

Building Bridges between Residents and Resources in the Piedmont Triad



JUNE 2025 Cohort Launch

THE REGIONAL CHALLENGE:

Persistent Poverty and A Fragmented Service Landscape

The Piedmont Triad Regional Council (PTRC), one of North Carolina's largest regional councils, serves a twelve-county region across north-central North Carolina, providing planning, economic & workforce development, aging and community development services to its member governments and partner organizations.

Forsyth County sits at the heart of North Carolina's Piedmont Triad region. With roughly 402,000 residents, it is the state's fourth most populous county. The county has 22 census tracts that are formally recognized as distressed by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and its poverty rate of 13.3 percent exceeds both the state and national averages. Residents in these tracts face higher unemployment, limited access to essential services, and fewer pathways to stable, well-paying jobs.

PTRC sought to better understand these barriers at every level. Yet residents facing transportation gaps, housing instability, and inconsistent access to services may not be reached through broad, low-touch outreach; the **populations most affected by these barriers are often the hardest to engage at a distance.** The organizations in direct service are on the frontlines. These workforce, education, housing, transportation, and social service providers operate independently across the region, often with limited visibility into one another's work.

The data itself has real gaps as well, leaving a basic question unanswered: are residents aware of the workforce and supportive services available to them, and are those services accessible and responsive to their needs?



PTRC has become more intentional about pairing data with the voices and experiences of the communities we serve. By bringing together research, community perspectives, and partner insights, we have been better able to identify gaps, recognize opportunities, and develop resources and strategies that are responsive to what our communities actually need.

—Hailey Hendrix, Data and Partnership Coordinator, Piedmont Triad Regional Council



AT A GLANCE



Organization

Piedmont Triad Regional Council (PTRC)

Organization Type

Council of Governments (COG)

Key Sector(s)

Manufacturing

Geographic Context

Suburban / Rural

Key Partner Organizations

Forsyth Technical Community College, Dream Center of Forsyth County, and a broader network of 18+ workforce, education, and service organizations

THE DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH:

Pairing Labor Market Data with Direct Resident and Stakeholder Engagement

Through Forsyth Connections, a capacity building initiative funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), **PTRC and partners sought to better understand and address barriers to workforce participation and economic mobility in Forsyth County's most underserved communities.** The initiative focused on the 22 distressed census tracts identified by ARC, where the combined impacts of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to services were most significant. From the beginning, the project was designed to address a disconnect: residents in these communities were not consistently accessing the workforce, education, and supportive services already available throughout the county.

PTRC's approach addressed a broad set of factors that influence employment outcomes, recognizing that long term employment success depends on access to supportive services, including transportation, childcare, housing, healthcare, and mental health resources. That approach was tested immediately, at the resident level. The original plan called for a resident survey administered through an external partner. After a lack of responses, PTRC offered an online survey in English and Spanish distributed through more than two dozen community locations, including churches, schools, libraries, community centers, and service providers. **The online version generated almost no independent responses: every completed survey came from residents who completed it in person with a project team member using a tablet.** This experience demonstrated that direct, in-person engagement was essential for collecting meaningful resident input and it reshaped PTRC's outreach strategy for the remainder of the initiative.

Key Takeaway #1

Trusted direct service providers are the frontline for data collection. For populations facing real barriers to economic mobility, in-person engagement, listening sessions, and focus groups generated stronger participation and more meaningful information than digital survey tools alone.

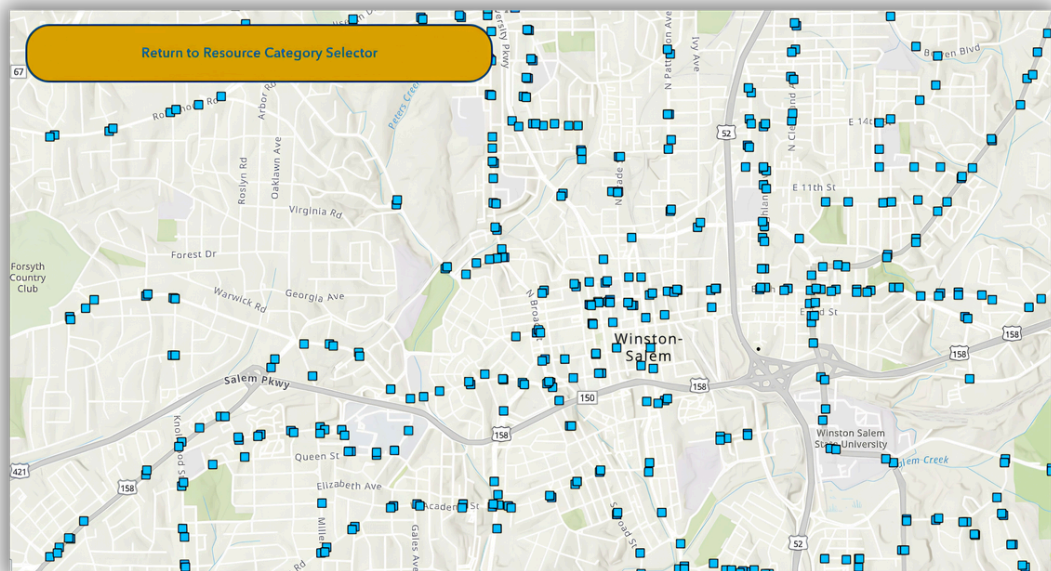
To build a fuller picture of the landscape, PTRC combined multiple labor market data sources and resident survey data collected in person. Together, labor market conditions, demographic patterns, and commuting trends could be understood alongside the experiences and needs shared directly by residents. **But data analysis was only one part of the approach; building relationships across the community was equally important.** In the beginning, the team initially expected to work with a defined group of organizations serving the distressed tracts, but each conversation revealed additional partners that should be included. Instead of a clearly connected network, PTRC found a fragmented landscape of workforce, education, housing, transportation, and social service providers. With that, PTRC's goal shifted back to the fundamentals, beginning with a strategic map of resources and partners touching the county's service area.

EARLY RESULTS & MILESTONES:

Groundwork for Coordinated Action

The first phase of the Forsyth Connections project focused on two complementary efforts: a completed asset mapping of workforce, education, and community resources serving the 22 distressed tracts, and interviews with workforce, education, nonprofit, government, and community service organizations. Both efforts confirmed what the survey pivot had already suggested. Understanding this region required direct, sustained engagement rather than occasional data pulls.

PTRC completed the asset mapping process in March 2026. The map identified resources serving the distressed tracts and was built off an existing community resources asset map (see Figure 1). PTRC paired this work with an analysis of demographic and community data to identify service gaps, uneven resource distribution, and opportunities for improved coordination. **Early analysis of the asset map focused on two areas: identifying potential partners and examining poverty levels alongside commuting patterns to better understand transportation barriers affecting access to employment.** These findings helped PTRC determine which organizations to prioritize for engagement and where transportation challenges were likely to have the greatest impact. The analysis revealed patterns that were also reflected in stakeholder interviews: limited awareness of available services, duplicated efforts among providers, and gaps in coordination across organizations serving the same communities.

Figure 1.

Source: Community Resources and Asset Map developed by Forsyth Regional Opioid & Substance Use Team, Partnership for Prosperity, and MapForsyth

Following this assessment, PTRC conducted interviews with 18 workforce, education, nonprofit, government, and community service organizations to better understand existing resources, referral practices, and opportunities for collaboration. These conversations expanded the project's network as organizations introduced additional partners that were not identified during initial planning. The interviews also helped create new working relationships, including the partnership between Forsyth Technical Community College and the Dream Center of Forsyth County, which expanded access to workforce training opportunities in underserved communities. **Throughout this process PTRC tried to position itself as a connector, helping organizations build relationships and collaborate in ways that had not previously existed.**

LESSONS LEARNED & WHAT'S NEXT:

Collaboration Charts the Path Forward

With the first phase complete, PTRC's immediate priorities are to submit a report to ARC and share findings with the stakeholders who contributed to the project. Looking ahead, PTRC plans to continue the collaborative relationships developed through Forsyth Connections, including through convenings such as Love Out Loud, where service providers share updates and strengthen connections. These ongoing meetings provide a practical and low-cost way to maintain communication and support continued coordination among organizations. **For a region this complex, the data will only ever be as strong as the relationships behind it.**

Getting to this point required real-time adaptation. Based on these findings, PTRC shifted its approach and prioritized direct engagement over digital outreach. The team also navigated additional challenges, including gathering candid input from residents, conducting outreach in both English and Spanish, and refining questions to ensure they generated useful and actionable information. Throughout it all, PTRC sought to better understand and address the disconnect between available workforce and supportive services and the residents who need them most.

Key Takeaway #2

A complex regional organization can't simply layer a new data initiative onto its existing structure. The fundamentals, direct communication and durable relationships, have to come first, or the data work built on top of them won't hold.

The strongest outcome of Forsyth Connections has been improved connectivity among organizations serving the community. **By engaging stakeholders and residents directly, PTRC identified gaps in service awareness and coordination and helped connect organizations that had previously worked independently**, including the partnership between Forsyth Technical Community College and the Dream Center of Forsyth County. As a complex organization spanning a dozen counties, PTRC could not simply layer a data initiative on top of its existing structure. It first had to establish the fundamentals, direct communication and durable relationships, with both the residents and the organizations it meant to serve.

Learn more about Piedmont Triad Regional Council [here](#).