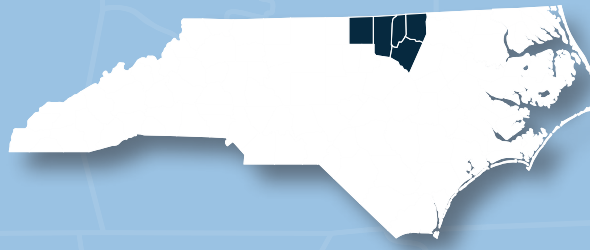


REGIONAL SUMMARY

Kerr-Tar

Focus-group session conducted in person on March 4, 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

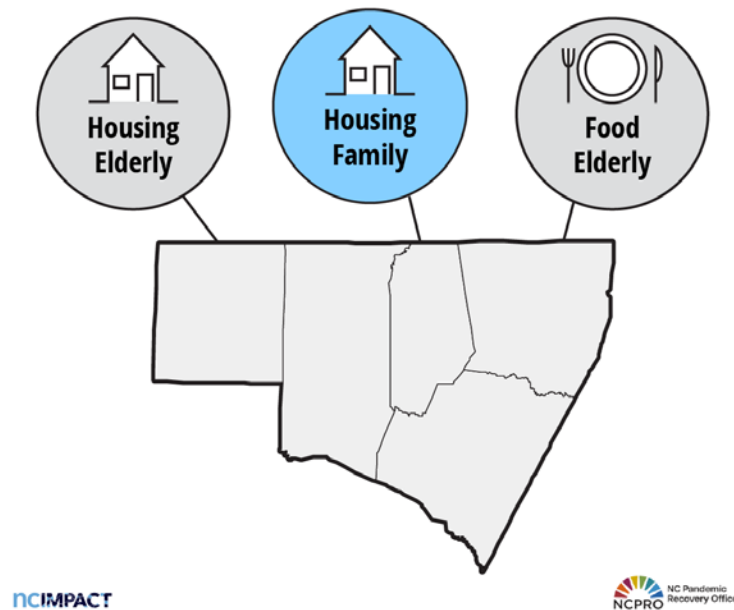
Five people volunteered for this focus-group conversation and offered strong participation. The [Kerr-Tar Regional Council of Governments](#) (COG) represents Franklin, Granville, Person, Vance, and Warren counties. Two participants came from Granville County and two came from Franklin County. One of the participants represented a regional organization that covered Franklin, Granville, Person, Vance, and Warren counties. Based on facilitators' observations, we had four women of traditional working age (24 to 65) and one woman of traditional retirement age (65+). Three participants were from the local-government sector and two worked in state government. The group appeared to be somewhat racially diverse. Two focus-group members appeared to be Black. The others appeared to be white. There were no other apparent races or ethnicities present.

Participants were active in joining the conversation exploring 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 information about their differing experiences across the region, especially where program implementation was concerned. There was great agreement around lessons learned and the need to learn from COVID-19 to prepare for future crises.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Kerr-Tar Council of Governments Service Area



NCIMPACT


 NC Pandemic
Recovery Office

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. Food insecurity for the elderly was also not mentioned.



Food Insecurity

Participants noted that food-delivery programs were part of the local pandemic-recovery effort. One participant said that the food made available through food-box deliveries was sometimes inadequate. Another participant disagreed, stating that community members were thankful for what they were given:

[People were] at home with no food, in isolation with five kids, in a pandemic[.] I didn't have anybody call me back[,] and we were delivering over eighty boxes a day[,] . . . say[ing] . . . "We don't want that [box of food] because we don't eat that."

Another participant said that they thought food-distribution programs were equitable during the pandemic:

One thing I saw in the pandemic was that there was no discrimination when it came to food insecurity.



Housing

Housing was cited as the area of greatest concern in this suburban and rural region. Participants agreed that rental-assistance programs did a good job of responding to the widespread need for help during the pandemic, covering rental-housing costs at a time when so many people had lost their jobs. Focus-group members worried, however, that the need for housing support outlasted programs that addressed the issue and resulted in homelessness. One participant said that housing support ended abruptly as people went back to work, leaving some people without enough time to save up for monthly housing costs. Here are other comments from participants:

We should have maybe looked at a transitional step in there so that we didn't have people falling [through] the cracks.

[For] utilities, you gave people [an assistance] plan. This would have been valuable [for housing costs].

We need to try to avoid a cliff. Whether it's rental assistance or unemployment, we need a transition plan for people so that we don't just cut them off.

Participants said that landlords often ignored the federal eviction moratorium, leading more people in the region to become homeless.

Adequacy

Focus-group members expressed frustration when the discussion turned to poor housing conditions. One participant talked about the need for more consistent housing standards, stating that rental conditions in some counties were substandard. Another said that more support was needed to enforce the standards that are in place:

People are paying crazy rates for shacks. [Landlords are] not required to [follow] a minimum [housing] standard.

Affordability

Participants agreed that rental-housing rates have continued to rise post-pandemic, contributing to homelessness. One person expressed fear about how many people are vulnerable to being forced into homelessness due to a change in debt or income status.

Several participants talked about community interest in tiny homes and the opportunities for increasing low-income housing with grant-funding support. One stated that more affordable-housing options were needed in their region to help people avoid homelessness:

Yeah, [we need options] so people can have [a choice]. [They should be a]ble to buy a [tiny] home if they want to.

There was a rigorous debate around the question of whether some people want to be homeless.



Physical and Behavioral Health

Equitable healthcare and access to mental health services were rated as top needs by participants. One noted that the expansion of Medicaid would bring better access to healthcare. Another agreed and emphasized the need to make it more accessible in rural areas.

One participant noted a shortage of community healthcare workers, who were heavily relied upon for healthcare services during COVID-19:

Community centers took care of the community [during the pandemic]. And people knew they could go there, and it was a safe place.

The need for increased and specialized services for the region's aging population was discussed, with particular emphasis placed on mental health services.



Internet Access

Participants agreed that lack of Internet access in the region continues to be a barrier to gathering information and accessing resources, particularly in rural areas.

One participant said that social services were more difficult to obtain without Internet access, noting that older adults faced increased ramifications due to a higher need for help in accessing food, healthcare, and social enrichment.



Public Safety

While most of the focus-group session conversation focused on other issues, one participant noted that public safety was a top concern in their community.



Collective Community Commitment

In this focus-group session, participants had varied experiences with their respective local governments. They made note of who was not in the room for the session and indicated that the absence of some leaders reflected a disconnection to collective need and action:

Never once did the local government ever contact me the whole time during the pandemic.

You counted the number of people here. That may tell you a lot more than anything we can say.

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.



Lack of Workers Generally

When the focus-group session discussion pivoted to the ongoing challenges facing businesses in the region following the pandemic, participants focused on the changing workforce and the need to increase employability skills among job seekers. They also noted the importance of high schools and community colleges in preparing people for skilled jobs. They mentioned their perception of a decrease in work ethic as being a struggle for employers, who are experiencing a higher number of employees who don't show up for their assigned shifts. Here are some participant comments on this issue:

I was asked on my job application, "Will you show up to work?"

We need to make sure that we are strongly supporting education [and] workforce development with these people, creating good pipelines.

Our community colleges are such a great groundwork for getting people in. They offer so many certificates and programs.

As [our state] moves toward clean energy, we need more [specialized] people . . . in manufacturing.



Remote Work

Focus-group members discussed remote work as having varied impacts on the workforce. One participant said that remote work is making it easier for people to explore new ways to earn income. Another said that the shift to remote work is a challenge for filling customer-facing jobs because more people are looking for remote work.

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 appeared to understand the visualized differences in vulnerability levels across

the region and pointed to socioeconomic factors they believed were contributing to the variability in resilience. Several participants offered local examples of wealth in relationship to resilience as visualized in their region.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Preparing for the Next Crisis

When the discussion pivoted to assessing the effectiveness of specific pandemic-recovery programs or sources of funding, there was little specificity among participants beyond mentions of rental-assistance programs and the federal eviction moratorium. Participants seemed to believe that local efforts were the most effective efforts.

- 1. Trusted brokers are important.** The Community Health Worker Program (CHWP) was mentioned as a champion of pandemic recovery, supporting work being done by local, state, and federal governments. Participants mentioned the importance of the role community health workers played in the implementation of community vaccinations, the sharing of information as trusted messengers, and the provision of equitable services. One participant said that the CHWP was uniquely positioned to reach vulnerable, marginalized, and underprivileged community members.
- 2. Integrated programs offer high value.** The Duke Social Support Program was also mentioned as being successful across the board and equitable to all.
- 3. Local implementation matters.** The success of pandemic-era food-distribution programs in the region was a point of contention for the group. One participant classified these programs as inefficient, stating that food recipients weren't able to use some of the food they received. Another said that recipients who encountered new or different foods were responsive in asking for help understanding how to prepare those foods.
- 4. Learning recovery continues to be a struggle.** Support for schools was identified as a high priority with significant repercussions. Participants noted that students came back after the pandemic to short-staffed schools without enough substitute teachers. The transition from remote learning to in-person instruction presented struggles with socialization, truancy, and learning loss.
- 5. Moving quickly has upsides and downsides.** There was agreement about the effectiveness of business support during the pandemic. While one participant expressed frustration with the [Paycheck Protection Program](#), claiming that some unqualified businesses were funded, the group agreed that the situation was unprecedented and that many businesses were helped by the program.
- 6. More collective support is needed.** Local experiences varied based on community, but all participants agreed that there needed to be greater community connection among local governments, the COG, and community-based organizations.