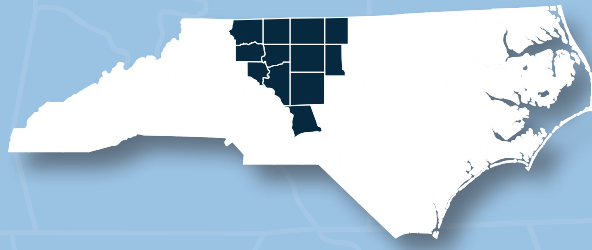


## REGIONAL SUMMARY

# Piedmont Triad

Focus-group session conducted in person on February 28, 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

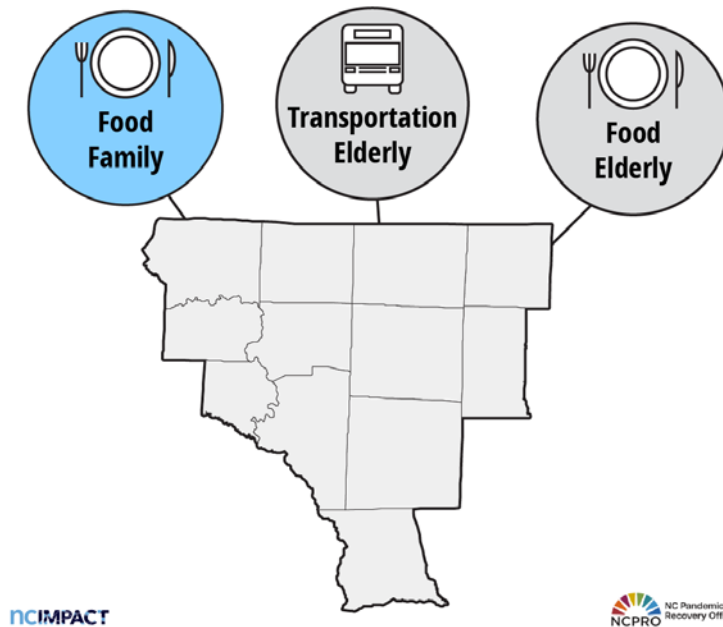
Eleven people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The [Piedmont Triad Regional Council](#) represents Alamance, Caswell, Davidson, Davie, Forsyth, Guilford, Montgomery, Randolph, Rockingham, Stokes, Surry, and Yadkin counties. Two participants were from Davidson County, two were from Alamance County, three were from Guilford County and four were from Forsyth County. (One of the participants from Forsyth County represented a regional organization that covers Forsyth, Davidson, Davie, Stokes, Surry, and Yadkin counties.) Based on our observations, the participants appeared to be nine women and two men of traditional working age (between 24 and 65). Four worked in local government; three worked in non-profits; two worked in higher education; and one was a small-business owner. Three appeared to be Black. The others appeared to be white.

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 the pandemic-era programs and funding that made a significant difference in their communities and raised concerns about conditions that are worsening or will worsen when these programs and their associated funding end. They spoke with great optimism about the future.

## Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Piedmont Triad Council of Governments Service Area



### WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

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

Participants agreed with the CES that the top concern in their region is housing, and they specifically mentioned housing for families. Housing for the elderly and food insecurity for the elderly were not mentioned.



### Housing

Housing was, by far, the area of greatest concern.<sup>1</sup> Participants emphasized the success of rental-assistance programs during the pandemic. Everyone agreed that the programs were responsive to a pressing need and averted a crisis of unprecedented homelessness. However, there were mixed emotions about the success of the eviction moratorium. Some participants said there were landlords who ignored the moratorium. Participants noted that the end of these programs caused a sharp rise in challenges to many households. Families that were behind on rent were evicted.

The group discussed issues related to homelessness. Participants mentioned the lack of affordable, adequate, and available housing as the greatest risks to thriving local communities.

1. We did not have the disaggregated data available for this focus group, but we did share the statewide data over time.

### Affordability

While some participants commented on the need for more and deeper subsidies to make the existing housing stock affordable, most of the conversation focused on the need to expand the supply of new, affordable housing units:

**[The] whole region needs to think creatively about affordable housing. In ways we have not seen in N.C. Creation of housing trust. Land trust. We can't rely on the private market. That's radically new for this part of N.C.**

The participants also discussed possible ways to incentivize corporate landlords to provide affordable housing units. One participant described how the housing market is changing:

**[P]eople [are] selling in droves to large corporate people who come and renovate and then jack the rent up so it's no longer affordable housing.**

### Adequacy

Participants shared deep and sometimes alarming concerns about the inadequacy of housing. Some noted that landlords were unlawfully making tenants pay for repairs while others mentioned that tenants were afraid to report minimal housing-code violations for fear their severely limited but affordable housing would either be deemed uninhabitable by the local government or torn down by the landlord, who would then use the land for something more profitable. Here are some sample comments:

**The condition of the housing that's available: [inadequate] heating, water issues, [broken] toilets, etc. Landlords demand tenants pay for [repairs].**

**When people report something to code enforcement—[the officers] say this house is not livable so you must move out immediately.**

**[W]e are a small rural community. We see it. A lot of landlords say, if there are repairs then we'll just tear it down and move on.**

### Availability

Participants expressed special concern about housing needs for the elderly and young people in foster care or aging out of foster care:

**Another data point that we can use is, when it comes to youth in foster care, there's a huge chunk of them that their living space right now is (literally) the Department of Social Services.**



### Childcare

After housing, the second major concern for participants was the end of pandemic-recovery programs for childcare:

I think when childcare subsidies end, providers are going to see another dramatic cliff of [losing] thousands of childcare centers. You're going to lose women in the workforce. Just like during the height of the pandemic.



### Physical and Behavioral Health

The group noted that the advancement of telehealth options could improve physical and behavioral health in North Carolina. However, they emphasized that healthcare is still not fully accessible or affordable and that increasing access to medical resources is important.



### Community Safety

Community safety was not a strong theme in the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey, but participants raised significant concerns about broader issues related to violence against individuals and their property. They also mentioned that some community structures are unsafe for disabled individuals. Participants noted a heightened sense of vulnerability:

Even in Walmart, you're thinking about somebody starting to shoot. Even at Joel Osteen's church.

People are saying they do not feel safe in their communities. Gun violence, gang violence. Living on a second floor if you're in a wheelchair. Safety is in the eyes of the beholder. Don't want to define it holistically for folks and miss a group.



### Civic Engagement through Volunteerism and Religious Activity

Participants noted a post-pandemic downturn in civic engagement. This was a surprising observation given that they had previously talked about how different sectors came together during the pandemic to support communities. Religious and non-profit efforts have been affected:

In the non-profit sector, we have seen a downturn in volunteerism.

I keep thinking, what happened to the people that used to come to church? Where are they?



### Transportation

Participants spent a significant amount of time noting how a lack of transportation access affects other issues like jobs. The quotes below focus on Greensboro, but they reflect a broader set of concerns:

In Greensboro there is a bus line. It's not easy to get from one side of Greensboro to the other without going to the main depot, which is insane.

Jobs are out in counties like Randolph County. For people in Greensboro, how are they going to get out there?

For people in [nearby rural areas who] want a job in Greensboro, how do you get there? You have to have a car.



## Income Inequality

As participants talked about cell-phone and Internet access and affordability, they agreed that the overarching challenge was one of income inequality. The group also agreed when one participant observed that many of the region's ongoing challenges are related to income inequality:

All the affordability pieces go back to income inequality, which is the overarching issue.

### WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

## Business-Specific Concerns

Participants made comments that aligned with concerns raised 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. They did not, however, specifically mention a lack of qualified workers or access to capital.



## Lack of Workers

When the conversation turned to the ongoing challenges businesses are facing after the pandemic, participants acknowledged that employers are having a hard time finding and retaining workers. They shared thoughts on how employers might solve these challenges. They also noted the need for businesses and workforce-development institutions to be more creative in engaging potential workers:

Employers have started to offer on-site childcare, on-site health care and their own affordable housing. There's a community where the largest employers are building their own affordable housing units because otherwise they can't attract employees.

If a business doesn't expose itself to early learners and start showing different facets of that business, [youth] can't start thinking about who they are and what they'd like to offer to these businesses. Businesses should do a better job of going into education and sharing what they do.

We need our partners to think about getting outside of the bricks and mortar. Technical schools going to rec centers [and introducing people to their opportunities] is going to where the need is.

Several participants noted that employers who pay low wages cannot find workers because of those low wages.

**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 vulnerability scores the region received. They noted, however, that some counties that appeared less vulnerable did not present that way in pandemic-recovery work.<sup>2</sup> Even the least vulnerable counties had very vulnerable subpopulations.

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

Perhaps not surprisingly, with respect to the effectiveness of specific pandemic-recovery programs or funding sources, there was little discussion of rental assistance or the eviction moratorium. Participants did not mention institutional support at the state, regional, or local levels. Instead, they spoke of these other issues:

- 1. Increasing capacity for communication and collaboration matters in a crisis.** Participants pointed to work by non-profits and the faith community as having the greatest impacts locally. They called for greater and better communication between local government and other sectors. One participant said:

*It was wonderful to see the communities coming together during the pandemic. Let's encourage our communities. We still need what you did.*

- 2. Being sensitive to cliffs that members of the community still face.** The participants expressed concern that the volume of federal funding may have left residents with the sense that only government has the answers, and that may have dampened their calling for volunteer work. One participant spoke of confusion:

*I'm not clear on programs that are being taken away. That's the issue here. I think we've given the government too much attention and not enough attention to the community.*

- 3. Addressing a perceived drop in civic participation.** One participant noted the need to bridge gaps:

*We have our concerned citizen groups that want to tell us what the problem is but don't want to be part of the solution. . . . We've got to figure out a way to bridge that gap that we're missing right now.*

<sup>2</sup> We used the Social Vulnerability Index for this part of the conversation rather than NCPRO's Resiliency Index because the NCPRO data was not available.