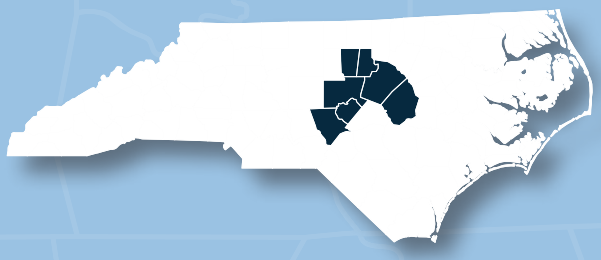
REGIONAL SUMMARY

Central Pines



Focus-group session conducted in person on March 7, 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

Seven people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The Central Pines Regional Council represents Johnston, Wake, Durham, Orange, Chatham, Lee, and Moore Counties. Four participants were from Durham County, two were from Wake County, and one was from Orange county. One was an elected official who served in state government. One worked for state government. One was an entrepreneur, and another was transitioning to the business sector from non-profit work. One was unemployed but had previously worked for non-profits. Two worked in higher education. Five appeared to be women and two appeared to be men. Two appeared to be Black, one appeared to be Latina, and the rest presented as white.

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 shared a great deal of information about community concerns, as well as potential solutions, including a wealth of information about how the region may move forward. They were eager to discuss how to utilize existing resources in the region to meet ongoing and emerging needs.

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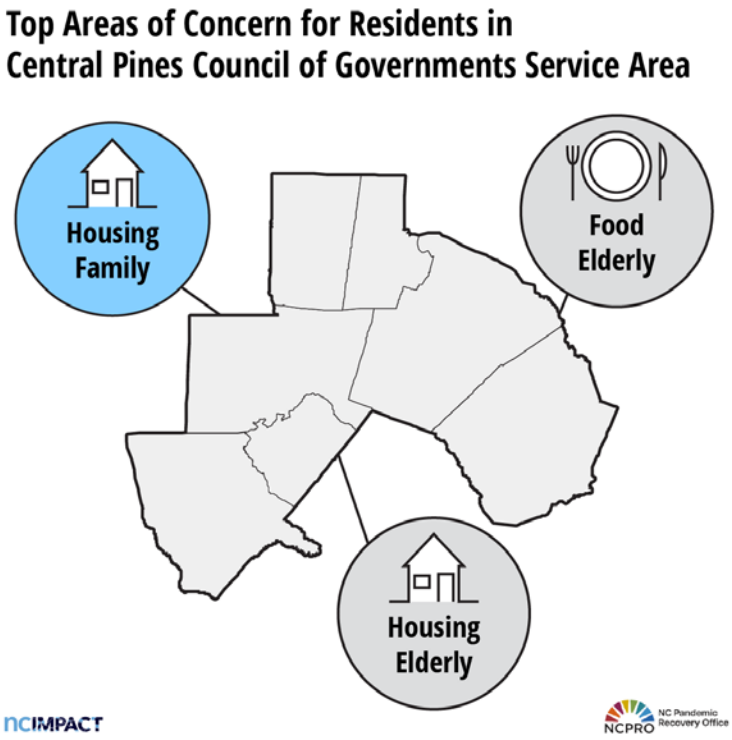

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Focus-group participants indicated agreement with CES's ranking of housing as a top concern, although housing for families and the elderly were not explicitly mentioned. Food insecurity for the elderly was also not mentioned.

Housing

Housing was the biggest pandemic-era and post-pandemic concern for participants, who noted that housing is so interrelated with other issues that many people who were displaced were unable to access other needed resources, such as jobs and food. Focus-group members noted that the continued migration to the region makes it difficult to protect affordable housing. One participant argued vehemently that housing should not be viewed as a commodity on which individuals make a profit. Others noted that renters need access to better information on resources. The group also mentioned tiny homes and hoteling as alternative housing options. Here are some sample comments:

> A lot of our people got displaced. They ended up in the hotels, they ended up in the woods, they ended up on the bridge, or at the bus stop.

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> **Even with rental assistance, a landlord can make more money on the regular market. Your problem is a landlord can make money on the regular market because [the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development] has set a two-bedroom apartment at $1,315.**

> **When [sticking] eviction notices on doors, we should also be giving info about rental assistance.**

> **If we continue to treat housing as if it's a luxury commodity and not a complete necessity of our people, then we will continue to have people who take out giant loans to become landlords. As a business strategy. That should not be a business strategy when we have people sleeping on the streets.**

Education

Participants lamented the extent of the student learning loss during the pandemic and pointed out that while traditional schools online were free, the Virtual Academy was not. Participants also noted that children of color suffered disproportionately during the pandemic. Many of those students had working parents who were unable to support their remote learning. Others had parents who did not have the computer or academic skills to support their children's learning.

Participants observed that, for many students, the inability to be in school had costs beyond learning (e.g., physical safety, food, social supports). These costs explain why Durham put learning academies in place and other people pulled together informal learning hubs to help students log in and participate in remote learning. Participants said that learning recovery has not been very effective.

Childcare

The dearth of childcare centers and the expected loss of additional centers when federal subsidies end generated significant conversation in the focus-group sessions. Participants specifically mentioned the significant impact of the child tax credit. They also focused on perceptions of over-regulation:

> **The preschool that my son goes to is closing because they operate out of a church and the church no longer meets the fire code. A lot of half-day preschools and other preschools depend on these affordable spaces through non-profits and other organizations like churches.**

Job Training

Participants noted that while many programs offered unprecedented opportunities for job training, the realities of the pandemic made it impractical for some people to take advantage of the programs. They pointed to limited public transportation, childcare

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responsibilities, and general stress as reasons why many people did not take full advantage of the opportunities.

Participants also pointed to things like debt as barriers to retraining:

> **Their focus is "[H]ow [am I] going to keep a shelter over my head and my children's head[s?] I can't focus on all that other stuff.**

> **How are you supposed to go to a job interview when you can't take a shower?**

Transportation

The lack of efficient transportation came up regularly in the focus-group sessions. Participants appreciated the impact of funding to make buses free of charge but wondered how local governments could continue to afford offering the service when funding went away. They also wondered whether local-government planning efforts would prioritize integrating housing and public transit:

> **Housing is so important to this conversation about transportation. What you're saying around . . . how our communities are laid out[,] planning and zoning, and thinking about where we can place housing in a way that more people can live on transit routes to get to their jobs and live their lives [is important].**

Internet and Cell Phones

One participant emphasized the importance of having a smartphone and Internet access to take advantage of many pandemic-era services. As another said, "social services went online" during COVID-19. In this focus-group session, participants generally agreed that affordability was a more salient concern than access. There was some concern raised, however, about the availability of phones for low-income residents. One participant noted that if a phone was lost, its owner would need to replace it at cost or wait months before becoming eligible for a replacement.

Overall, participants in this focus-group session did not think that concerns with this issue were particularly widespread in the region.

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 qualified workers and access to capital. Lack of workers generally was not mentioned.

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Employability Skills

Participants agreed that this topic presented challenges but did not spend much time discussing it. After a brief conversation about the need to support those re-entering the region from incarceration, participants returned to talking about housing.

Lack of Access to Capital

Participants stated that this issue was a perennial concern for many small-business owners. They noted that pandemic programs rewarded those with know-how and relationships to financial institutions. They also pointed out problems in the way some businesses handled taxes to limit liability and cultural concerns about government intrusion among people who did not take advantage of programs although they qualified for them. There was a robust conversation about fraud in pandemic programs. Here are some sample comments on the issue of capital:

> **There are people who, who are struggling, who could use [help accessing capital], [help with how to] use it correctly, [who] and are struggling to access it.**

> **There's also a disconnect between some individuals and understanding how [access to capital] works.**

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). Several participants asked for more details on the Social Vulnerability Index. The index served the purpose of sparking conversation. Participants noted that some places in their region had higher capacity for recovery from disasters than others.

The following crucial needs of the region emerged as the primary themes of the resilience conversation:

- a true regional strategy for affordable housing that considers workforce housing for organizations, such as UNC Health, that want to continue growing;
- to think more creatively about using public transit to get people to where the jobs are;
- to pay childcare workers more and increase opportunities for people with disabilities;
- a process for supporting potential workers who are re-entering the region after incarceration.

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LESSONS LEARNED:

Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Utilize community resources to meet workforce needs.** This region has significant resources, and participants were clear that during and after the pandemic, winning strategies were needed to capitalize on existing assets. They talked about the robust current workforce and noted that the people were the strength of the region. Participants sought to have small businesses and families connected to the prosperity of the region. They expressed concerns about childcare workers, those in public K-12 educational institutions, people re-entering the region after incarceration, and those cut off from opportunity due to a lack of access to public transit.
2. **Support for small businesses.** Regarding business programs, participants noted that who you know determines what you know. They explained that some small businesses did not know about programs that could provide assistance or did not have confidence in their ability to access them.
3. **Importance of meeting basic needs.** This focus-group session emphasized that shelter and food during a disaster supersede all other needs. They lauded programs that provided food to the community. They were less generous in their praise for programs that provided shelter.

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