



Gaston County, North Carolina



teachers could no longer report on the well-being of their students. The assistant county manager gathered community stakeholders to address process improvements for reporting to ensure the wellbeing of children and families.

Keys to Economic Recovery from COVID-19

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Synopsis

Leadership in Gaston County noticed that reports of child abuse significantly decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Town leadership suspected that the decrease was a result of under reporting, as schools shut down and

Points of Interest	County Data
Population (2019)	224,529
County budget (2020)	\$228,789,884
Per capita income (2019)	\$27,352
Median household income (2019)	\$52,835
Poverty rate (2018)	14.2%
Minority population (2019)	22.4%
Proximity to urban center	26 miles to Charlotte, NC
Proximity to interstate highway	6 miles to I-85

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 enables multiple agencies to share their data and collaborate through one platform. 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; 46% of the County's population live in unincorporated areas.

North Carolina state law requires anyone who suspects a case of child abuse or neglect to report it to social services. However, training for recognizing the signs of abuse and neglect is typically only provided to educators and other professionals who interact with children on a daily basis in schools or other community settings. With the implementation of the new BrightHive platform, the county will be able to expand training to more community stakeholders.

Child abuse reporting is relevant for regional economic resilience as it ensures the safety of children and paves the way for more successful outcomes for both children and their families. In the short-term, reporting child abuse benefits and protects children's well-being as research indicates that when children are removed from abusive households their futures and trajectories improve. Additionally, child abuse is associated with overall adult and family stress, which impacts the wellbeing of the workforce.

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The Strategy

The potential impact of the pandemic on child abuse reporting was identified almost immediately upon the Governor's order to close in-person school attendance and move to a virtual environment. The County Department of Health and Human Services typically notices a decrease in reporting, especially from schools and after school child care, in the summer months and virtual learning was expected to have a similar effect. The Department began to informally engage stakeholders to focus on this issue in May of 2020.



The BrightHive partnership was established before the pandemic, as Gaston County had already been working on process improvements for child welfare reporting. Given the unique impact of the pandemic 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: Gaston County Public Health Department, 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), houses of worship, YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, and health care providers including Caromont hospital system and Kintegra family care provider.

Bringing these partners together was 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. The focused conversations about improved reporting brought these organizations together and improved communication across the board.

The intent for this partnership is to share and collect information on school attendance, health care provider visits, and attendance or participation in community activities (like the Boys & Girls Club, YMCA programs, and sports leagues). Participating organizations will convene on a regular basis to review procedures, determine if the partnership is targeting appropriate community touch points for data collection, and ensure efficiency and improved outcomes. Currently there is an implied intent to share data informally or as already mandated via statute; as the project builds, formal agreements will be put into place.

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 rates were high due to large case loads and emotional tolls on staff. New standards and reporting expectations across a broad group of stakeholders 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 BrightHive was 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 any process improvement 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. This engagement will ensure that the end product meets everyone's needs, and builds important relationships between partners along the way.

Lessons Learned

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 require collaboration across different departments, organizations and jurisdictions. Taking a broad 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.

Institutional agreements are needed for long-term sustainability of partnerships. In order to sustain longterm partnerships (beyond individual relationships), institutional agreements and processes need to be put in to place. Data sharing agreements and systems can also help to sustain partnerships while creating a clear infrastructure within which to operate

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