

REGIONAL SUMMARY

Centralina

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 19, 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

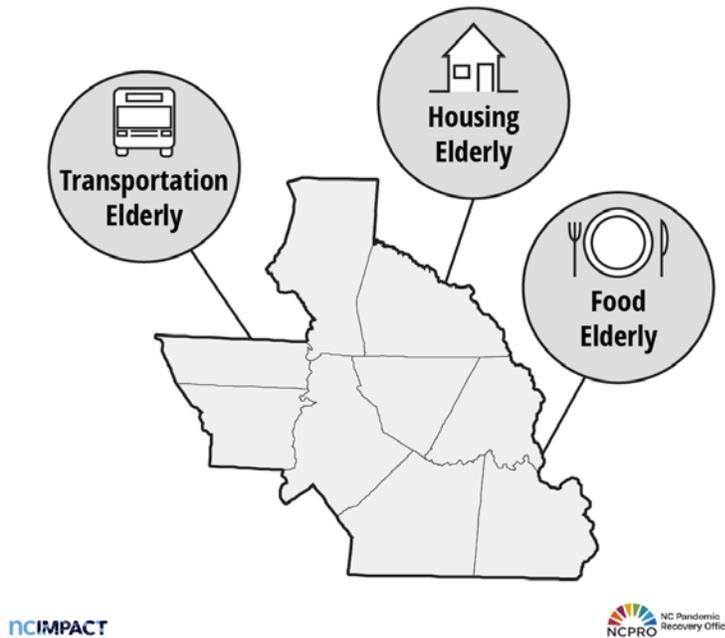
Eleven people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The [Centralina Regional Council of Governments](#) (COG) represents Anson, Cabarrus, Gaston, Lincoln, Iredell, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly, and Union counties. One participant was a representative of the COG. Eight participants worked and lived in Mecklenburg County. One participant worked and lived in Anson County, and one worked and lived in Cabarrus County. All participants appeared to be working age (24 to 65). Nine appeared to be women, and two appeared to be men. Five participants appeared to be Black, four appeared to be white, and two appeared to be Latina. The group represented the education, business, non-profit, local-government, and self-employed sectors.

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?

The participant group discussed the needed support provided by, and the shortcomings of, federal aid programs. They noted that the community concerns discussed in the focus-group session predated the pandemic and that many have worsened over time. The group is optimistic about the region's ability to meet ongoing community challenges provided collaboration forged during the pandemic continues.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Centralina Regional Council Service Area



WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Focus-group participants indicated agreement with CES's ranking of concerns, especially with regard to the difference in housing and food-security experiences among the elderly in the region, which are largely dependent on wealth.



Food Insecurity

There was agreement among participants that food insecurity was a primary concern not only during the pandemic, but also beforehand, especially for elderly people with limited incomes.

Even though this issue existed before COVID-19, participants noted that the pandemic may have presented unique challenges for elderly residents with access-to-food needs:

Our elderly depend on local stores, [places that are nearby so that] they don't have to drive very far, or [they need] someone [who] can take them [to the store]. [Not having this may have] caused some of those numbers to be driven up.

I think, for the elderly in particular, that the transportation situation, which has worsened in [my] county . . . for those people who depend on public transportation to get to food . . . may have impacted more on the elderly.

Religious organizations and non-profits in the region worked with county departments of health and human services and within the school systems on access-to-food issues during the pandemic. Participants noted that the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services (DSS) used its additional COVID-19 funding to help address food insecurity in families. There was strong agreement among participants that DSS did an effective job in meeting this need.

One participant, who runs her own non-profit, said that the need for food during the pandemic was so great that her organization, based in Anson County, provided food for a half-dozen surrounding counties. Prior to the pandemic, food delivery was not the focus of her organization. She offered the following comments:

Cafeteria workers . . . created [what were] basically to-go packages. . . . [T]he school[s] allowed the school buses and teachers and principals to . . . go out and . . . lay eyes on their students by . . . going and delivering the packages, homework, or school packages along with the meals. . . . That was good for the day. But what happens over the weekend? . . . We stepped in and [were] able to be part of the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's] Farmers to Families program, and so we had it where the truck delivered the food on a Thursday or Friday. . . . That way [families] had food for the weekend. . . . [W]e were doing this every week, giving out 1,200 to about 3,000 boxes of food every week, from August of 2020 to May of 2021.



Housing

A couple of participants in the focus-group session noted that while the results of the [NCPRO Community Engagement Survey](#) (CES) indicated that housing for the elderly was a top concern in many communities, this was not the case in their region because many of the elderly in the area have higher incomes. However, there was agreement that housing for the general population was an issue, especially for communities already facing income insecurity.

A different perspective was shared by a participant who worked at a local emergency housing non-profit organization during the pandemic. This person said that there were many elderly individuals applying for housing assistance at that time and that when elderly individuals contacted the organization, it was clear that they were also dealing with other issues, such as domestic violence and food insecurity.

Participants agreed that family housing insecurity was a major concern during the pandemic, noting that for some individuals, assistance did not come in time to

help. A state leader shared his first-hand experience with fielding calls from North Carolina residents:

I know the state was overwhelmed. But there should have been a better process and place to get those emergency assistance funds . . . out for the people that needed them so they could stay in their home[s]. Because I know that for a lot of those people that was a big thing, and [they are] probably still today in hotels.

There was agreement that, while the federal eviction moratorium helped folks stay in their homes longer, many people in the region had to live in hotels as a means of shelter following eviction. It was noted that getting people into hotels, rather than homeless shelters, helped slow the spread of COVID-19:

I don't think they [the City of Charlotte and its city council] really realize how quickly that pandemic could have spread even more rapidly if we [hadn't] moved towards trying to get the people without homes into hotels. We've had to learn a lot about that, because it did not always go well. . . [T]here was fallout from the hotels when they did not get paid on time.

Participants expressed appreciation for the sheriff's office holding off on removing people from their homes. This was beneficial, especially as private businesses, such as hotels, sought to remove families who could not pay for this temporary housing solution.



Role of Non-Profits

Participants observed that it seemed like Mecklenburg County recognized that, although the county may have had funding, grassroots organizations are able to respond more effectively to emerging challenges:

Accounting realized that, yes, we have . . . millions of dollars. But it's the organizations, the grassroots organizations, these non-profits that are closest to the people . . . [that] know exactly what the people need at this moment. I really believe that that was one of the most effective initiatives when they realized we need to get this money off . . . to these non-profits. Because the people that are closest to the problems are closest to the solution[s].

For example, people were able to benefit from the funding that Mecklenburg County allocated to workforce-development programs.



Healthcare

A participant from the Mecklenburg County Health Department described efforts the county made to be responsive to the needs of the community by doing checks in hotels, going into neighborhoods, and providing educational information in different languages:

No other state had a team . . . like [North Carolina's] ambassador program. . . . I have to give kudos to Mecklenburg County, because no one else had that. . . . We went from apartment complex to apartment complex[,] . . . and all of us know how many

different languages and peoples and diversity that we encounter]. But to have those tools in different languages also actually getting out and getting people vaccinated [was invaluable].

Schools hosted health fairs where families could drive up in their cars and get information about COVID-19. A food truck was onsite to distribute food.



Education

There were already educational concerns in the region before the pandemic. COVID-19 highlighted them by revealing learning gaps and the need for technology distribution.

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 lack of access to capital.



Lack of Qualified Workers

It was difficult for employers in the region to find qualified employees during the pandemic. Participants noted that, with pandemic-era assistance ending, there will also be challenges for schools to meet the needs of students, especially when it comes to training them for jobs that employers are seeking to fill.



Access to Capital

One participant who acts as a consultant for non-profits said that many of his clients received small-business loans during the pandemic. Another participant, who owns her own business, said that without pandemic-era government assistance, she might have gone out of business:

My sales were literally cut 75 percent. . . . Charlotte did a good job . . . supporting . . . small businesses to ensure that we stayed afloat, and then I was able to pivot and do other innovative things.

The non-profit consultant observed that many organizations are grappling with how to function once pandemic-era programs expire and they lose funding.

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). One participant said that the index made them feel bad due to the high vulnerability rating for the region and that it was disheartening to have such pressing needs in a nation with so many resources. This person stated that because Union County has a lower vulnerability rating and is located beside Mecklenburg County, which has a higher vulnerability rating, resources and ideas should be shared so that Mecklenburg County can learn and evaluate its own programs in the hope of replicating the success of Union County. Participants also noted that these rating disparities are due to differences in access to resources and that this conversation intersects with racial inequalities, demographic change, and the need to advance equity as the region recovers from the pandemic.

There was significant agreement among participants with the following statement:

I live in Charlotte, but I'm from Eastern North Carolina, and I know what it's like out there. We, you know, we cannot have this conversation without talking about demographics, without talking about race and without talking about socioeconomics.

There was also a great deal of agreement on the need to change the mindsets of county leadership around “the big picture” and to push for change.

Participants said that pandemic-era relief programs may have provided a false sense of security and that it will be difficult to continue to meet needs such as childcare and food distribution without such assistance. They also noted challenges surrounding increasing food prices as well as eldercare:

Our population of adults over the age of 65 is actually our fastest growing demographic. . . . So it's not just a rural condition or an urban condition. . . . [O]ne of the major challenges we're facing on the older-adult services side is that the additional funds that the federal government made available, specifically through the Older Americans Act, to provide emergency transportation, nutrition, and housing supports, all of that is ending. It's ending in September, and we call that the “Covid Cliff.” . . . We already have waiting lists. . . . [W]e are very concerned about . . . [what] the impacts might be to our older adults across the region.

LESSONS LEARNED:**Preparing for the Next Crisis**

1. **Build systems that work for more people.** Participants expressed hope that community organizations will continue to be forward-thinking and proactive. They want these organizations to be innovative and to rethink what systems can look like to better meet residents' needs.
2. **We need to extend the capacity of our not-for-profit organizations.** Here are one participant's comments:

The opportunity that . . . [American Rescue Plan Act] funds provided to local governments was really [crucial. It was] interesting to see who took advantage of some of the creativity and the flexibility that those funds provided, and [which] local governments chose to take the easy way.