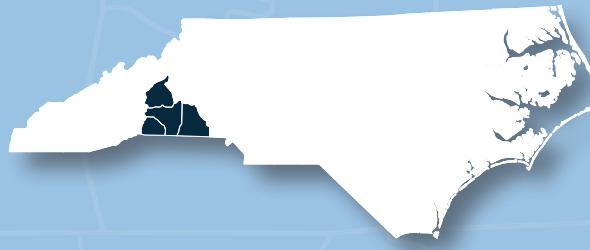


## REGIONAL SUMMARY

# Foothills

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 21, 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

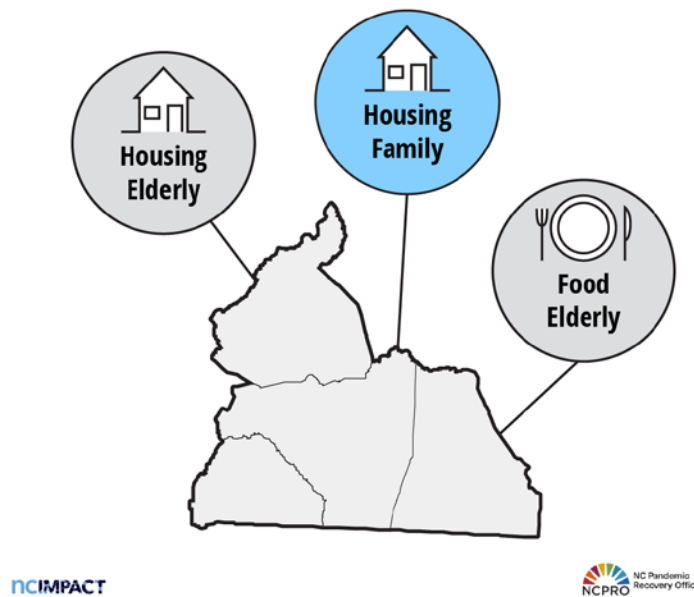
Thirteen people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The [Foothills Regional Commission Council of Governments](#) (COG) covers Cleveland, McDowell, Polk, and Rutherford counties. Eleven of the participants appeared to be women, and two appeared to be men. Four participants voluntarily shared that they were white women, and two shared that they were Black women. Those participant ages that were shared ranged from 46 to 61. All participants left their cameras off, so further age and race information could not be obtained. Five attendees lived and/or worked in Polk County, four lived and/or worked in Cleveland County, and one worked in Buncombe County but lived in McDowell County. The group included a representative from the COG plus workers from the education, non-profit, local-government, health, and private 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 group discussed local needs and concerns and barriers to fully utilizing pandemic-era programs, which were caused by confusion around program specifics. There was strong appreciation among participants for the pandemic response and coordination by/ between local governing bodies.

## Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Foothills Regional Commission Service Area



### WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

## Reactions to the **NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results**

Participants noted that it was hard to disagree with the top concerns outlined by the CES. Specific topics mentioned by multiple participants as being worthy of inclusion in ongoing dialogue were broadband and mental health.



### Difficulty Understanding Programs

A small-business owner shared that it was difficult to navigate staffing decisions due to uncertainty about the availability of federal assistance. When services did arrive, they were difficult to understand, and the websites for the services often crashed. The participant said that for small businesses like hers, it was hard to understand and figure out the processes for accessing available programs:

I laid off my entire staff because we didn't know when we were going to reopen, and we . . . had heard that there were some unemployment benefits that would possibly be coming that could help. . . . [I]t was also a really challenging system to navigate. . . . But the benefit was great . . . when you look back and contemplate how things happened. We also were able to take advantage of the small-business loan [program]. . . . [I]t was a little confusing [too]. . . . [I]f we were to go through something like this again, it would be great for there to be a tried-and-true process that was easier to understand.

Another small-business owner shared similar frustrations:

**It was simply overwhelming. . . . There was a lot of pressure to get it right for our employees to be able to get money, they need to live. And so[,] a very, very challenging thing to navigate. . . . The [federal [Paycheck Protection Program](#)] was . . . very challenging. There were a lot of restrictions, one of which kept us from being able to get any of the money.**

One participant noted that they believed programs went on for too long, organizations and individuals became comfortable, and they are now facing difficulties knowing how to operate again.



## Housing

Lack of affordable housing in the region is a problem, especially for families with school-age children. The following quote is from a participant with educational leadership experience in one of the counties in the COG:

**We have around sixty to sixty-five students living at a local hotel right now, just . . . in our county. And when you . . . talk to [a student's] parent or . . . grandparent, that's the issue, the cost of living. . . . We don't have housing that is affordable for these low-income families.**



## Education

Pandemic-era funds allowed local school systems to be innovative and meet needs in new ways as they partnered with other organizations and had funding to buy supplies that may have typically been out of reach. Of note, the schools provided meals to people and were able to purchase a thermal scanner to prevent the spread of disease. Here is a comment on this issue:

**Without that funding[,] we certainly would not have been able to do innovative work with other agencies in our county. . . . Our local health and human services agency[,] and our local county government also, we . . . worked together because they had money as well, and that allowed us to be a little bit more creative.**



## Childcare

A new Boys and Girls Club was opened in Cleveland County to help fill the gap of childcare for workers who were unable to stay home during the pandemic.



## Role of the COG

Participants noted that funding helped build capacity at the Council of Government (COG):

**The money we got was through our State COG Association. So there are sixteen COGs in the state, and the money we got through the [American Rescue Plan Act] funds was divvied out per region. . . . We've gotten a lot more contracts than we ever have before, because we were able to get on in our community more and just become more relevant.**



## Healthcare

Participants said there were challenges meeting staffing needs across the healthcare sector during the pandemic. People working in hospitals got sick and also left their jobs for higher-paying opportunities, such as travel nurses. ARPA funds helped to pay those travel fees. One person employed at a hospital summed it up this way:

We had many people in healthcare. We were essential, and we had nurses that . . . didn't want to even be a nurse anymore during COVID. So, of course, that affected everything. [W]e had . . . agency staff . . . [and] traveling agency companies [come in] because of the demand to take care of COVID patients. They were raising their rates. So people were leaving the hospital . . . to go work [at] other places and make three, four times what [they] would [make] at the hospital.



## Partnerships

The importance of partnerships was noted by participants:

[F]unding . . . was provided through the state tourism entity[,] which was phenomenal because it allowed us to tap into additional marketing resources that we wouldn't otherwise have had access to. . . . Our county leadership did an incredible job. . . . [I]t was very common for there to be an event that the health department was putting on for vaccinations or [for] sharing kits of supplies and things like that, and different people from different departments would come and be a part of that. . . . So, there was funding involved. But there were also these opportunities for us to all better understand other departments and other parts of our county and our community.

There was strong agreement among participants that there was no competition between local governing bodies, only cooperation:

I really didn't feel it was competition. I feel like our officials pulled together and worked well with one another, reaching across the table to . . . anybody that they could help.

Participants noted that health departments worked with hospitals and schools and that everyone made efforts to disseminate up-to-date information.

It was also noted that the pandemic caused the healthcare sector to form new partnerships in the community, allowing for a more strategic approach as the community continued to recover:

[W]e started doing far more consistent focus groups with our faith-based leaders [and worked to improve] our relationship[s] with our schools [and the] Boys and Girls Clubs that we just historically have not had a great foundation with. We fostered those relationships, and it helped us communicate and build trust in the community[,] which was [very] effective. . . . Some of that[,] just fostering those relationships[,] has helped us . . . post-pandemic as well.

Essential healthcare personnel in the region, such as mental healthcare providers, received a 5 percent bonus for reporting to work during the pandemic. However, not everyone was able to take advantage of this benefit.

## WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

### Business-Specific Concerns

A participant noted that 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 aligned with what is being heard from local employers and that they would add cost of living and cost of housing as additional concerns—people can't afford to live where they work.



#### Lack of Qualified Workers

Participants observed that the state's credentialing requirements exacerbated workforce shortages for positions in fields such as childcare and law enforcement, making it more difficult for people to work. One participant pointed out that service-oriented or public-facing jobs like nurses and social workers are facing similar shortages:

People are tired. . . . [T]hose hard jobs are a lot harder for people to keep. . . . We have people leaving [who] say, "I want a different career." . . . [S]ome of that has come out of the pandemic[, with] people . . . saying, "I'm not sure if I want to do this anymore" or "this is too hard to do." . . . [T]here's just no pipeline. . . . [Y]ou gotta have the people to do the work, and I'm telling you it is very hard to find them right now. Very hard.

Participants also mentioned that there was a shortage of service workers, preschool teachers, and teachers in the region and that the lack of a living wage for teachers was likely a contributing factor. One participant said that unemployment benefits may have prevented people from wanting to come back to work. It was also suggested that this lack of workers may also be due to overarching demographic trends—like an aging population—that were occurring long before the pandemic.



#### Lack of Workers—Childcare

Participants noted that a lack of access to childcare kept some people from working. Pre-K centers and other educational centers have strict requirements that limit supply, and few people want to join the workforce to fill this need due to low wages and challenges managing children who have not been socialized during COVID-19.

Participants mentioned that some business closed during the pandemic due to a difficulty in navigating federal assistance programs, with one participant stating that she has yet to reopen her business after closing it in 2020:

We had a restaurant at the time, my husband and I. . . . [We had to put] a quick halt on everything, and we thought it would be [for] two or three weeks. . . . So our business closed [in March 2020,] . . . and we are still closed today with no clear way to really get . . . back. I mean, it would be too hard to start all over again.

### MOVING FORWARD:

## Understanding Resilience across the Region

Participants were shown their region's ratings on the NCPRO Resilience Index and on the [Social Vulnerability Index](#) 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 the results presented. Participants noted that the region needed more affordable housing to improve resilience:

If you look at the state map . . . you can tell where most of the money is in the state, and I think that's no surprise to anyone on this call that the regions with the highest incomes are the regions that are more resilient.

For areas with high resilience ratings, participants noted that an influx of retirees might be skewing results upward, making the region appear more resilient than what is actually experienced on the ground.

### LESSONS LEARNED:

## Preparing for the Next Crisis

#### 1. Capacity for communication and collaboration should be expanded.

Participants said that they hoped for a more straightforward process of accessing and utilizing available resources, especially for small businesses and for continued collaboration. As one focus-group member described it,

I've seen this whole new [thinking around] collaboration that didn't necessarily exist prior to the pandemic. People have actively come out of their individual silos to create a united front. So I want to be able to see the continued collaboration for our community.

- #### 2. Communities must be able to meet workforce needs.
- Participants worry about the region's ability to meet the needs of the healthcare and mental healthcare sectors, as they are concerned about meeting the mental health needs of residents. Participants are also concerned about the region's ability to supply adequate teacher salaries.