

REGIONAL SUMMARY

Southwestern

Focus-group session conducted virtually on March 19, 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

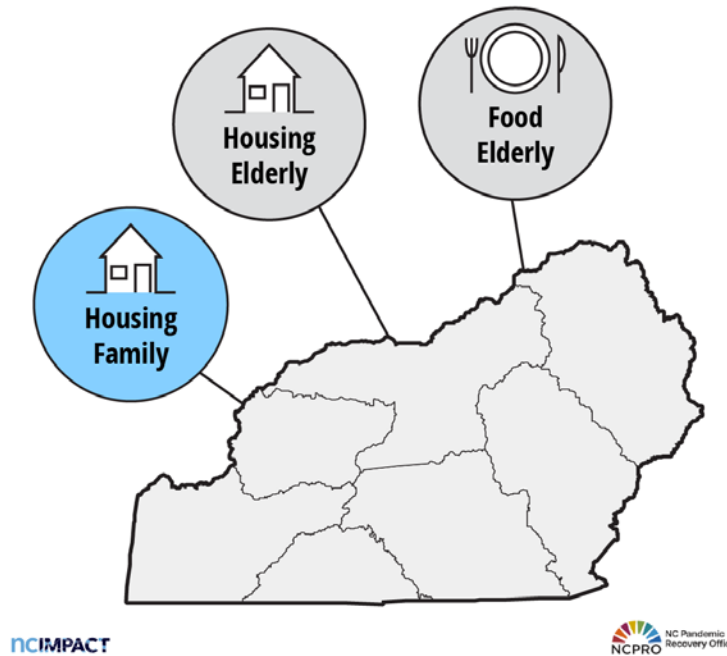
Seven people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The [Southwestern Commission Council of Governments](#) covers Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. The participants appeared to be of traditional working age (between 24 and 65). It appeared as if this group was mostly white with one Native American. Each county had some form of representation. One woman from the healthcare sector and one woman from the university sector represented all seven counties. Three women from Haywood and Jackson counties represented the government sector. One man represented the local-government sector in Graham as well as the EMS and health department. One woman was from the community planning sector. NCPRO had two representatives present as well.

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?

The group discussed the role of federal funding in meeting community needs during the pandemic and the importance of a comprehensive regional strategy that will continue to meet those needs. Communication and collaboration between local organizations was a common theme throughout the discussion.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Southwestern Commission Service Area



WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

Participants agreed with the top concerns in the CES related to housing and food, but they did not make specific reference to housing for families and/or the elderly or food insecurity for the elderly.



Communication and Collaboration

Participants said that their communities came together during the pandemic in an effort to help people in need. Several participants noted that food distribution was crucial not just for the elderly but also for people trying to feed their families:

We were very versatile about trying to make sure everybody had what they needed, especially food.

I don't think it's just food [for the] elderly. I think it's food for families everywhere, because you still have a lot of . . . food banks that are going on, that families are going to because there's such food insecurity in this area.



Housing

Housing was a top concern shared by participants. One participant said that the struggle many faced to maintain housing during the pandemic could be seen at local food banks, where people were not only asking for food but also for help with housing assistance. Another said that while the opportunity to defer mortgage payments helped homeowners stay put during the pandemic, ultimately many of them lost their homes when the deferment period ended. A participant who is in social work said that while many families were able to avoid being displaced thanks to rental-assistance programs, many of them were unprepared for the financial disruption caused by those benefits ending. Here are some sample comments:

Families could not come up with additional funding [that would] replace what they needed to be able to keep . . . their homes. And we've had quite a few people lose their homes because they didn't understand how that impact was going to affect them in their life.

The understanding level of some of the people involved in [rental-assistance programs] was not [understanding]. When everything ended, that meant they had to actually figure out what they were going to do.

The group agreed that there is a need for workforce housing.



Business

Participants agreed that the [Paycheck Protection Program](#) (PPP) was immensely helpful in saving small businesses and keeping people in their jobs. For people who were unable to stay in their jobs, the expansion of unemployment benefits was crucial. Participants talked about efforts to continue supporting small businesses in the post-pandemic era. One participant mentioned that American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding through the N.C. Division of Workforce Solutions has funded new incumbent worker training sessions for businesses with twenty-five or fewer employees. Here are some of those comments:

I really do think that that [ARPA] was a lifeline, for not only the business, but also the employees. There. So I mean, that was just such an awful time.

Expanded unemployment benefits were very valuable. It was a very concerning and frightening time for people.



Healthcare

Participants agreed that the solutions to delivering healthcare during the pandemic were creative and collaborative. One participant said that community testing sites were successful and well-received by local residents. Social media made it possible to

streamline and expedite communications about the availability of pandemic-related community events and services:

I remember Haywood Community College having a place where everybody could go collectively and be tested . . . so I felt like that was a really good community effort.

Another participant said that essential-worker pay was supplemented during the pandemic, which helped support healthcare access. The group agreed that the increase in telehealth services was not only beneficial during the pandemic but continues to make access to medical care easier for people in the region.



Childcare, Education, and Eldercare

Childcare and intergenerational care were noted as top concerns for the region. Supplemental funding for childcare facilities was helpful during the pandemic, but when it ended, some centers had to close their doors. As one participant noted, the impact of childcare shortages on the workforce is a concern that continues today:

[Childcare is] still lacking in our area. And it's [had] a huge impact on our workforce.

One participant added that support for older community members is a growing need in the region. Broadband access, in particular, is an issue that can complicate older people's access to healthcare:

But with our older adults some of them do not have broadband, so they don't have telehealth, or they don't use a computer, not everybody is on the computer. So . . . especially with our older adult population . . . it's a big challenge for sure.

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.



Lack of Workers and Lack of Qualified Workers

There was a great deal of discussion about the lack of workers in the region, which led to a discussion about the lack of housing for workers. The difficulty of earning a living wage is another issue that workers in this region face:

It's difficult to get people into our region because there's nowhere for them to live. . . . And then [there are] the ones that we do have, our homegrown talent, the people who live here, that we're trying to get into the workforce.

Continuing to increase the employability skills of people in the region was also noted as a top priority.



Lack of Access to Capital

One participant mentioned access to capital as a barrier to local businesses.

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 its results. Participants said that access to transportation was a concern in the region since a lack of adequate public transportation can prevent workers from getting to their jobs. They noted that the region's vulnerability was related to a lack of flat, open areas of land that are enticing to larger corporations.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Preparing for the Next Crisis

This region is committed to the ongoing process of working together to build on what they learned during the pandemic.

1. **Communication and Collaboration.** Participants noted that the improved communication that developed during the pandemic has continued to benefit collaborations in the area, though infrastructure funds are needed to help avoid potential transportation barriers. As one participant said:

I think a lot of communities were playing Whac-a-Mole with . . . difficult infrastructure. It's like, oh, where's the water main break today? And then that's what we deal with. . . . [S]ome of the funding that has come down has allowed [people] to think a little . . . more broadly about redevelopment kinds of projects and projects that would move a community ahead economically.

2. **Economic Development.** The group affirmed the importance of regional councils of government. One participant expressed a desire to bolster supply chain and food distribution processes:

Greater regionalization . . . is something that we really need to think very hard about, [and] whether we are able to support ourselves with food and drinking water and that kind of thing.