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.
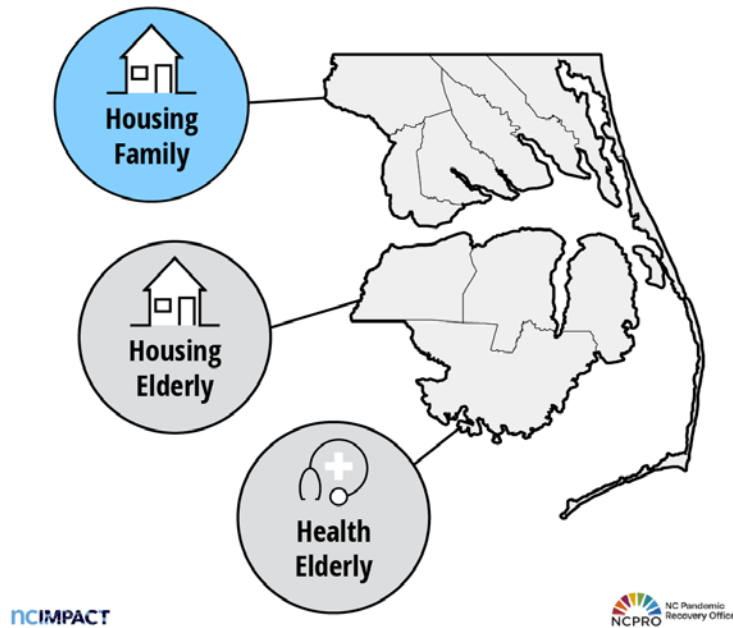
INTRODUCTION:

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.

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.