

## REGIONAL SUMMARY

# 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?

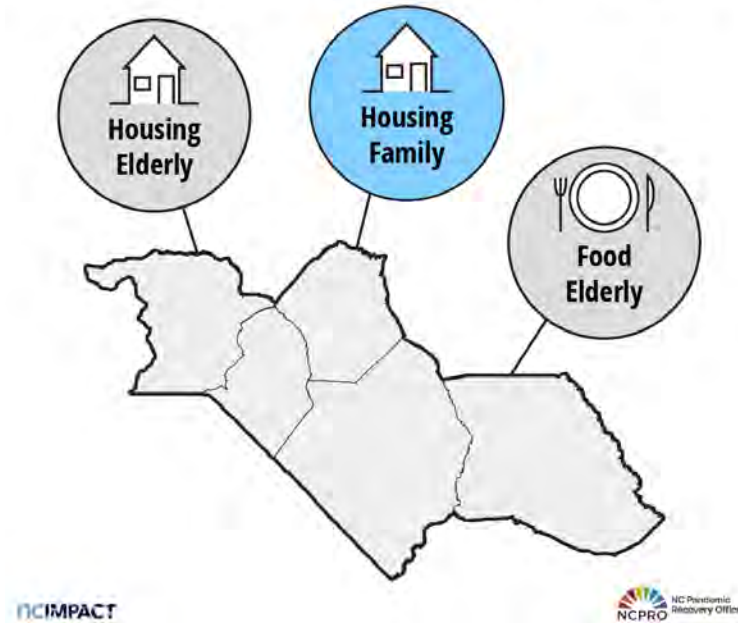
Participants also discussed concerns for the inclusion of the Lumbee Tribe community in decision-making processes and collaborative efforts that might address the region's needs in the future.

## 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.

### WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

## 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].

### 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 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.