

CASE STUDY

Keys to Economic Recovery from COVID-19

This case study was developed by NCGrowth and the ncIMPACT Initiative as part of the Testing the Keys for Economic Recovery project supported by the North Carolina Policy Collaboratory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with funding from the North Carolina Coronavirus Relief Fund established and appropriated by the North Carolina General Assembly. Learn more about project findings, upcoming webinars, case studies and resources at <https://go.unc.edu/KeystoRecovery>.

GASTON COUNTY, NC

Data Snapshot

DATA	DATA YEAR, ETC.
Population: 224,529	Data year: 2019
County budget: \$228,789,884	Data year: FY 2020 Data source: County website
Per capita income: \$27,352	Data year: 2019
Median household income: \$52,835	Data year: 2019
Poverty rate: 14.2%	Data year: 2018
Minority population: 22.4%	Data year: 2019
Proximity to urban center: 26 miles	Urban center name: Charlotte, NC
Proximity to interstate highway: 6 miles	Interstate name: I-85

Synopsis

Leadership in Gaston County noticed that reports of child abuse significantly decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The assistant county manager gathered community stakeholders to address process improvements for reporting to ensure the wellbeing of children and families.

Overview/Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, Gaston County observed a drastic decrease in the number of reports of suspected child abuse. Teachers play an important role in reporting cases of child abuse. As COVID-19 forced education online, teachers could no longer make determinations about child abuse in the classroom. The state of North Carolina as a whole saw an 80% decrease in reporting from educators during the period of March through June of 2020.

To address this decline in reports, Gaston County worked with the data consultant BrightHive to develop new reporting processes for the pandemic and beyond. BrightHive provides a platform that enables data collaboratives between multiple agencies through one site. This platform will allow data sharing between agencies throughout the county and enable the county to train more community stakeholders to report suspected child abuse.

The Community and its History

Gaston County is located just west of Charlotte and is part of the Charlotte metropolitan area. There are fifteen incorporated towns in Gaston County, ranging in size from the City of Gastonia with 77,024 people to the Village of Dellview with 13 people. Gaston County also has a large portion of unincorporated territory within its jurisdiction and 46% of the County's population live in unincorporated areas.

In Gaston County, as in all of North Carolina, when someone suspects a case of child abuse or neglect they are required to report it to social services. However, formal training for recognizing signs of abuse and neglect is typically only provided to educators and other professionals who interact with children daily in school or other community settings. With this new platform the county will be able to expand training to more community stakeholders.

Child abuse reporting is relevant for regional economic resilience as it paves the way for success for children and families. In the short-term there are benefits to general well-being, but research indicates when children are removed from abusive households it can impact their long-term futures, putting them on an improved trajectory. Additionally, child abuse is often associated with overall adult and family stress which impacts the wellbeing of the workforce.

The Strategy

Gaston County began working with BrightHive before the pandemic on process improvement for child welfare reporting. Given the unique impact of the quarantine on this issue, the County was able to use CARES Act funds to elevate the work and contract BrightHive to create a data trust. A data trust is a system

that brings together data from many different sources, synthesizing it onto one platform. BrightHive is creating a data trust to identify new, and more resilient, sources of data and data-sharing networks to provide the information human services staff need to keep children safe from abuse and/or neglect. Combining data sources across agencies makes it easier to see relationships and insights between different variables, and enables communication and decision making about child welfare across multiple organizations. Many stakeholders provided input on the new system including the Gaston County Government, Gaston County Schools, North Carolina Department of Public Safety, North Carolina Courts System, Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina, and Casey Family Programs (a national foundation focused on providing, improving - and ultimately preventing the need for - foster care).

Bringing these partners together is a critical element of this effort. Although many of the partners knew of each other and had interacted previously, they were not communicating as consistently as they do now. These focused conversations about improved reporting brought these organizations together and improved communication across the board.

The new reporting process, and the involvement of additional partners, is expected to decrease turnover rates within the county department of social services. Historically turnover remained high due to the large case load and emotional toll for staff. New standards and reporting expectations across a broad group of stakeholders joining in the reporting process will make daily case management easier for staff within the department.

The Outcomes

This project is still in progress and it is too early to report quantitative outcomes. Project leaders expect to see increased efficiency in the reporting process and decreased staff turnover in the department of social services. Increased and streamlined communication between stakeholder organizations is already evident as a result of collaboration on the project.

How and Why the Strategy is Working

Keeping in mind that the strategy is still early on, there are several unique aspects of the process that make it successful.

Working with a third party consultant allowed Gaston County to gain new perspective and make the issue a focal point. As an outside entity they are able to synthesize data across multiple agencies and help bring down silos to improve reporting and communication.

Dedicated funding allowed quick progress. Leveraging CARES Act funding to hire an outside consultant allowed intense focus on process improvement and comprehensive outreach.

Stakeholder engagement is central to the data trust design process.

Although the process is early on, BrightHive had a kickoff workshop, design workshop, and seven separate stakeholder engagement meetings. These were well attended because so many organizations were engaged, including Gaston County Government, Gaston County Schools, North Carolina Department of Public Safety, North Carolina Courts System, Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina, and Casey Family Programs. Ultimately doing so will ensure that the end product meets everyone's needs.

Lessons Learned from the Story

Times of crisis can be an opportunity to address underlying issues.

Communities are only as resilient as their most vulnerable populations. Disasters, and the way they are handled, expose underlying vulnerabilities already present in a community. The recovery process can be an opportunity to make fundamental changes to address these vulnerabilities and strengthen community resilience over the long term.

Data collaboration and streamlining can improve processes across organizations. Within local government there are many tasks that inherently require collaboration across different departments, organizations and jurisdictions. Taking a global look at what data different stakeholders have, where it is stored, and how it is used can increase efficiency, generate new insights, and improve outcomes.

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