Western Piedmont

Focus-group session conducted in person on March 18, 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

Ten people volunteered for this focus-group conversation. The Western Piedmont Council of Governments represents Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba counties. There were participants from each county. Their age range appeared to be from 30 to 60 years old. One participant, who works in the non-profit sector, appeared to be an Asian man. The other nine participants appeared to be white. Of the five participants from the local-government sector, three appeared to be women and two appeared to be men. One participant, who appeared to be a woman, was from the Division of Social Services (DSS) in the nutrition sector; one participant, who appeared to be a woman, was from the education sector; one participant, who appeared to be a woman, was from the eldercare sector; and one participant, who appeared to be a man, was from the emergency services sector.

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 participants discussed the role of federal programs in meeting community challenges that were exacerbated by the pandemic, such as housing and healthcare. The threat of environmental hazards and natural disasters was also discussed. The group emphasized the ongoing importance of meeting the basic needs of the region's residents.

Top Areas of Concern for Residents in Western Piedmont Council of Governments Service Area
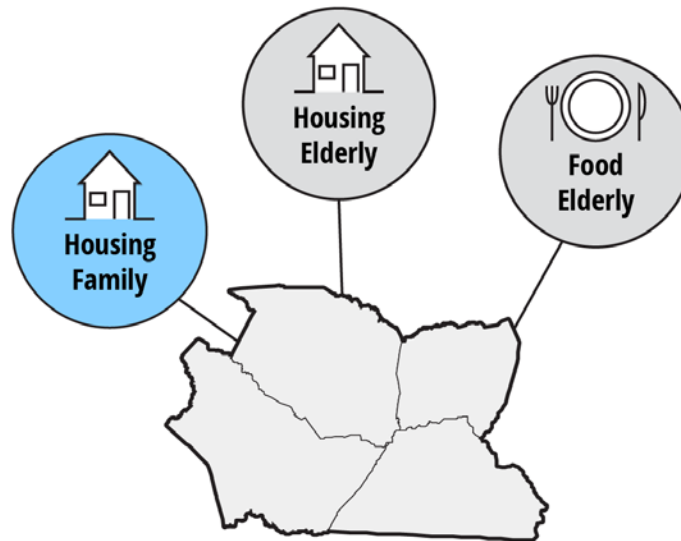
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NCPRO
NC Pandemic
Recovery Office

Reactions to the NCPRO Community Engagement Survey (CES) Results

The participants agreed with the CES that the top concern in their region is housing, although they did not specifically mention housing for families and/or the elderly. Food insecurity for the elderly was mentioned.

Housing

Participants agreed that pandemic-era funding, such as the locally facilitated Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), helped distribute a wide range of support, enabling community members to pay their utilities, mortgages, or rent. One participant said:

> For residents in the region . . . it really kept foreclosures down because if they were behind, [funding] would be put on house payment[s] and also rent, . . . [keeping] them from being displaced, . . . so that was a really good program.

One participant noted the leadership role one city took in creating a program to alleviate homelessness, hiring five homeless "navigators" to go out in the

community's streets, encampments, and other areas with police to provide people with much-needed services:

> It's a really cool program, and when we first thought about it, we thought that's going to be really hard to do, and it is really hard to do, but they've hired these, what I call superpowers . . . people [who] understand that and can do that.

Local municipalities and water providers worked together to avoid cutting off utilities during the pandemic:

> We had people [who] were already living on the margins and they were laid off or their business was not open or their hours were cut back. . . . I think we got six months' reprieve, and the state and feds stepped in and helped us pay those bills for those folks who couldn't pay them.

Healthcare

Local businesses were eager to collaborate and quick to respond to pandemic needs, according to the participants. A local soap maker partnered with a nearby distillery and shifted from making soap and candles to making hand sanitizer. One participant said that **Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act** funds allowed detention centers to purchase scanning equipment that saved people's lives. The imaging technology helped facility workers to identify and remove contraband that may have led to the spread of the coronavirus. Early Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reimbursements were also important because they allowed local manufacturers to start making personal protective equipment (PPE), which helped first responders stay safe while performing their essential work. Here are some sample comments:

> [I] remember the county manager for Catawba County walked up with the county credit card and said, "We need masks for all of our frontline first responders now." And [when] we ordered them, nobody could get them.

> Had we not had the confidence in the family reimbursement program and emergency management in North Carolina, [shifting manufacturing to PPE production] would not have been possible because . . . when we made those orders, that gave that company enough working capital.

> Simple things like gowns and hoods . . . there was no production capacity for that in the U.S. There's no production capacity for nonwoven materials. Almost all of that had been offshored in the '90s. And we were able to reshore that and put factories back to work. And that was simply through having that FEMA money where the locals could write a check and know we were going to be able to cover that expense.

One participant said that vaccine delivery was streamlined thanks to partnerships between public and private entities. For example, some community paramedics helped rethink the delivery process, which resulted in the county's health department leasing commercial space for vaccine administration.

Eldercare

The participants agreed that the region's effort to support the elderly during the pandemic was effective, and they were proud of it. Using CARES Act funds, a partnership was created with Lowes supermarket to offer free delivery of food to older members of the community. More than five hundred people were served, and the program was recognized nationally for its success. One participant said that the CARES Act funding was also helpful in creating a "house planning" program that helped the elderly avoid paying for basic maintenance projects like pest control and lawn care so that they could save their money for housing and food:

> [Seniors ask], "Am I getting that grass cut, or am I eating, or am I getting my meds?" . . . It's making their homes safer . . . [and] they're not out in the courtyard of their yard and falling. . . . We're able to do some cleanup and pay for some tree removals and things like that.

Education

Participants said that students and their families were able to find resources through schools. One participant said that some schools provided meals that families could pick up. Another said that local parking lots and churches were used to connect students with the Internet so they could do their schoolwork. According to one participant, teachers were instrumental in helping identify students and families in need. In the absence of in-person instruction, they had to improvise in order to understand what was happening at home with their students. The food pick-up program at schools helped them feel better about students' well-being and safety:

> You're not seeing these kids every day, you don't know if they're okay. So that kind of helped where we could still see the kids. You still saw them every day, and you could . . . you could call the social worker if there was concern. But when they were gone, that was very scary, for us teachers.

One participant said that the pandemic increased community awareness of the number of grandparents who were raising their grandchildren in the region. This awareness drove an effort to connect grandparents with available resources, including Internet services so that schoolchildren could continue their education:

> We serve a huge population of grandparents raising grandchildren, and there were so many other obstacles before COVID and now you're telling 80-year-old grandparents who have a hotel and a computer that their grandkids have to do school online, and they don't even have Internet and so they were driving to local parking lots and sitting in the parking lot. We had a grandparent that had three grandchildren . . . and they're sitting in the car for five to six hours, all of them, doing homework. So [we were] able to partner and buy jetpacks [mobile hotspot devices] so that they can have a better home.

Workforce

One participant said that the expansion of public–private partnerships, involving companies like Lyft, Indeed, and Goodwill Industries, were instrumental in helping people keep, access, and gain training for jobs. A partnership with Lyft gave free "essential" rides to parents who needed to fill out in-person paperwork before beginning new, online jobs. Indeed provided computers and laptops for remote workers.

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. However, the participants did not specifically mention the region's lack of qualified workers or access to capital.

Lack of Workers

The participants' business concerns were focused on worker shortages and population shortages. They said that families were moving out of the region and having fewer children, which was driving a regional population decrease and making it hard to maintain a local workforce:

> They [young adults] didn't come back here because they couldn't find housing, [living wages,] and jobs, . . . which is the sad and unfortunate truth for some of the ones who went off to college and didn't come back.

> I do think that it is probably also a lack of professional jobs. Because if we [only] have low-skilled jobs, people who went off to college are not going to want to come back and do those jobs.

Some participants mentioned that an increase in vacation rentals was driving up home costs and making them unaffordable to many residents.

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 results. They noted that financing to rebuild and update infrastructure is crucial for strengthening resilience in the region. A stronger workforce is also necessary to help with future infrastructure projects and sustain the local business economy. Participants emphasized that increasing access to weather warnings

is critical in a region that experiences sudden and extreme weather events. Access to adequate mental health resources was also mentioned as a top need. Substance use disorder, in particular, was highlighted—one participant said the region is "plagued" with addiction—as significantly contributing to mental health support needs as well as demands on the incarceration system. One participant emphasized the importance of resilience efforts:

> For long-term resiliency, you need to look at two major factors. One has to be mitigation of environmental and manmade hazards. And having adequate funding and [requiring] local governments and industries to constantly be on the lookout for mitigation, whether it's cybersecurity, whether it's environmental—flash flooding, earthquakes, and whatever the area is prone to. That has to be part of the operation from here on out.

LESSONS LEARNED:
Preparing for the Next Crisis

1. **Meet basic needs.** Participants mentioned the importance of continuing to find ways to address the food deserts in the region and increasing access to affordable housing. One participant said:

   > I'd like to see the basic needs mapped so that we don't have any residents [who] worry about where their next meal is coming from or where they're going to sleep."

2. **Communication and collaboration.** Participants said that communication has increased in the region and should be maintained to address future concerns. One participant spoke of mental health concerns:

   > Mental health . . . my hope is that we will collaborate more and find innovative ways to invest in our population that we have now and the population that we want. [I]nvesting in our population now will help them get the resources they need to be successful.

3. **Workforce.** Because most of the people who live in the region are older, it is important to attract new residents. The local workforce would also benefit from a population increase. Innovative solutions are needed to help address this issue.