

REGIONAL SUMMARY

Land of Sky

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

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



INTRODUCTION:

This Focus Group

Thirteen people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The [Land of Sky Regional Council](#) represents Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania counties. Eleven participants came from Buncombe County; one came from Transylvania County; and one came from Madison County. Seven of the participants represented a regional organization that covered Buncombe, Madison, Henderson, and Transylvania counties. The group appeared to include six women and five men of traditional working age (between 24 and 65). One person worked in local business and one worked as a local health leader. Four people worked in local government and five worked in regional government roles. All seven of the on-camera participants appeared to be white, and five of them appeared to be women.

The conversations were centered on the following three major 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?

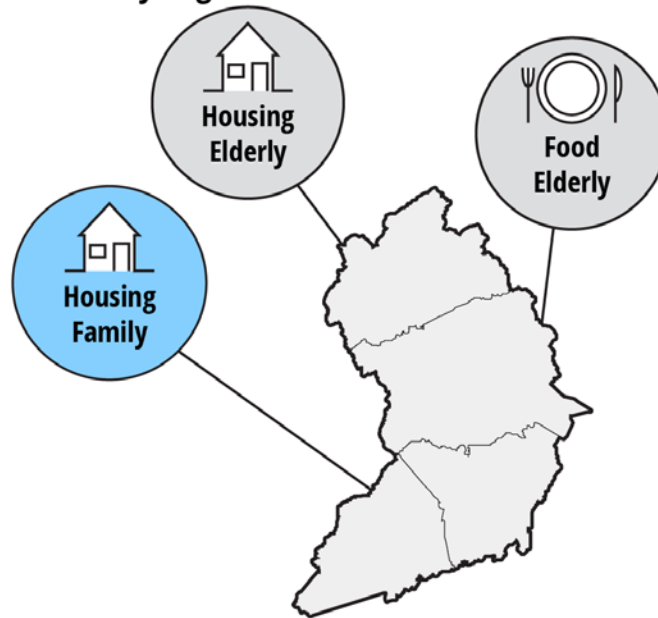
Participants also discussed details of pandemic-era programs, funding, and what will happen in the future when certain funds no longer exist.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Reactions to the [NCPRO Community Engagement Survey \(CES\) Results](#)

Participants agreed with results in the CES identifying housing and food as top concerns. Housing for the elderly and/or families was not explicitly discussed and neither was food insecurity for the elderly.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Land-of-Sky Regional Council Service Area



NCIMPACT

NCPRONC Pandemic Recovery Office



Housing

Housing was, by far, the area of greatest concern. One participant said that the regional housing stock was low because supply had not kept up with demand. A lack of workforce housing was emphasized by one participant. Another participant shared that housing for the elderly was a growing concern.

One participant said that as homes are being built farther from city centers in rural and other exurban areas, services are becoming more expensive for communities to provide. Participants also said that there is an increased need for worker housing in city centers where more jobs exist. Here are some sample comments:

We haven't built to accommodate growth. And now we're seeing a lot of people kind of fighting over the units that we do have.

Without that housing, everything else kind of falls apart.

According to one participant, managing public health resources was a challenge during the pandemic that continues to put pressure on the region. This person said that the influx of high-wealth individuals relocating to the area didn't slow during the pandemic, which made the demand for issuing well and septic permits difficult to manage:

[Y]ou put this tremendous flow of people with resources and money [who will] pay a million dollars for a house that's worth . . . half a million. . . It's just stacking the pressures up on our long-standing communities and folks that don't [have] that level of financial resource.

Affordability

One participant shared that rental assistance was helpful during the pandemic, but rent has continued to rise in the region. Another participant said that rental-assistance support is still greatly needed, especially since there are fewer agencies and non-profit organizations available to manage the increased demand. It was also shared that an increased awareness of rental-assistance funding had caused landlords to raise their rates. The group agreed that rising housing costs have been exacerbated by the influx of high-wealth individuals, creating even more of a barrier to potential homeowners.



Food Insecurity

The group agreed that helping with food access during the pandemic was essential. One participant said that government benefits were instrumental in helping the region avoid an economic meltdown:

We were using every resource possible to get access to the fresh fruits and vegetables. Having our SNAP [benefits] increase during that time period was instrumental for us.



Childcare

Support for families needing childcare was a top concern shared by participants. One participant said that pandemic funding allowed a childcare facility in her community to keep employees paid during the temporary closures, an option that is no longer possible:

Here's a situation we're facing now . . . that money that flowed into childcare allowed for this system to stay intact and for the staff not to bolt. . . . A lot of [the] staff across the state received raises because the funding was available to do that, which desperately needed to happen. . . . [But right now we're facing a] huge cliff.

Another participant agreed that pandemic-era funding allowed for staff retention and for much-needed pay raises, both of which are at risk now that funding is gone and facilities are left with a deficit. It was also shared that some local commissioners have been working to set aside funding to help with that deficit.

The options of telehealth and remote work were noted as the top reasons that parents are able to balance their work and childcare responsibilities:

When parents have a sick child, they can now work from home that day, if it's possible. . . . That was not something that existed previously. That has been a really nice benefit that came out of the pandemic.



Worker Retraining

The group agreed that retraining workers is a top concern in the region. Participants said that work-based learning grants have been helpful in upskilling incumbent workers and that the funds were easy to implement in companies across sectors, regardless of their size. One participant elaborated on this issue:

[We currently have] 15 companies who have participated [with a total] of probably 210 [workers], plus \$1,000 that we have granted for short-term training for upskilling incumbent workers.



Transportation

Helping people move safely throughout the region was a challenge during the pandemic. One participant said that concerns about communicable diseases slowed the use of public transit. Other participants said there was an increased need for ride-sharing opportunities during that time. Some participants noted that the expense of commuting was a roadblock to home ownership. They said that public-transportation improvements could encourage people to drive their cars less and save their money to buy homes. Another participant shared that while rural areas have been slow to use pandemic-era funding for transportation, urban areas have depleted that funding quickly. Here are some sample comments:

People are spending so much money on commuting that they can't afford a house in the region, and it's a catch-22.

Costs are definitely up, and ridership is not back at pandemic levels.



Broadband Access

Participants agreed that access to the Internet was problematic during the pandemic. One participant said that the limited availability of technology like laptops was also a problem. Another participant shared that American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and state funding for broadband expansion has been a great benefit. One participant said:

We really felt the education issue and workforce remote worker issue with COVID. We had a lot of children that didn't have access.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Business-Specific Concerns

Overall, the group agreed with the main concern 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: a lack of workers. The lack of qualified workers and the limited access to capital were not specifically discussed.



Lack of Workers

As the discussion turned to the ongoing challenges facing businesses after the pandemic, participants championed local collaboration as the primary reason the region was able to pivot quickly to alleviate individual needs and community concerns. But employers still struggled to fill workforce needs, possibly due to the growing number of retirees who left their jobs during the pandemic. Participants expressed a need for training in employability skills, especially for younger workers who enter the workforce with fewer of the human “soft skills” that take time to build. Here are some sample comments:

It felt like the first time a lot of us were sharing information [about] how we could do what people needed.

Our prime working-age population is not meeting, or even exceeding, the growth of our retirement population.

[T]oday all of our employers are talking about housing, and it's not just for our lowest-wage workers. It's across the spectrum because they see how the lack of housing and the fact [that] our housing is so expensive is inhibiting their ability to recruit workers.

New, stricter food-safety rules and inspection rules from the federal government were noted as causing bottlenecks and delays for the state's environmental department and the businesses it serves.

Participants noted that minority business owners struggled during the pandemic because they had fewer relationships in the banking industry and experienced difficulty in navigating the [Paycheck Protection Program \(PPP\)](#) loan process.

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 were not surprised by the vulnerabilities it showed across the region. The rapid influx of high-wealth individuals into the area was again noted for its impact on economic and social disparities.

One participant noted that the CDC/ATSDR Social Vulnerability Index failed to address some of the specific needs in their region. Others agreed that it might not be the best way to recognize the resilience of their communities.

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

- 1. Maintain collaboration.** Participants pointed to regional government collaboration and non-profit leadership as critical to mapping out ideas and opportunities for increasing access to affordable housing:

[We will continue to] work with our communities and housing non-profits to see what we can put in place to assist . . . [and] meet that need at a regional level [while trying] to leverage all the work our communities are doing.

- 2. Meet transportation needs.** The group emphasized that there will be no progress in the region without improved public transportation. They reiterated the importance of increasing public transportation options in rural areas.
- 3. Support workforce development.** Participants noted the need to connect supply with demand. They called for more workforce promotion to help people connect with available jobs and training opportunities. They lamented the gap in employability skills among younger workers and urged an increase in middle- and high-school career programs that will help bolster the workforce pipeline by increasing the number of skilled trade workers. One participant noted the extensive openings in one county:

Buncombe County [has] over 5,000 openings just in [the skilled-trade] sector.