

## REGIONAL SUMMARY

# Mid-East

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 20, 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

Thirteen people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The [Mid-East Commission](#) represents Beaufort, Bertie, Hertford, Martin, and Pitt counties. There were participants from all of the counties. The age of the participants appeared to range from 30 to 65. The group appeared to be mostly white, with five Black participants and two participants who did not appear on camera. Four participants represented the education sector; four participants represented the commission sector; two participants represented the local government sector; two participants represented the health sector; and one person represented the economic-development sector. The group appeared to consist of four men and nine 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?

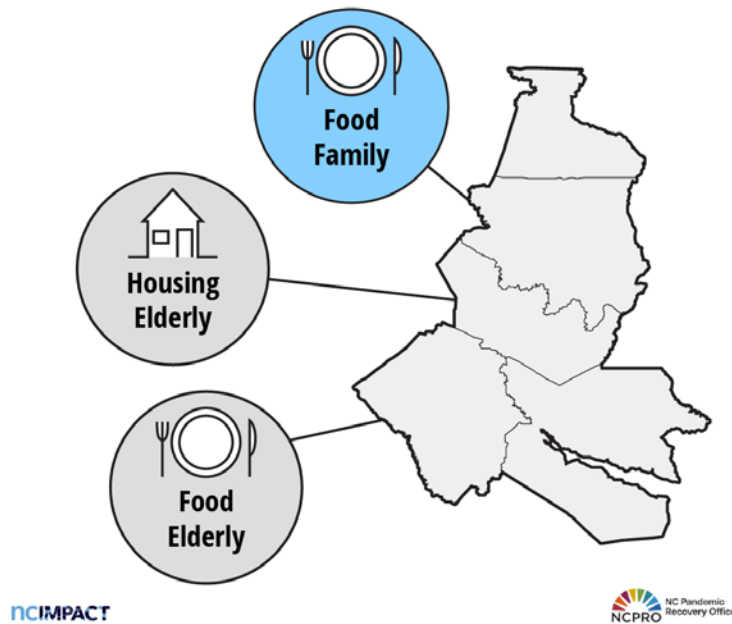
Participants discussed how the pandemic highlighted preexisting community concerns and disparities in the region. They also shared lessons learned and their hopes of improving local capacity and partnerships to meet ongoing community needs.

### WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

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

The participants agreed with the top-identified CES concern of housing, but they did not talk specifically about housing for families and/or the elderly. Food insecurity for the elderly was not mentioned either.

## Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Mid-East Commission Service Area



### Education

The group agreed that schools became a hub for community needs during the pandemic, taking the lead in connecting food-insecure students with meals through food pick-up programs. Participants said that this effort continued through the school year and into the summer. One participant mentioned that some schools set up smart classrooms using Webex to help students access lessons and stay connected.

Another participant said that learning loss from the pandemic has been noticeable. Because younger students, especially those in early elementary school, missed out on crucial foundational years of education, they lacked socialization skills and were unprepared to move to a higher grade level after the pandemic:

**[If] you started kindergarten during the pandemic, when you came back, you were almost in the third grade, which is [when] you're now supposed to be ready to test.**

A participant who works with a local community college shared that the transition to online learning helped everyone shift their assumptions about education, allowing the emergence of hybrid opportunities that help students balance their classroom education with hands-on skills training for jobs in the automotive and construction industries. Pandemic-era funding made possible an increase in the number of classes offered at a community college, which helped reduce class size and increase safety.



## Community/Local Government

The participants said that collaboration among local governments during the pandemic was successful and helped expedite relief for the region. The Mid-East Commission, which is the regional council of government, offered grant-writing support to local governments to help them take advantage of funding opportunities. One participant noted that local infrastructure recovery funds were earmarked to upgrade water treatment facilities and lift stations throughout the Town of Aurora. Another participant shared that local government efforts to help citizens maintain their utilities and access social services increased during the pandemic. The group agreed that food access was a challenge during and after the pandemic, especially for the elderly. As one participant noted:

**Aurora is situated in a food desert, still, and even though great strides were made with the Recovery Act funding . . . that's not bringing [a] grocery store to my town.**



## Broadband

A lack of access to broadband hindered recovery in this region, according to participants. One participant expressed frustration that social connections today tend to happen online rather than in person, which affects people who don't have Internet access:

**I also know that there are things that are actually hindering any capacity building, such as lack of broadband. . . . It shouldn't be [like this] in 2024, [when] everyone should have access to the same [methods of communication] but we don't.**

Another participant said that partnerships with local churches resulted in park-and-learn locations, allowing people in the community free Internet access. One participant acknowledged that Internet-access issues put rural students at a disadvantage when schools shifted to online learning.



## Transportation

One participant mentioned that the pandemic made clear how transportation barriers can prevent rural students from accessing training at local community colleges and participating in the workforce. Another participant said that recovery funds helped cover costs related to masks and other protective gear for bus drivers and passengers, helping people feel safer as they moved about during the pandemic:

**We continued to keep the drivers somewhat safe, as well as passengers, particularly those who had to go, say, [to] dialysis and things like that. So it was very, very helpful.**

The group agreed that transportation became a bigger issue for the region during the pandemic than it had ever been.



## Healthcare

One participant who was involved with the distribution of masks, COVID-19 tests, and hand sanitizer said that funding to increase access to these items was important—especially the funding to support vaccinations. The group agreed that there was an increased need for mental health resources in the region, which has led to more communication about how people can seek help. One participant noted improvements in mental health care:

**Especially that mental health piece. I have seen that across the board that has increased tremendously after the pandemic. I know it has. I know I have been receiving more communication of mental health first aid being offered at no cost.**



## Housing

Housing-related support was discussed by the group as necessary and helpful during the pandemic. One participant said that the region's workforce includes many jobs in the restaurant industry. Service-related jobs like these were suspended during the pandemic, so those employees needed help to pay their rent. In addition to rental-assistance funding, the stimulus checks allowed service-related employees to pay their monthly bills, such as rent and utilities. As one participant noted:

**[In] any one of our five counties . . . you suddenly had all these renters who can't pay their rent, and then landlords can't pay their payments on the rental property they own. So it [shows how] not being able to pay your rent affects a lot of people.**

One participant said that while there was a growing need to help the elderly find housing, the pandemic uncovered an even wider need:

**I'm able to help individuals gain a career opportunity. But [sometimes] they need a job, [and] they're pretty much homeless. And [this problem is] not just affecting the elderly. [It] is affecting every age group, population. That is what I've observed.**

### WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

## Business-Specific Concerns

Overall, the group agreed with the 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: a lack of workers, a lack of qualified workers, and a lack of access to capital. They did not necessarily place them in any particular order, however.



## Lack of Workers and Lack of Qualified Workers

Participants spoke of the low employability rate in the area. They also seemed to feel that society has changed and the knowledge of “soft skills”—effectively speaking with people, for example—is no longer useful. They noted that the extra workers hired to assist with social services during the pandemic will probably not be able to stay in their jobs because of the salaries required.

### 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 generally agreed with the resiliency scores for the region and the individual counties. The participants said that because most of the region is in a very rural part of the state, it is not able to compete with more urban areas.

### LESSONS LEARNED:

## Preparing for the Next Crisis

Participants seemed to feel that the region is very resilient, and they shared the following insights to help prepare for the future.

1. **Communication and collaboration are crucial.** There is better communication across the region since the pandemic. Collaboration among the various local governments has also improved.
2. **Increase centralization of information.** The participants said that many resources were left untapped because people weren’t aware of them, especially in the education community. Looking ahead, it would be helpful to have a central hub that helps community members access key services and resources.
3. **Support workforce and business needs.** The progress that was made to help people stay connected with jobs through the pandemic can strengthen efforts to bring new businesses to the area and continue building a workforce pipeline.
4. **Utilize existing funding opportunities.** Pandemic impacts, along with an increase in hurricane-recovery and resilience needs in recent years, has left the area in great need, which means it is in a position to take advantage of new funding opportunities as they become available:

Our needs are tremendous. [They range] from housing to transportation to our food deserts. But . . . we’re trying to . . . tackle [them], trying to overcome them. . . . [T]hinking outside the box [will] help us get to where we need to be. So I’m very optimistic about our region. And [I] certainly take pride in our five-county region.