

REGIONAL SUMMARY

Eastern Carolina

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 18, 2024, by [nclIMPACT](#) and the [N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office \(NCPRO\)](#).

Hosted by the [North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Government](#).



INTRODUCTION:

This Focus Group

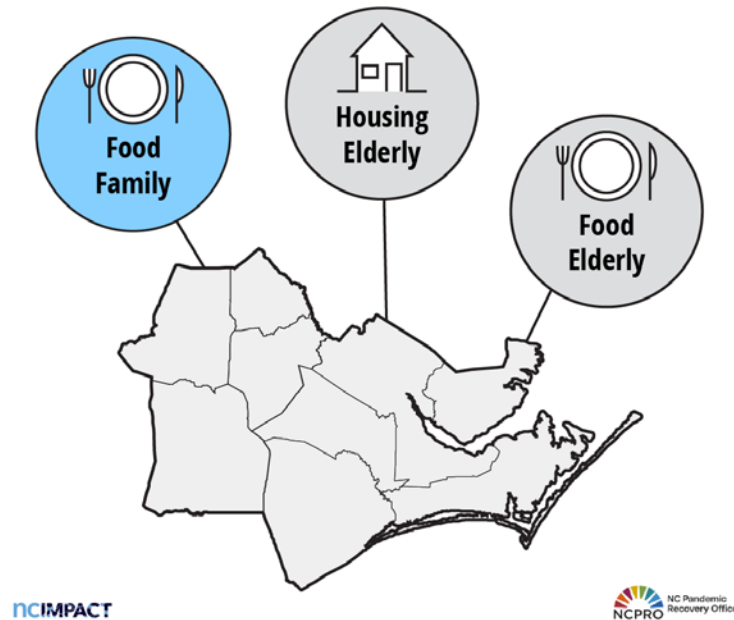
Eight people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The [Eastern Carolina Council of Government](#) (COG) represents Carteret, Craven, Duplin, Green, Jones, Lenoir, Onslow, Pamlico, and Wayne counties. One participant was a representative of the COG. One participant represented the Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board, which covers Carteret, Duplin, Lenoir, Pamlico, and Wayne counties. One participant was from Jones County. Two participants were from Craven County, one participant was from Lenoir County, one participant was from Onslow County, and one participant was from Duplin County. The majority of participants appeared to be 40 to 60 years of age, with two participants appearing older than 60. Five participants appeared to be women, three appeared to be men. Seven participants appeared to be white, and one appeared to be Black. The group represented the education, local-government, health, state government, workforce-development, and faith-based ministry 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?

Participants were eager to discuss community concerns and emphasized the interconnectedness of challenges such as housing and workforce participation. The group discussed the ongoing challenges created by hurricanes and inadequate disaster responses by government, which compound other community needs. Participants were enthusiastic about the continuation of partnerships between local organizations formed during the pandemic to meet community concerns.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Eastern Carolina Council of Governments Service Area



WHAT MATTERS TO COMMUNITY:

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Focus-group participants indicated agreement with CES's ranking of housing for the elderly as a top concern. Housing for families and food insecurity for the elderly were not explicitly mentioned by focus-group members.

Participants were surprised that transportation and healthcare were not featured more prominently in the CES results. They also shared concerns about daycare availability, which were not reflected in the CES results. Participants were not surprised by results that indicated concern over the issue of food insecurity for the elderly. As one person put it,

We ran a grocery reimbursement program for seniors. We distributed well over \$750,000 to assist seniors. It was extremely popular. It was certainly extremely needed.



Housing: Affordability and Availability

Participants noted that rental costs in their region are rising and that the elderly and others on fixed incomes cannot keep up. They also pointed out that the region includes people who live elsewhere but have second homes in the region. "Prices have gone up astronomically," said one participant. Most housing being built is out of reach for

median-wage families in the region. Hurricanes and other natural disasters have also depleted the inventory of available housing. Here are one participant's comments:

With our [military] base increasing, it's only gonna bring more and more people here[,] . . . which is only gonna increase the amount of rent, because if they can rent to somebody in the military, that's secure money [compared to other renters in the region].

Starting teacher salaries in North Carolina are below the family-sustaining wage calculation for multiple counties in the COG. It's hard to recruit teachers to the region when housing costs are out of reach. Teachers in the area have had to take on second or third jobs in order to make enough money to afford housing, or they find adult housemates or roommates to help share costs.



Connection between Education and Workforce

Participants discussed funding being used to develop educational programs to meet workforce needs, for example, the local community college system received funds to offer short-term courses to provide training and help people gain employment or move up in their current positions. Focus-group session participants also discussed partnerships to expand employment services and the flexibility of employers to work with employees to expand the labor pool. As one described it,

We partnered with local businesses and the Volt Center here in Craven County, which is an extension of Craven Community College[,] and [created] a fast-track program to allow individuals without experience [in] manufacturing to gain manufacturing experience in a two-to-three-day crash course. . . . [W]e put . . . at least forty individuals in jobs where they did not have experience. [T]hose [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act] dollars help the employer offset the cost of onboarding those individuals. . . . [O]ne of the individuals [was] wearing an ankle [monitor]. His battery was about to die, and he told his supervisor and the business [about it] . . . [They] got him an extension cord to make sure he was plugged in and recharged so he wouldn't get in trouble with parole and probation [officials.]



Role of Community College System

Multiple participants mentioned that comprehensive services provided through the community college system may have been administered ineffectively. The system strove to distribute funding to many students to make sure their needs were being met but, in the process, some students who did not need financial support received it nonetheless:

Community colleges had an opportunity to give debit cards to [their] students, to . . . be spent as . . . needed[, such as on] food, transportation, keeping the Internet going so they could do online learning. . . . But high school students received those [debit cards] as well if they were dual[ly] enrolled. . . . [The money] was dispersed across the board[, and] . . . many families . . . didn't necessarily need it.

Other challenges mentioned by participants included teacher shortages and broadband access issues. Hotspots were distributed during the pandemic, but many people are now losing those resources.



Infrastructure Updates

It was noted in the focus-group session that the regional airport had been updated:

In . . . county government[, w]e don't see . . . the business loans, . . . [the federal [Paycheck Protection Program](#) funds], or anything like that. But what we did see . . . [were] changes at our airport. . . [W]e're very appreciative of that.



Health Services

The Jones County Health Department provided food boxes and vaccination clinics during the pandemic. Participants noted that having funds to expand health services, such as in times of emergencies brought on by natural disasters, would have been beneficial and that lessons should be taken from this experience to be better prepared in the future.



Non-Profit Capacity

Participants said that the speed at which pandemic-era programs were launched negatively impacted the ability of some organizations to utilize them, as they did not have the administrative capacity to do so.



Effects of Natural Disasters

Participants noted that they themselves, along with others in their community, have not fully recovered from the natural disasters that affected their region. Long-standing challenges with housing, in particular, were exacerbated by the pandemic, as many families were living in small spaces together due to lack of housing. According to one participant,

A lot of people in our community, myself included, had not been properly helped to recover from [hurricanes] Florence and Michael. . . . And you had multiple people living in homes that were not made to accommodate fifteen or twenty people. . . . [W]hen you add the pandemic to it, it was a nightmare. . . . So now you had an outbreak of COVID. You had people dying. . . . [P]eople were literally dying from COVID, and folks were in the other room. . . . And we're still recovering. . . . So [when]ever the next pandemic or disaster comes, we'll still be limping along.

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. Lack of access to capital was not discussed.



Lack of Workers Generally and Lack of Qualified Workers

Participants emphasized that lack of qualified workers, an aging population, a large number of “Opportunity Youth” (16- to 24-year-olds that are not working and not in school), and businesses having difficulty recruiting due to housing challenges were top regional concerns. Demographic trends indicate that basic issues of affordable housing and food insecurity in the region must be addressed. Here are one participant’s comments:

We have an employer over in Newport that . . . bought a tract of land and is putting [up] housing for [its] workers. . . . [I]t’s interesting. [I]f you go back . . . [and look at] the mill towns that took care of . . . all their employees, . . . for a while that worked, I guess, and it helped build, build our economy here in North Carolina. But then it got frowned upon because it was a company . . . having . . . too much control over the workers. . . . And so how do we implement these things without making it easy for people to be taken advantage of? And [how do we enable] those vulnerable populations to make decisions[?]

One participant noted that lack of public transportation, especially in rural areas, compounds workforce recruitment challenges in the region, as does lack of working-age and young adults in the area:

Until we turn that tide, somehow, it’s gonna be awfully hard to recruit industry here. . . . I’m told by the economic developers [that] if you were to try to recruit an industry that had much over a 500-employee requirement it would be . . . next to impossible.

Participants mentioned the loss of an affordable connectivity program as a major challenge to meeting business concerns, as the need for reliable and fast Internet connections is crucial in many modern jobs.

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 noted that Pamlico County may be more prosperous due to its retiree population and that, across the region, retirees likely skew the data.

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

- 1. Governments need to be proactive.** Participants emphasized the need for federal and state bodies to be proactive in designing responsive services, thereby increasing the capacity of non-profits to utilize federal funds. One participant noted that updating data systems was a key part of this strategy:

There are about ten health departments across North Carolina that have dedicated a little bit of the [pandemic] funding that [they]’ve received to doing a data modernization project that . . . [our region is] piloting for the State of North Carolina. . . . [W]hen we were trying to collect our early statistics to understand how COVID was impacting communities and the state, we had data systems in place. But with all of this new information, the data systems just were not able to handle it. . . . We want to use this as a moment to improve and get better.

- 2. Improve local communication channels.** Participants said they got their information primarily through TV and social media and that folks without access to either medium would be at a disadvantage, so improving information-sharing channels should be a priority.
- 3. Workforce-development opportunities should be expanded.** Leaders in the region expressed a need to increase both educational attainment and upskilling levels in the population.
- 4. Pandemic-era partnerships should continue.** Participants expressed hope that partnerships formed during the pandemic will continue on and enable them to address challenges together with partners, despite a changing funding landscape. Here is a comment on that issue:

I’m really hopeful that we will maintain and leverage those partnerships that we built during the pandemic. I don’t think we had ever worked with as many partners as we did [then], because we had to, . . . as a force multiplier [and for other reasons.] . . . [It was key to have] those trusted messengers to get information out to the community. If we keep reaching out . . . there’s usually . . . a way to get there. The funding might not last, but if the collaborations and the communications do, we can still do great things.

- 5. Affordable housing is a must.** One participant summed up the importance of this issue:

What I hope to see in my community is affordable housing, real, affordable housing. You have people [who] are on disability [and] only receive \$700 [to] \$800 a month. We really need affordable housing. We need to dig into it [and ask questions like] what [is] the definition of affordable housing [and] how can we help keep . . . people in the houses that they’re in now[?]