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.
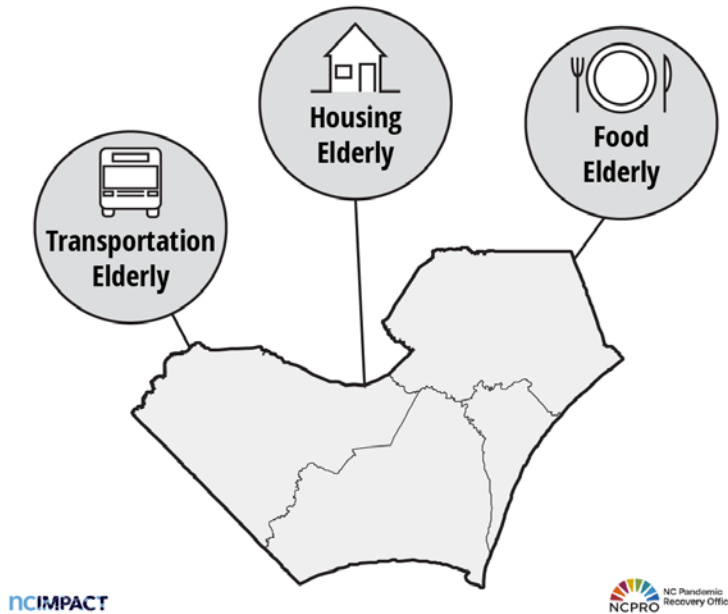
INTRODUCTION:
This Focus Group

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**

Transportation
Elderly

Housing
Elderly

Food
Elderly

ncIMPACT

NC Pandemic
NCPRO Recovery Office

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.