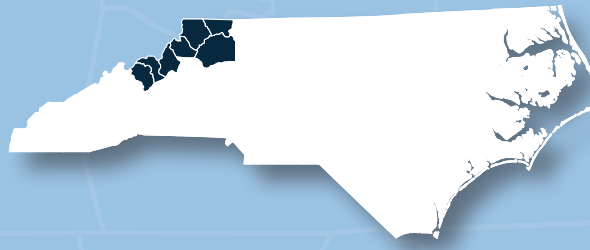


REGIONAL SUMMARY

High Country

Focus-group session conducted virtually
March 12, 2024, by [nclMPACT](#) 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 [High Country Council of Governments](#) (COG) represents Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, Wilkes, and Yancey counties. No representatives from Yancey County were present in the focus-group session. The focus group consisted of three men and one woman from Watauga County, ranging in assumed ages from 24 to 65. The other four participants were from Ashe, Alleghany, Wilkes, and Avery counties, respectively, and each was assumed to be between 50 and 75 years old. The majority of the participants were from the local-government sector. Two participants did not turn on their cameras. Those who did appeared to be white. Overall, the participation level was very good.

Participants 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?

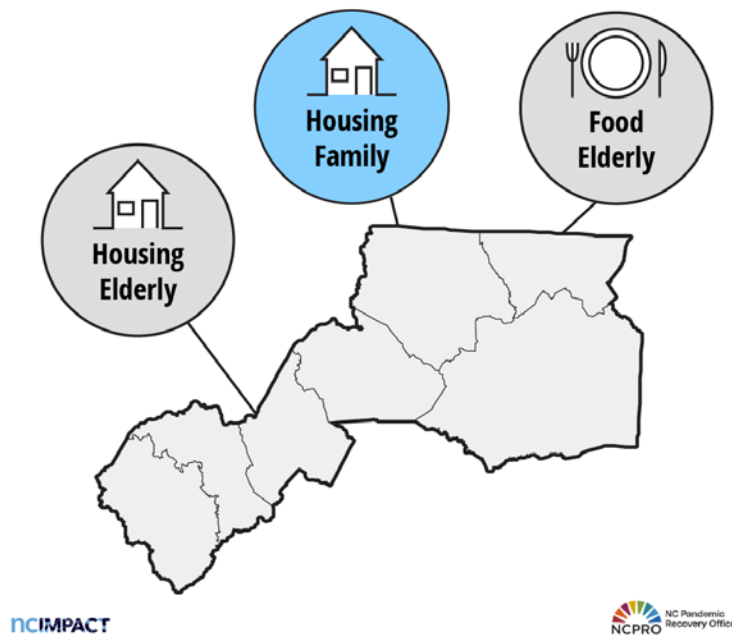
Participants also discussed the country's and the region's paths forward and how improved communication and collaboration can bolster the resilience of the region.

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 the issues of housing for families and the elderly were not explicitly mentioned by participants. Food insecurity for the elderly was also not mentioned.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in High Country Council of Governments Service Area



High-Speed Internet

Several of the participants stated that having money to expand access to high-speed Internet in the region was a huge benefit during the pandemic. One participant noted that pre-pandemic coverage maps were not representative of broadband coverage in the region, requiring a heavy investment to help local residents access the Internet:

While the official maps of broadband coverage showed us with good coverage, they were sadly mistaken. And so [pandemic funding] was used to really beef up the broadband coverage in the county[.] . . . I don't know if you'd say that's the most effective [use of funding], but it was certainly the biggest chunk of money spent here.

To ensure that learning would continue during the pandemic, children having access to the Internet was a major priority in the region. With remote work happening and a lot of people moving to the area to work remotely, broadband expansion was massive. It was pointed out that the discount connectivity program (service was offered at a cost of \$30/month) was and is advantageous for families in the region. One participant felt that the funds that were used for this purpose will continue to serve generations to come:

Everything's happening online since the pandemic, and that hasn't really changed. Including school, work, you name it[. Even] healthcare. Having that access and that little extra bit of help each month has enabled folks to tap into that resource. It's economic development and community development wrapped into one program.



Transportation

Focus-group session participants said that the North Carolina Department of Transportation (DOT) needs to have more funding because it is a complicated system and, by the time money gets to this region, its impact is watered down. One participant noted that, initially during the pandemic and after big storms, the DOT got kind of “sideways for a while,” which became an issue for the region, where road access is everything:

Especially here in the Northwest, being road-dependent, only you know [the implications of that situation]. No airports, no interstates up this way. So you know the impact of the pandemic initially[,] . . . how the gas tax money dropped off. And then you had a . . . couple of big storms [that caused further impacts].



Childcare, Education, and the Elderly

The timing of the pandemic-era child tax credit and stimulus checks was helpful to families in the region. During the pandemic, schools were offering free meals, including breakfasts. Once the aid for childcare centers ends, it will have a big impact. Focus-group session participants said that they believed teacher pay is a real problem in the area, as it is nationwide. The additional checks going out to college students during the pandemic made a difference in the community college system. The American Rescue Plan Act included funds for aging services, which was also helpful. The impact of aid programs was described as follows:

I think that the child tax credit, or whatever that was called, those stimulus checks[,] . . . were helpful from a timing perspective . . . I think . . . things [were] timed out [fairly] well, you know, [like] when stimulus came, when [Paycheck Protection Program] money came, when those tax credits came. It felt like that was at a good time, right before, you know, school got back in session again, and people were thinking about some of the elevated costs of education at that point in time.



Housing

Affordable housing is an issue in this region. Without available, accessible housing, it is hard to recruit businesses to your area. For the Wilkes County participant, the housing issue definitely speaks to an inability to fill jobs. Some of the county’s ordinances are being revised to allow for the building of innovative housing.

The Avery County participant referenced that county’s tremendous second-home market. “There’s a dichotomy of culture and social economic balance [on the issue.] [T]he way people see this issue is widely varied. . . . Avery County has a tremendous tax base from second homes.” In addition to second homes, the county has a lot of resorts, and both forms of housing create a lot of tension. “If you go to any town in North Carolina, there are buildings closed down but not . . . second homes[,] . . . [I]t’s difficult to

get affordable housing when the average home price is a lot higher [than most people can pay]. It's difficult when people see such a different culture.”

One participant stated that affordable housing in the region is almost non-existent:

In our area we have a lot of pressure [around] housing. . . . [W]e're trying every day to work with unique solutions . . . [to ensure that there is] housing access . . . and affordability[. It] drives a lot of things in our area.



Healthcare

Participants labeled healthcare as another major concern in the region. During the pandemic, participants felt that the area did a good job with the dissemination of information. They also said that opioid settlement funds have been a valuable tool from a treatment standpoint. Clinics were set up for citizens to get testing and vaccines once they became available. AppHealthCare was also cited as having been helpful with messaging about the importance of hand washing and normalized outreach. The region also received some funding from AppHealthCare during the pandemic. There were a lot of visitors to the area at that time, so the signage developed by Alleghany, Ashe, and Watauga counties helped those from other states understand the region's rules.

In February 2020, Avery County opened a new community center, and its first usage was for testing and, later, vaccinations. During that year's Christmas season, seasonal workers came to the area, and the county put together a medical trailer to serve them.

Despite these positive things, participants still worried about healthcare issues:

The provider I use is retiring, so everyone is panicking. One person [leaving results in a] 10 percent [drop in] available providers.

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. Lack of qualified workers and access to capital were not mentioned.



Small Businesses

The PPP helped small businesses keep their employees in the region. There are a lot of arts and crafts businesses and restaurants in the area. Participants thought it was amazing that only a few small businesses in the region were lost during COVID-19. A job-retention grant from the state Department of Commerce was said to be helpful for businesses that were not eligible for a federal PPP allocation.



Employment

Focus-group members discussed the lack of workers in the region and how raising the minimum wage had been debated pre-pandemic. One had this to say on the matter:

You may disagree that the minimum wage needs to be higher. But that's what the market is demanding right now, and higher salaries are helpful. The people, especially those who are having trouble finding housing or affording child care, [need the help].

Participants felt that being able to use tools like Zoom was a good development that produced both time and money savings. Recruiting and training employees, such as school employees, was cited as a critical need.

MOVING FORWARD:

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Unlike other focus-group members, participants in this session were not shown 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) due to facilitator error. They were asked about the region's resilience generally. The group said that Americans are incredibly resilient and innovative when compared to the rest of the world and that their region will adapt to handle whatever comes its way:

[We are technically discussing pandemic-]recovery needs, but they impact everything to do with the local economy and economic development.

I think the [pandemic-]recovery needs and the [region's] long-term needs are one [and] the same. In many cases.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Communication is key.** Participants reported that communication between local governments and their citizens is much better post-pandemic. Here's a typical observation:

Local governments have found new ways to interact with people and get feedback, and it seems like the amount of public participation has increased [since the pandemic]. I'd like to see that continue. I think that's healthy, and I'm sure our local governments would agree that they enjoy hearing from folks 99 percent of the time.

2. **Collaboration improves outcomes.** According to focus-group session participants, the counties in their region have more collaboration and open lines of communication since the pandemic.

3. **The commitment of community leaders is crucial to a community's success.** Members of this focus group are invested in their communities and vow to continue to do the work necessary to be successful:

A part of this area's DNA is to rise above challenges.

There is a famous quote by Daniel Boone [about how] he was never lost, but he was a mite bewildered for three days. That's the way we are. We're not lost[, we're] bewildered. We are not victims. We are overcomers. We are hard workers. That hopefulness was the thing that was kind of lost [during the pandemic]. We are positively going to be okay. We can instill that confidence as opposed to fearfulness. From a leadership standpoint, that is what we really have to be cognizant of.