

REGIONAL SUMMARY

Mid-Carolina

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 14, 2024, by [ncIMPACT](#) and the [N.C. Pandemic Recovery Office](#).

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



INTRODUCTION:

This Focus Group

Five people volunteered for this focus-group conversation, but two had to leave before the questions began. The [Mid-Carolina Regional Council](#) represents Cumberland, Harnett, and Sampson counties. Two of the participants represented Harnett County and one represented Cumberland County. All three appeared to be of traditional working age (between 24 and 65). One worked in local government, one in education, and one in health via a local government agency. Two participants appeared to be white females, and the third, who sounded male, responded off camera.

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?

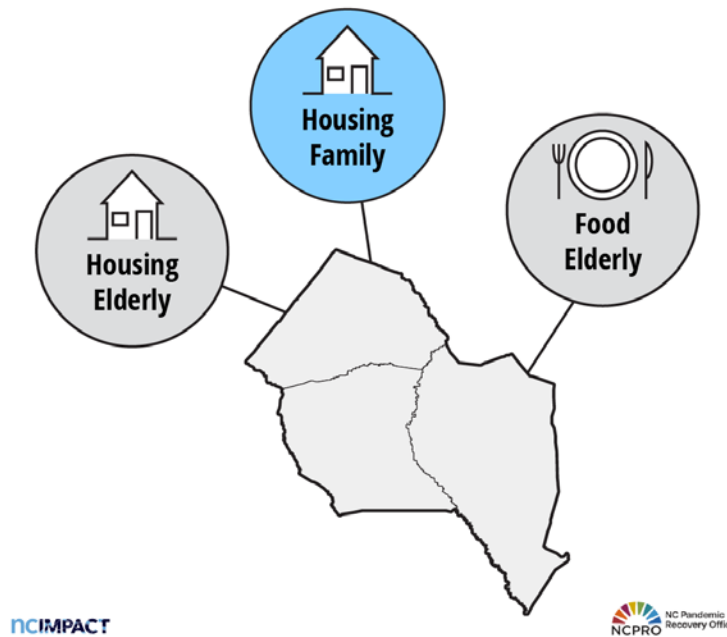
Participants discussed their communities' concerns during the pandemic and the barriers that made addressing those concerns challenging. The importance of meeting citizens' basic needs was emphasized, as well as the need for ongoing communication and collaboration between local entities.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

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

The participants agreed with the top-identified CES concerns of housing and food. They did not, however, specifically address issues related to housing for families and/or the elderly or food insecurity for the elderly.

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



The stimulus checks issued during the pandemic were identified by participants as a key support for community members. Families who experienced negative consequences from job losses were able to use these funds to cover their essential expenses such as bills, housing costs, and food. One participant suggested that this also may have had an indirect benefit for families' mental health by reducing their stress.

Some of the participants said that the federal funding made available to local-government entities was invaluable. As a resident of a smaller town, one participant said that funding from the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act](#) and the [American Rescue Plan Act](#) (ARPA) helped the community navigate budget concerns. However, the lack of guidance indicating when funds would be released and the inconsistent updates did cause challenges in deciding how the money would be allotted.



Housing

All three participants named housing as the top priority or challenge facing their region, especially given its implications for future economic growth and prosperity. Issues related to homelessness were also mentioned, including the limited amount of shelter space and an ordinance in Cumberland County that prohibited people from

living in tents on county property. The importance of federal funding was noted by one participant:

One of the things that we had a hard time with was, of course, isolating people who are homeless. So with the federal funds, we were able to put people up in hotel rooms. And so I mean, that made a big difference.

One participant said that [NC Care 360](#) has been helpful in providing rental assistance:

During COVID, we also were able to help the community with funding and things like that. Also, we are part now of NC Care 360, and that's how we were able to help a lot of people with assistance programs, rentals, utilities, mental health. That has been a huge help for our community members [because it's] one less barrier for them. And so we've done that as well. And that's been a success.



Healthcare

The impacts of COVID-19 encouraged partners within and across communities to communicate and collaborate more effectively. It also helped strengthen the overall system. The participant from the health sector noted that the region now has a greater ability to share information across community agencies, urgent care facilities, hospitals, and public health organizations.

One participant said that the mental health of aging parents was a growing concern during the pandemic and that the stimulus checks helped alleviate this concern for some families:

The stimulus checks as far as . . . the families of our students go . . . took [away] a lot of stress and [brought] relief. Mental health issues were a [major] concern.

However, as public health professionals have noted, some communicable diseases (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases and infections) worsened when the pandemic's social distancing protocols were lifted.

Participants indicated a need for more mental health providers.



Education

Participants agreed that collaboration and information sharing between local schools, counties, the public, and others have improved as a result of the pandemic experience.

One remaining area of significant concern with regard to education is burnout and attrition among teachers and school personnel. The participant from the education sector noted that teachers struggled during the pandemic to do their jobs effectively while also looking after their own families, and as a result many have left the profession or moved to nearby districts where salary supplements are higher.

Recovering from learning loss for students is another challenge that is especially concerning given the expiration of federal funds. Even though after-school programs,

tutoring, summer programs, and similar support systems are required to address learning loss, fewer resources are now available.



Food

Food access was a recurring theme and area of concern. The participants said that the region faced challenges with food access during the pandemic and identified it as an ongoing need. One participant noted efforts by local agencies to provide food when the need was urgent. Another participant said that the region has a high poverty rate, making food a challenge for many residents. This was especially true during the pandemic as people navigated the loss of their incomes. Here are some sample comments:

Food was a big factor. And that's just based on when we did investigations, we called people. Food was always the number one thing. Like, "How am I going to get food?"

Food costs have skyrocketed, and that's causing a strain on the area.



Transportation

Participants agreed that transportation is an important issue with wide-ranging implications. For example, in Cumberland County, free bus passes made it easier for residents to go to medical appointments. Now that pandemic programs are expiring, public health officials are thinking about alternatives to help make sure that people can access care:

They had free bus passes for anybody, everybody. And I think that's over with. And that helped a lot of patients get to where they needed to get to here in Cumberland County. And now we're . . . having to go back to the scene [and figure out] how we can get transportation for people, how we can help them, you know, maneuver around for appointments. So I remember that . . . people loved the free transportation on the buses.

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Business-Specific Concerns

Participants mentioned some issues that aligned with the [2022 Employer Needs Survey](#) produced by the Labor & Economic Analysis Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce and the NC Works Commission, but they did not specifically reference a need for qualified workers or access to capital. While participants did express some concern about the Great Resignation and its effects on staffing—particularly in the

education sector and in health professions like nursing—they seemed optimistic about the region’s general capacity for job training and workforce development:

If I had to pick some place we’re making good strides in, it would be job and training access and employability skills. We have a strong CTE (Career & Technical Education) program, and we do a lot of academies, and work with FTCC (Fayetteville Technical Community College) on credentialing. So I feel like we’re making headway there.

Going back to the relationship and the collaboration piece between our commissioners and our schools and our local governments, our town leaders—we are all very focused on job training, creating workers, and economic growth. I feel like that’s everyone’s focus a lot of times. And that’s one place we do come together and agree.

MOVING FORWARD:

Understanding Resilience across the Region

Because the region is growing quickly, participants expressed concerns about the location and accessibility of specific resources. Fayetteville and Cumberland County have greater access to transportation networks than some of the more rural locations like Harnett County. Though the region has broadband capabilities, many parts of Harnett are still using dial-up Internet. Some local schools are unable to compete with nearby districts for personnel because the property tax base is lower, which leaves less for teacher salary supplements.

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 did not seem surprised by the region’s vulnerability scores. One participant talked about how being a rural county impacts a community’s needs and how it might also affect folks who are thinking of moving there:

I mean . . . these are . . . things that people look for in places when they move places.

The participants said that in order to be more resilient, their communities need more housing options and healthcare access:

I think there’s only one shelter that we have here that is for men. And so if it’s full, it’s full.

We’ve got the hospital healthcare access, [but] even with Medicaid expansion, it’s just so difficult for people. And . . . we just don’t have enough mental health–care providers or people for mental health. And that exacerbates all the issues.

It all goes back to the quality of living. So your housing access, your healthcare access, and your childcare access: they’re going to be . . . three key components in the growth of your community and your resilience.

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

- 1. Communication is crucial.** Participants felt strongly that communication and collaboration between organizations within their communities had been strengthened as a result of programs implemented and needs identified during the pandemic. One participant mentioned that social media had been helpful and that text messaging made contact tracing easier. These collaborative practices will better equip the region to respond to future crises.
- 2. Collaboration and partnerships are key.** The participants were less concerned with recovery efforts because the region now has strong collaborative efforts in place, especially in the area of workforce development and training. Strength in unity was emphasized:

If there's no communication, no collaboration, it's "if one entity falls, we all fall," right?

[W]hen we were in the throes of the pandemic, all the what-ifs and concerns [made us question] exactly how strong we [were] . . . but I don't think there's any question [about it] anymore. I think we know what we're capable of doing, especially when we work together. So, like everyone says, we came out with a new skill set. [And] that's a positive [because] we are resilient as a community.

- 3. Address ongoing community concerns.** Participants emphasized that the region is growing, and regional partners must continue working to meet needs related to housing, healthcare access, food, education, and other identified core issues to maintain the quality of living that makes the area appealing.