

2024

# RURAL LISTENING TOUR

A REPORT







## DEAR FELLOW RURAL ADVOCATE,

On behalf of the NC Rural Center, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude for taking the time to participate in our Rural Issues Poll and Listening Sessions. We have heard you, and your input plays a key role in helping us improve our messaging for the advocacy of issues pertinent to rural North Carolina.

We heard from twelve hundred different North Carolinians through our poll and in depth conversations across fifteen different communities.

This report summarizes what we heard collectively and highlights relevant trends, perspectives, and stories worthy of attention and praise. We learned:

- across geography, political affiliation, and gender, the most critical issues at the top of your minds are childcare, affordable housing, and the education of our future workforce;
- disparities exist in infrastructure, health, and economic opportunities, and local champions working diligently to overcome these challenges; and,
- our rural citizens are resilient, committed to their communities and regions, and care deeply about the future of their families and fellow citizens.

We understand that your time is precious, and we appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts and experiences with us. Personally, I am humbled by your openness and time. We will utilize these findings to formulate a robust **policy platform** and **legislative priorities** list, as well as drive discussions at our policy-focused **Rural Summit** on March 25-26, 2025. Please don't hesitate to contact me or my staff if you have any questions about this report, our advocacy platform and legislative priorities, or what more we can do to help amplify your perspectives and work.

And we'll be back!

Sincerely,

Patrick Woodie, President & CEO  
NC Rural Center

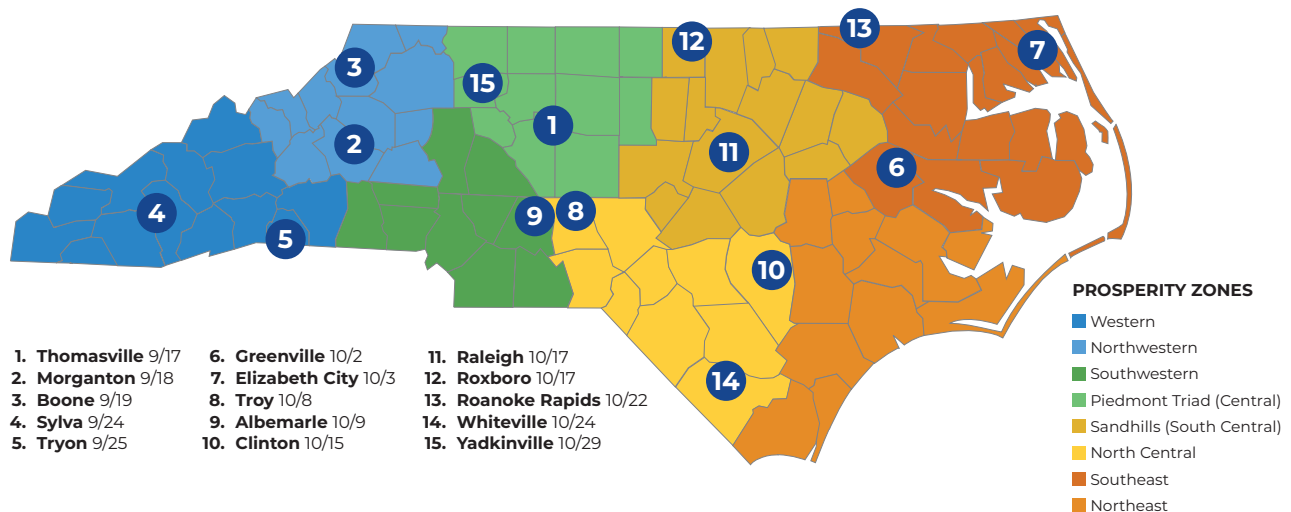


# RURAL LISTENING TOUR - THE SET UP

The Rural Center embarked on a fifteen stop journey across the state to collect the thoughts, perceptions, and opinions of rural residents and leaders on issues affecting their communities' and regions' economies. Our goal was simple: to listen to participants' insights to bring back to Raleigh to share with elected officials in the halls of Jones Street and beyond. We specifically addressed issues pertaining to five areas:

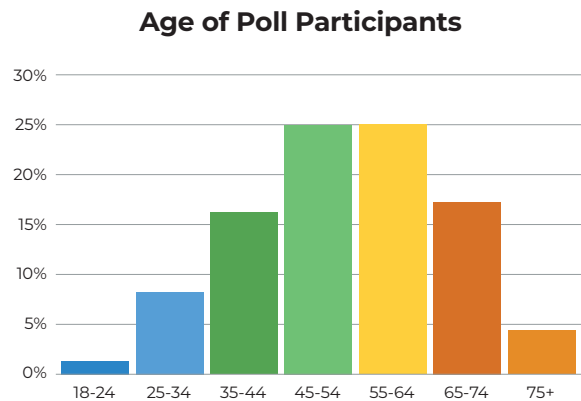
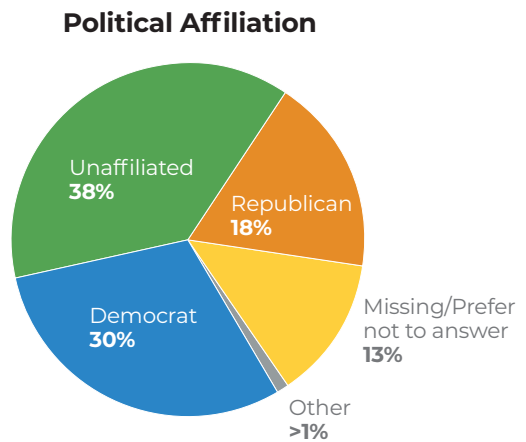
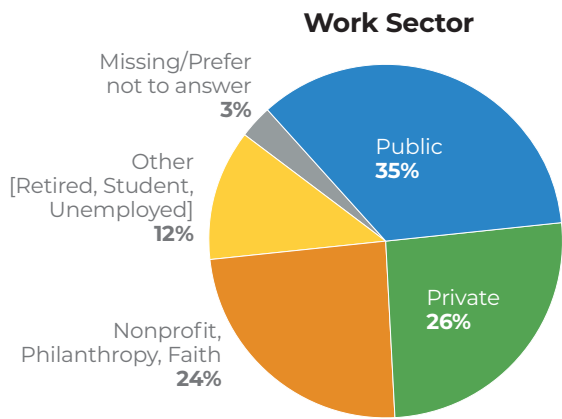
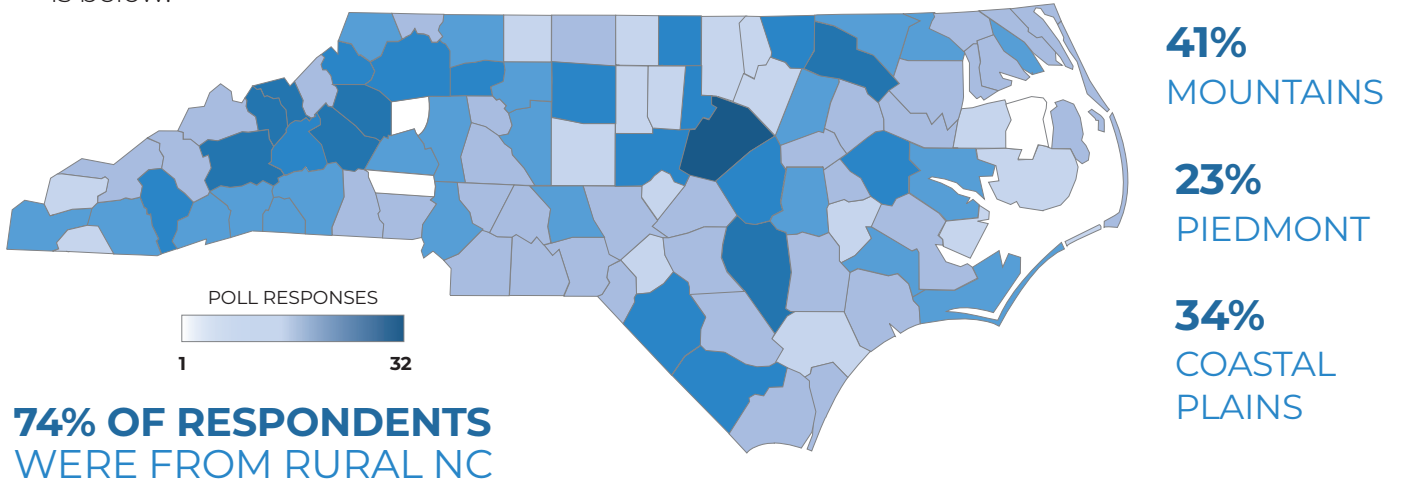
- **Infrastructure:** Affordable housing, Road and bridge conditions, Public transportation, Access to high-speed broadband, and Water and/or wastewater systems.
- **Education & Workforce:** Quality of public K-12 schools, Adequate funding for public K-12 schools, Opportunities for postsecondary education (i.e. trade school, community colleges, 4-year institutions), Continued opportunities for local postsecondary education options, Availability of mentorship and/or apprenticeship programs, and Access to childcare.
- **Health:** Opioid/drug abuse, Access to healthy food, Adequate elder healthcare, Quality of, and access to, local healthcare providers and/or facilities.
- **Business & Economic Development:** Access to financial resources (i.e. loans, investments), Availability of a qualified workforce, High cost of doing business (i.e. rent, utilities, gas), Sufficient local customer base, and Business taxes.
- **Social & Civic Infrastructure:** Civic engagement, Crime, Population change (growth or loss), Effective local leadership, Local cultural amenities (cultural opportunities, outdoor recreation, parks, community space), and Access to eldercare.

## WHERE WE WENT - RURAL LISTENING SESSIONS



# WHO WE HEARD FROM - RURAL ISSUES POLL

In addition to the listening sessions, the Rural Center also conducted the *Rural Issues Poll*, which sought respondents' perceptions on issues related to five key categories noted previously: infrastructure, education & workforce, health, business & economic development, and social & civic infrastructure. We heard from over 850 residents, and their thoughts are presented in the following sections of the report. A snapshot of the respondents is below:





# INFRASTRUCTURE

## **Roads and Bridges**

Rural roads and bridges in North Carolina face significant challenges, especially in regions experiencing population growth. Deferred maintenance has left many of these critical structures in deteriorating condition, with repair costs becoming prohibitively expensive over time. Rural communities often struggle to compete for grant funding due to high matching fund requirements and limited capacity for grant oversight, creating a cycle that hinders safety and economic opportunities. Without proactive investment and long-term planning, rural areas will become further overlooked for otherwise opportune development projects.

## **Public Transportation**

Public transportation in rural North Carolina is limited, leaving residents without reliable transit options to access essential services like healthcare, jobs, and education. Existing public transportation systems often fail to meet community needs due to inefficiency or insufficient reach. For residents who need to travel to community college campuses or medical facilities, this lack of transportation creates barriers that hinder personal and regional growth. Tailored investment in accessible and efficient transit systems is essential to bridging these gaps and fostering economic and social mobility in rural areas.

## **Broadband Access**

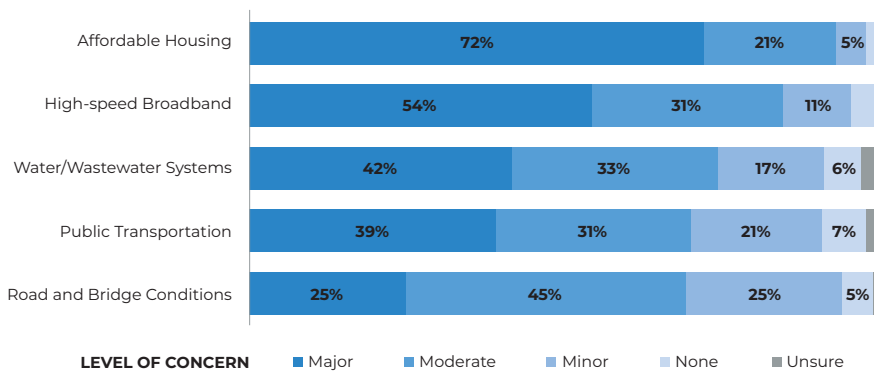
Broadband connectivity remains a persistent challenge in rural areas, with many residents unable to access reliable or affordable internet services. Digital literacy issues further prevent some populations from fully benefiting from existing resources. The discontinuation of federal subsidy programs like the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) has raised affordability concerns, particularly in areas with limited competition among internet service providers. Bureaucratic delays also slow the deployment of infrastructure funded by public grants, frustrating communities eager for progress. Expanding broadband access and affordability is increasingly vital for rural economies and quality of life, as digital connectivity becomes a cornerstone of modern living.

## **Water and Wastewater**

Aging water and wastewater systems present a significant challenge for rural North Carolina. The financial burden of necessary repairs and upgrades often exceeds the capacity of small municipalities and ratepayers. To stay afloat, many smaller systems have been absorbed by larger ones, but this shift does not address ongoing concerns about water quality, including PFAS contamination. Federal and state funding remains critical, as local governments lack the financial means to independently address these issues. Long-term solutions will require innovative funding models, technical support, and policy changes to ensure sustainable water and wastewater infrastructure.



## POLL DATA



Poll data indicated affordable housing is the issue that garnered the most concern on the entire poll, regardless of geography, political affiliation, and demographics. Broadband connection remains a top concern, highlighting the importance of continuing to connect rural communities.

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

### Edgecombe County's "Get Off the Lists" Initiative

Participants highlighted Edgecombe County's **"Get Off the Lists" initiative**. This countywide endeavor began in 2023 and focuses on improving Edgecombe County's rankings on prevalent lists that rank North Carolina's counties on a variety of health and socioeconomic factors. County leadership is using this initiative to make targeted improvements based on four focus areas (Youth & Families, Education & Workforce, Health Equity, and Affordable/Safe Housing) that will lead them into a future where they can "get off the lists" and improve their ranking. The initiative embodies a long-term commitment directed by four advisory boards that, through a "support framework", will infuse resources into existing local efforts to further elevate and sustain ongoing work while expanding capacity. County manager Eric Evans commented, "How we have been does not dictate what will always be. That starts within us- local and county governments."

### Bertie County Schools Housing Program

Listening sessions participants praised the **Dream Pointe apartment project in Bertie County**, an apartment complex that was created to house local public school and government employees. These apartments were made possible by a \$3.1 million, 15-year interest-free loan and interest-free construction financing provided by the **State Employees' Credit Union**. This financing was directed to the Partners for Bertie County Public Schools, which identified a need for affordable housing in the area for teachers. During the 2021-22 school year, about one in four teachers left the district, leaving Bertie County with the second highest attrition rate in the state. The apartments rent for \$800 a month, which is lower than the fair market rate in the area, and can house up to 40 teachers. Teachers with the greatest need will be given priority access to the apartments.



# EDUCATION & WORKFORCE

## K-12 Education

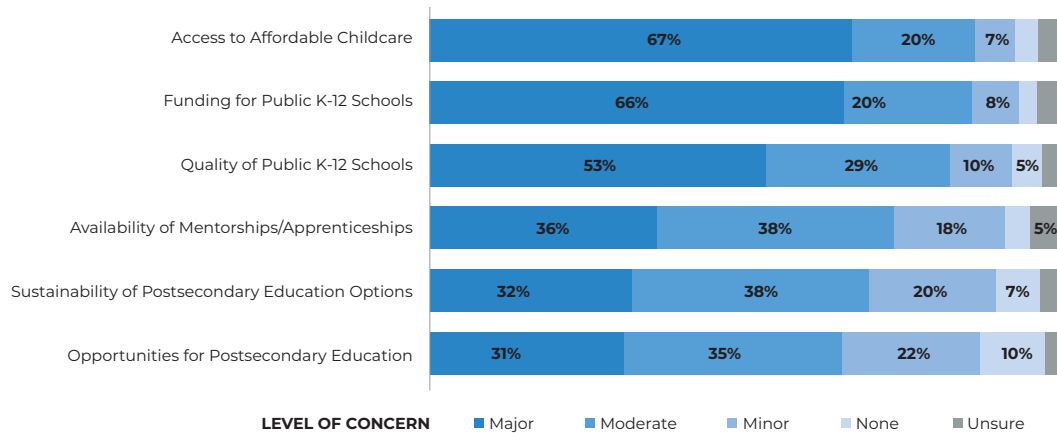
Rural schools face numerous challenges that impact both educators and students. Teachers and administrators are overburdened with addressing students' social and emotional concerns, leaving less time and energy to focus on academic outcomes. Mental health issues among students, coupled with underfunded resources like textbooks and supplies, exacerbate achievement gaps. Competition between city, county, and charter schools further strain rural districts, while low teacher pay and questionable school grading systems hinder recruitment and retention. These challenges also reduce the attractiveness of rural communities, discouraging families and businesses from relocating. To improve educational outcomes and community vitality, there is a pressing need for increased funding, curriculum adjustments emphasizing workforce preparedness, and expanded after-school programs to support older youth.

## Postsecondary Education

While North Carolina's community colleges are well-regarded, rural residents face significant barriers to accessing postsecondary education, professional and skilled trade certification, and continuing workforce training. Transportation challenges and high program costs limit opportunities, while the shortage of instructors in trade programs further constrains growth. Despite high demand for skilled trades training, better wages in the private sector draw potential instructors away from teaching. Additionally, a persistent stigma surrounding trade careers discourages younger generations from pursuing them, even in high-demand fields where apprenticeship programs exist. Expanding outreach to underserved populations and investing in instructor retention, transportation, and program development are essential to addressing workforce shortages and equipping rural residents with the skills needed for economic mobility.



## POLL DATA







## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

### District C

**District C, a North Carolina 501(c)(3) nonprofit**, has contracts with several rural school districts in NC to provide internship experiences in local businesses to public school students. Seventeen rural school districts across NC have adopted District C's Teamship program, a reimagined internship where teams of students solve real problems for real businesses. Lenoir County Public Schools adopted Teamship in 2021. Last year, student teams from across Lenoir County proposed solutions to help the Kinston Police Department devise new strategies to recruit young talent into entry level roles. The Police Department began implementing some of these solutions the very next week.



*Access to affordable childcare was a major concern across demographics, showing that cost and accessibility of childcare - and the economic impacts of a lack of affordable childcare - is top of mind for rural people.*



*There were strong concerns regarding public K-12 schools, especially around funding of public schools. While concern was higher in Democrat- and Unaffiliated-respondents, nearly 50 percent of Republicans rated funding and quality as a major concern.*



*Postsecondary education options and mentorships are of less concern and are typically viewed positively in rural communities.*



# HEALTH

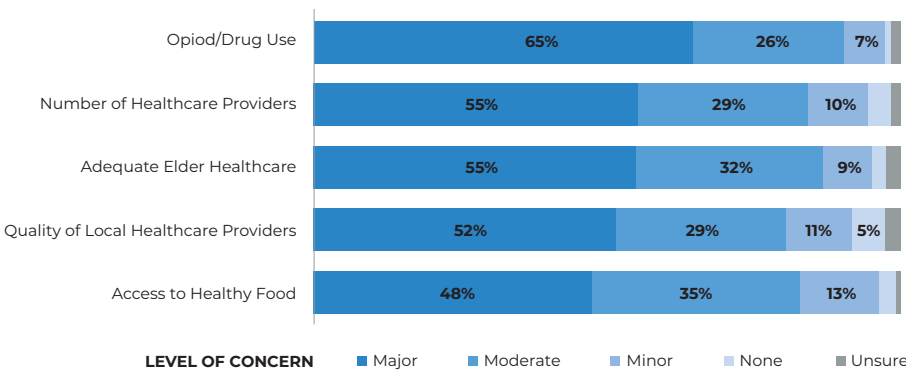
## Healthcare Access and Provider Shortages

Rural North Carolina struggles with severe shortages of healthcare providers, particularly in primary care, mental health, and specialties like pediatrics, obstetrics, and dentistry. Transportation barriers and limited availability of providers who accept Medicaid or new patients compound access challenges, leaving many residents without viable options for care. Hospital understaffing, especially in emergency departments, has led to long wait times and eroded trust in healthcare systems. Consolidation of local hospitals into larger health systems has resulted in residents' perception of reduced services and a loss of community-based care. These issues are exacerbated by provider attrition to urban areas offering higher pay and better opportunities. Addressing these concerns requires targeted incentives to attract and retain healthcare professionals in rural areas and systemic improvements to healthcare infrastructure.

## Nutrition, Elder Care, Youth Mental Health, and Public Health

Rural communities face interconnected challenges in nutrition and public health. Many areas are "nutrition insecure," with limited access to fresh, healthy foods contributing to population health concerns. The aging population struggles with insufficient long-term care facilities, a shortage of home health providers, and transportation barriers that limit access to services. Caregiver burnout is another pressing concern, as family members take on increasing responsibilities without adequate support. Youth mental health is also deteriorating, with higher rates of anxiety and depression reported. Coordinated efforts to invest in public health initiatives are critical to supporting rural residents across all life stages.

### POLL DATA



*Opioid and drug abuse remain a high concern for rural communities, not only for the public health implications but also the implications on culture, workforce, and more.*



*All health issues presented in the poll were of high concern to respondents, showing that health outcomes continue to pose challenges in rural communities.*



*Many of the health concerns link to staffing shortages.*



## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

### The NC Statewide Telepsychiatry Program

The **NC Statewide Telepsychiatry Program (NC-STeP)** is working to close access to care divides in rural North Carolina by bringing virtual psychiatric services closer to home. This ECU initiative, under Founder and Executive Director, Dr. Sy Saeed, MD, MS, FACPpsych, is providing desperately needed psychiatric services to rural North Carolinians in hospital emergency departments and community primary care clinics through telehealth. NC-STeP is funded through a mix of both state funding and grant dollars, including the United Health Foundation, BlueCross BlueShield of North Carolina Foundation, and the Health Resources and Services Administration. Virtual emergency department services have saved the state over \$59 million by preventing over 10,000 unnecessary hospitalizations. The success of the emergency department-based services motivated the expansion into primary care sites using an integrated care model in 2018. Since then, the program has expanded its service in 24 community-based sites where it has already served over 30,000 total patient visits. In 2023, the program again expanded its services into six additional pediatric clinics. During COVID, NC-STeP utilized its telehealth expertise to bring obstetrics and gynecology care to women with high-risk pregnancies, saving these moms-to-be and their families over 400,000 driving miles. NC-STeP continues to deliver on its mission to increase efficacy of care and reduce costs while also providing a service otherwise unavailable to rural North Carolina.



# BUSINESS & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

## Access to Financial Resources

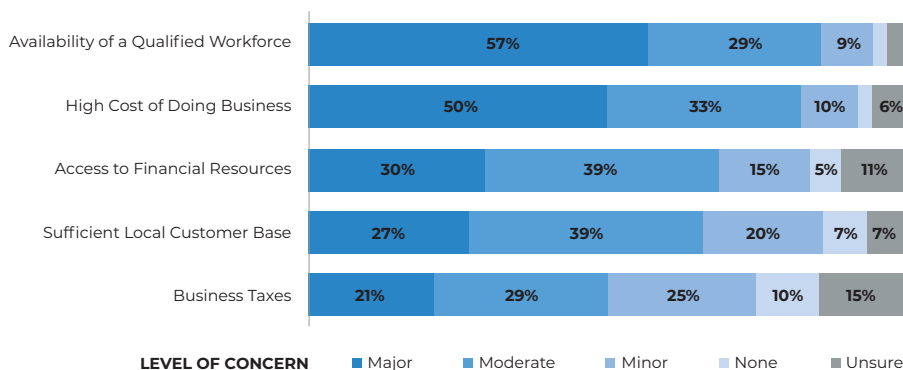
Rural businesses face significant challenges accessing capital for startups and expansion. Affordable wraparound services such as accounting and payroll assistance are increasingly unavailable as local bank branches close, leaving business owners without critical support. Community college-based Small Business Centers (SBCs) offer valuable resources, but their limited visibility and resources prevent wider utilization. Entrepreneurs express frustration with over-reliance on loans and call for grants, tax incentives, and other resources often reserved for larger corporations. Addressing these gaps is essential to fostering entrepreneurship and sustaining rural economies.

## Workforce and Infrastructure Challenges

Recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce is a persistent issue for rural businesses, driven by housing shortages, limited childcare options, and gaps in workforce readiness among K-12 graduates. Many new workers lack both the technical and soft skills needed to succeed in modern industries. Infrastructure barriers, such as aging facilities and the high cost of expanding utilities like water and broadband, further affect rural areas in appraisal for large scale economic development projects. Coordinating infrastructure improvements and addressing workforce gaps through targeted programs can help rural businesses thrive.



## POLL DATA



*A need for local workforce development initiatives is highlighted as the issue of highest concern, suggesting many small businesses may struggle to fill roles. However, rural places seem poised to foster relationships with small businesses and their postsecondary institutions that are viewed highly.*



## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

### RAMP East

The Carolinas Gateway Partnership created **RAMP East**, the Regional Advanced Manufacturing Pipeline of Eastern North Carolina, in 2018 to meet local workforce needs by bridging eight community colleges in ten counties with future employers. The program establishes a pipeline of “job ready individuals” in the advanced manufacturing sector by infusing skill development within educational programming and connections with employment opportunities within a 45-60 mile radius of their schooling. The program is a joint effort of the NC Department of Commerce, NC Community College System, and the Carolinas Gateway Partnership.



*The high cost of doing business is a major concern for many rural people. This perhaps coincides with affordable housing shortages, highlighting an affordability challenge for consumers and businesses.*



*Challenges accessing financial resources like loans and other funding appears to be regional, with people in the Coastal Plains and Piedmont rating this as a higher concern than Mountain counties.*



# SOCIAL & CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

## Civic Engagement and Leadership

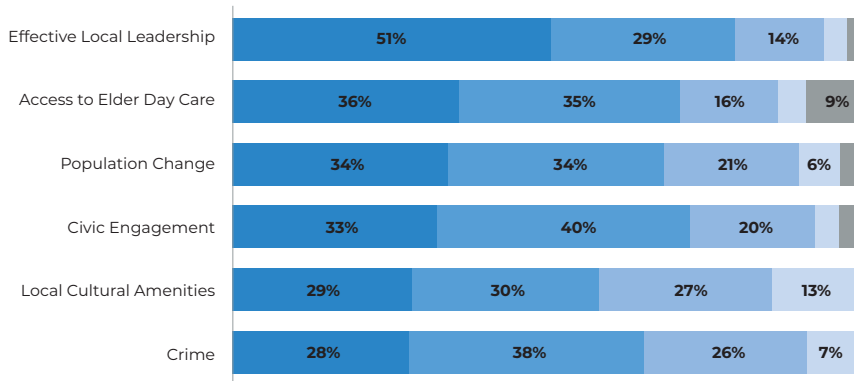
Civic participation in rural North Carolina is limited by a lack of volunteers and disengagement from local boards and institutions. Many residents feel that civic entities lack the power to enact meaningful change, fostering complacency and reducing interest in community involvement. Younger generations are particularly uninvolved, and uncontested elections discourage voter participation.

## Community Development

Population changes, including growth in Hispanic populations and the continued exodus of young adults, are reshaping rural communities. While diversity creates opportunities, housing shortages, aging infrastructure, and limited leadership capacity strain resources. Dissatisfaction with outside developers who bypass local input and the absence of cultural and recreational amenities highlight the need for more community-focused development. Investments in inclusive spaces, recreational facilities, and stronger civic engagement are essential to revitalizing these areas and fostering long-term growth.



## POLL DATA



*Effective local leadership garnered the most concern in this section. This includes a disconnect between leadership and community members, and also highlights the need to implement leadership development and succession planning.*



*Other social/civic infrastructure seems to receive less concern. However, regional differences exist, with Coastal Plains responses ranking issue areas, like local cultural amenities and population change, as greater concerns.*

# PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

## Sharon United Methodist Church Literacy Enrichment Tutoring Program

Dr. WT Griggs Elementary School and Sharon United Methodist Church (Sharon UMC) sit adjacent in the Poplar Branch community of Currituck County. For years the school struggled with lagging reading scores. Meanwhile, Sharon UMC was looking for opportunities to use its assets to better serve the community. After participating in the NC Rural Center's yearlong **Faith in Rural Communities Connect Church** program, they discovered their underused building and wealth of experienced teachers could serve as an answered prayer for their next-door neighbor. With a shared vision, the community, the school system and its parent teacher organization came together to develop the Literacy Enrichment Tutoring Program. This one-on-one tutoring program utilizes school-provided and state-mandated materials to help third-grade students struggling with reading attainment levels and has seen remarkable results. In its inaugural class, participating students' state reading scores rose as much as 80.5 points as students discovered a newfound love for books and libraries, as well as a sense of confidence. With the overall school's state test scores rising from a C to a B, Sharon UMC is securing additional funding to expand the program to the wider community.

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## Kramden Offers Digital Literacy Trainings for Rural Communities

Digital technology and training is critical for engagement in today's world. And digital access and literacy are challenges to many especially citizens in rural communities. The **Kramden Institute** is a non-profit organization trying to tackle these problems by advancing initiatives in digital access and literacy. Started by a father and son in 2003, Kramden began refurbishing and fixing older computers to donate to students. Today, over 52,000 computers have been donated to families and students across North Carolina. Kramden also provides trainings and workshops that help people develop digital skills vital to modern life. Various courses are available to instruct youth on the basics of technology, as well as skills needed in IT careers, like coding and artificial intelligence. Courses are available for adults as well, ranging from courses for beginners to certificate programs where skills can be honed and practiced. Altogether, over 11,000 people (and counting) have been trained across the state



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Rural Center expresses its sincere gratitude to the hundreds of citizens who provided their perspectives and opinions in our Rural Issues Poll and Listening Sessions, including the following elected officials:

- Senator Graig Meyer
- Senator Eddie Settle
- Representative Gloristine Brown
- Representative Jake Johnson
- Representative Ray Pickett
- Representative Rodney Pierce
- Representative Bill Ward

Additionally, the Rural Center thanks the many host sites for having us and sharing your facilities.

This road trip and report were generously supported by the Dogwood Health Trust and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust.

The Rural Center would also like to thank the many partners who helped spread the word of this grassroots effort, including Business NC magazine, NCInsider, EdNC, and numerous other local media outlets, and the North Carolina Economic Developers Association.

Finally, the Rural Center is grateful to all those citizens who graciously donated their time and energies on this effort to collectively gauge what's on the minds and in the hearts of our rural communities.



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