allows] somebody [to] live here or commute or [they need to] help with some coordinated daycare. . . . They [business owners] have got to come to the table to help out with some of these issues . . . We've got to get business off the sidelines to come in and be a partner with us.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Centralized information hubs.** Participants hoped that moving forward there would be better ways to share information about available, legitimate services for citizens.
2. **Communication and collaboration.** Participants said they were optimistic about moving forward together but were worried that when funding programs ended, they might not be able to meet the needs of their communities:

> We need . . . state leadership to help bring people together. We need some coordinated state funding that's targeted to help us deliver coordinated services and eliminate some duplication to make these things more effective. . . . It's a combination of we need more tools and we need more partnerships.

Participants also said that they hoped to continue working together on these challenges and that the focus-group session was a good way to begin thinking about it.

3. **Increase transportation access.** The group agreed with one participant who said that the region had very limited public transportation options, which is a workforce barrier:

> **I get calls all the time. Folks are asking us for help. Some company wants to hire . . . people, but it doesn't help if transportation is only getting there one day a week.**

Western Piedmont

Focus-group session conducted in person on March 18, 2024, by ncIMPACT and the N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office.
Hosted by the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government.

INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

Ten people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The **Western Piedmont Council of Governments** represents Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba counties. There were participants from each county. Their age range appeared to be from 30 to 60 years old. One participant, who works in the non-profit sector, appeared to be an Asian man. The other nine participants appeared to be white. Of the five participants from the local-government sector, three appeared to be women and two appeared to be men. One participant, who appeared to be a woman, was from the Division of Social Services (DSS) in the nutrition sector; one participant, who appeared to be a woman, was from the education sector; one participant, who appeared to be a woman, was from the eldercare sector; and one participant, who appeared to be a man, was from the emergency services sector.

The conversations were centered on the following three major questions:

1. Which pandemic-era programs best supported relief and recovery efforts in your community?
2. How will the expiration of pandemic-era programs and efforts to address resulting funding gaps or program changes impact your community?
3. Where do ongoing recovery needs intersect with long-term economic planning needs?

The participants discussed the role of federal programs in meeting community challenges that were exacerbated by the pandemic, such as housing and healthcare. The threat of environmental hazards and natural disasters was also discussed. The group emphasized the ongoing importance of meeting the basic needs of the region's residents.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Western Piedmont Council of Governments Service Area
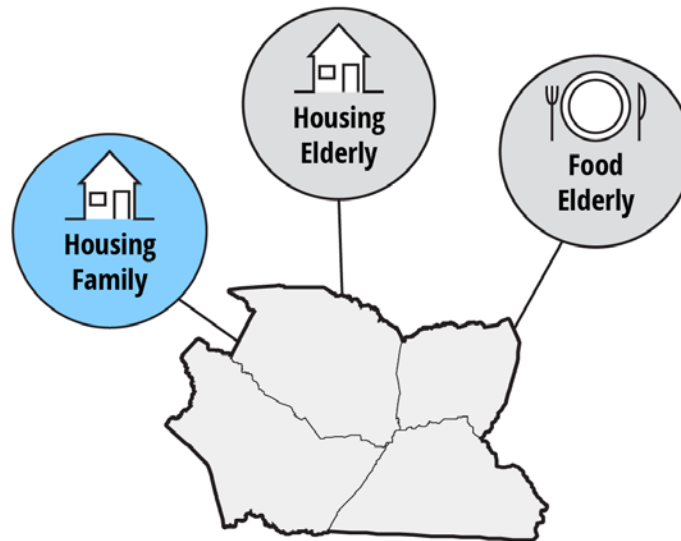
Housing Elderly

Housing Family

Food Elderly

ncIMPACT

NCPRO NC Pandemic Recovery Office

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

The participants agreed with the CES that the top concern in their region is housing, although they did not specifically mention housing for families and/or the elderly. Food insecurity for the elderly was mentioned.

Housing

Participants agreed that pandemic-era funding, such as the locally facilitated Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), helped distribute a wide range of support, enabling community members to pay their utilities, mortgages, or rent. One participant said:

> For residents in the region . . . it really kept foreclosures down because if they were behind, [funding] would be put on house payment[s] and also rent, . . . [keeping] them from being displaced, . . . so that was a really good program.

One participant noted the leadership role one city took in creating a program to alleviate homelessness, hiring five homeless "navigators" to go out in the

community's streets, encampments, and other areas with police to provide people with much-needed services:

> It's a really cool program, and when we first thought about it, we thought that's going to be really hard to do, and it is really hard to do, but they've hired these, what I call superpowers . . . people [who] understand that and can do that.

Local municipalities and water providers worked together to avoid cutting off utilities during the pandemic:

> We had people [who] were already living on the margins and they were laid off or their business was not open or their hours were cut back. . . . I think we got six months' reprieve, and the state and feds stepped in and helped us pay those bills for those folks who couldn't pay them.

Healthcare

Local businesses were eager to collaborate and quick to respond to pandemic needs, according to the participants. A local soap maker partnered with a nearby distillery and shifted from making soap and candles to making hand sanitizer. One participant said that **Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act** funds allowed detention centers to purchase scanning equipment that saved people's lives. The imaging technology helped facility workers to identify and remove contraband that may have led to the spread of the coronavirus. Early Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reimbursements were also important because they allowed local manufacturers to start making personal protective equipment (PPE), which helped first responders stay safe while performing their essential work. Here are some sample comments:

> [I] remember the county manager for Catawba County walked up with the county credit card and said, "We need masks for all of our frontline first responders now." And [when] we ordered them, nobody could get them.

> Had we not had the confidence in the family reimbursement program and emergency management in North Carolina, [shifting manufacturing to PPE production] would not have been possible because . . . when we made those orders, that gave that company enough working capital.

> Simple things like gowns and hoods . . . there was no production capacity for that in the U.S. There's no production capacity for nonwoven materials. Almost all of that had been offshored in the '90s. And we were able to reshore that and put factories back to work. And that was simply through having that FEMA money where the locals could write a check and know we were going to be able to cover that expense.

One participant said that vaccine delivery was streamlined thanks to partnerships between public and private entities. For example, some community paramedics helped rethink the delivery process, which resulted in the county's health department leasing commercial space for vaccine administration.

Eldercare

The participants agreed that the region's effort to support the elderly during the pandemic was effective, and they were proud of it. Using CARES Act funds, a partnership was created with Lowes supermarket to offer free delivery of food to older members of the community. More than five hundred people were served, and the program was recognized nationally for its success. One participant said that the CARES Act funding was also helpful in creating a "house planning" program that helped the elderly avoid paying for basic maintenance projects like pest control and lawn care so that they could save their money for housing and food:

> [Seniors ask], "Am I getting that grass cut, or am I eating, or am I getting my meds?" . . . It's making their homes safer . . . [and] they're not out in the courtyard of their yard and falling. . . . We're able to do some cleanup and pay for some tree removals and things like that.

Education

Participants said that students and their families were able to find resources through schools. One participant said that some schools provided meals that families could pick up. Another said that local parking lots and churches were used to connect students with the Internet so they could do their schoolwork. According to one participant, teachers were instrumental in helping identify students and families in need. In the absence of in-person instruction, they had to improvise in order to understand what was happening at home with their students. The food pick-up program at schools helped them feel better about students' well-being and safety:

> You're not seeing these kids every day, you don't know if they're okay. So that kind of helped where we could still see the kids. You still saw them every day, and you could . . . you could call the social worker if there was concern. But when they were gone, that was very scary, for us teachers.

One participant said that the pandemic increased community awareness of the number of grandparents who were raising their grandchildren in the region. This awareness drove an effort to connect grandparents with available resources, including Internet services so that schoolchildren could continue their education:

> We serve a huge population of grandparents raising grandchildren, and there were so many other obstacles before COVID and now you're telling 80-year-old grandparents who have a hotel and a computer that their grandkids have to do school online, and they don't even have Internet and so they were driving to local parking lots and sitting in the parking lot. We had a grandparent that had three grandchildren . . . and they're sitting in the car for five to six hours, all of them, doing homework. So [we were] able to partner and buy jetpacks [mobile hotspot devices] so that they can have a better home.

Workforce

One participant said that the expansion of public–private partnerships, involving companies like Lyft, Indeed, and Goodwill Industries, were instrumental in helping people keep, access, and gain training for jobs. A partnership with Lyft gave free "essential" rides to parents who needed to fill out in-person paperwork before beginning new, online jobs. Indeed provided computers and laptops for remote workers.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:
Business-Specific Concerns

Overall, the group agreed with the main concern presented in the 2022 Employer Needs Survey produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission: a lack of workers. However, the participants did not specifically mention the region's lack of qualified workers or access to capital.

Lack of Workers

The participants' business concerns were focused on worker shortages and population shortages. They said that families were moving out of the region and having fewer children, which was driving a regional population decrease and making it hard to maintain a local workforce:

> They [young adults] didn't come back here because they couldn't find housing, [living wages,] and jobs, . . . which is the sad and unfortunate truth for some of the ones who went off to college and didn't come back.

> I do think that it is probably also a lack of professional jobs. Because if we [only] have low-skilled jobs, people who went off to college are not going to want to come back and do those jobs.

Some participants mentioned that an increase in vacation rentals was driving up home costs and making them unaffordable to many residents.

MOVING FORWARD:
Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown a Social Vulnerability Index of their region created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They generally agreed with the results. They noted that financing to rebuild and update infrastructure is crucial for strengthening resilience in the region. A stronger workforce is also necessary to help with future infrastructure projects and sustain the local business economy. Participants emphasized that increasing access to weather warnings

is critical in a region that experiences sudden and extreme weather events. Access to adequate mental health resources was also mentioned as a top need. Substance use disorder, in particular, was highlighted—one participant said the region is "plagued" with addiction—as significantly contributing to mental health support needs as well as demands on the incarceration system. One participant emphasized the importance of resilience efforts:

> For long-term resiliency, you need to look at two major factors. One has to be mitigation of environmental and manmade hazards. And having adequate funding and [requiring] local governments and industries to constantly be on the lookout for mitigation, whether it's cybersecurity, whether it's environmental—flash flooding, earthquakes, and whatever the area is prone to. That has to be part of the operation from here on out.

LESSONS LEARNED:
Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Meet basic needs.** Participants mentioned the importance of continuing to find ways to address the food deserts in the region and increasing access to affordable housing. One participant said:

   > I'd like to see the basic needs mapped so that we don't have any residents [who] worry about where their next meal is coming from or where they're going to sleep."

2. **Communication and collaboration.** Participants said that communication has increased in the region and should be maintained to address future concerns. One participant spoke of mental health concerns:

   > Mental health . . . my hope is that we will collaborate more and find innovative ways to invest in our population that we have now and the population that we want. [I]nvesting in our population now will help them get the resources they need to be successful.

3. **Workforce.** Because most of the people who live in the region are older, it is important to attract new residents. The local workforce would also benefit from a population increase. Innovative solutions are needed to help address this issue.

From the Experts

To test the outputs of the focus groups, ncIMPACT consulted six experts across the state to hear their opinions on the same questions presented to the focus-group participants. Several experts either directly received or supported organizations that received pandemic-recovery funding. This summary focuses on how they affirmed or offered perspectives that differed from the results gathered from focus-group participants.

The experts largely supported the themes and lessons learned coming from the focus groups. Given their insider perspective, however, they offered more details and raised more technical issues.

Areas of Agreement

- We must prioritize a robust public health infrastructure, which includes as a key component community health workers.
- Crises make clear the critical need for cooperation among local, state, and federal government agencies; healthcare providers; community organizations; and businesses.
- Disparities in access to housing, food, childcare, broadband, and transportation existed long before the pandemic. COVID-19 shined a light on inequities in these, and other, areas.
- Social isolation has long-lasting impacts. Our mental health system will need an infusion of workers to help the state's residents cope into the future.
- The pandemic served as a call to funders to focus on capacity building in local communities through support from local governments and community-based organizations. This work must include capacity to seek funding after a crisis, and it would be more effective if funders worked together to centralize the effort.
- We need better data at the substate and even subcounty level to understand the challenges that communities are facing.
- Many local governments were not prepared to navigate new federal grant and procurement processes on their own. They were overly burdened responding to the

COVID-19 crisis, which sometimes left limited capacity for understanding and using these new federal processes. Regional councils of government played an important role in helping some local governments find, apply for, and otherwise secure funding.
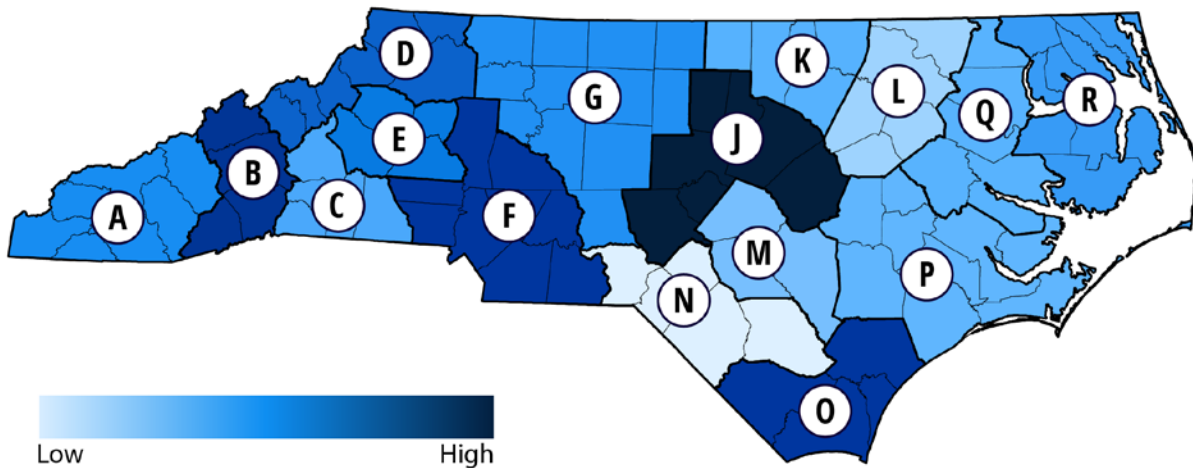
New Perspectives

North Carolina fared better during COVID-19 than many states because of its existing infrastructure, including community relationships and partnerships across organizations such as the North Carolina Pandemic Recovery Office, regional council of governments, North Carolina Department of State Treasurer, North Carolina Association of County Commissioners, North Carolina League of Municipalities, North Carolina Rural Center, and UNC School of Government.

North Carolina needs a better data infrastructure that can be readily accessed by communities, allowing them to indicate a need for assistance and to learn about organizational capacities in nearby regions that might be able to provide support. Regular maintenance and construction of the database would be required, as would a series of simple and accessible dashboard tools for community leaders to access data.

The Resilience Index

North Carolina Community Resilience Index

A constructed measurement showing the resilience levels in North Carolina communities.

Low · High

LEGEND

A. Southwestern
B. Land of Sky
C. Foothills
D. High Country
E. Western Piedmont
F. Centralina

G. Piedmont Triad
J. Central Pines
K. Kerr-Tar
L. Upper Coastal Plain
M. Mid-Carolina
N. Lumber River

O. Cape Fear
P. Eastern Carolina
Q. Mid-East
R. Albemarle

Notes: The areas depicted on the map reflect the sixteen regional councils of government (COGs) overseen by the NC Association of Regional Councils of Governments. The lighter a region's shading, the lower its resilience level and the greater its need for assistance. Regions with darker shading register higher resilience levels and a greater abundance of strengths.

Top Industry Concerns

The industry concerns depicted below are drawn from data collected for NCPRO's North Carolina Business Engagement Survey (BES), where business leaders are asked to identify challenges they are experiencing at the local level. For more information about the BES, please visit ncpro.nc.gov/data-research/north-carolina-business-engagement-survey.

Top Area of Concern	Sector
Prices for Materials	**Administrative and Waste Management Sector** **Food Services/Restaurant** **Management of Companies** **Manufacturing Durable Goods** **Manufacturing Nondurable Goods** **State Government** **Transportation, Warehousing, and Utilities Information**
Interest Rates for Financing	**Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation** **Construction** **Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services** **Real Estate and Rental Leasing** **Retail Trade** **Wholesale Trade**
Employee Housing Affordability	**Educational Services** **Healthcare and Social Services**
Obtaining Tax Incentives	**Federal Government** **Finance and Insurance**
Delivery Reliability	**Hospitality**
Attracting Financing from Outside Sources	**Local Government**