



Statewide Planning Grant Case Study

North Carolina:

*Aligning with EDDs to Administer a
Statewide Community Engagement
Survey*

Key Takeaways

- The North Carolina Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO) used the Statewide Planning grant to distribute a community survey, research workforce issues, and develop data dashboards for economic recovery and resiliency.
- NCPRO coordinated with higher education partners and local organizations such as Economic Development Districts (EDDs), the Association of County Commissioners, and the League of Municipalities to connect with the local community through distribution of a statewide survey.
- Improving communication with local economic development organizations and EDDs is a priority to increase trust between state and local organizations and to develop distinct approaches for working with different partners.

Introduction

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the North Carolina Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO) wanted to learn more about recovery in communities across the state and better understand the role the office could play in addressing these unique needs. Thus, NCPRO sought to improve both social and economic concerns within communities based on what the communities themselves said they needed. With the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) Statewide Planning Grant, NCPRO compared community conditions pre- and post-pandemic to better prepare for future unexpected shocks. Because of grant funding, NCPRO was able to expand the monthly [North Carolina Community Engagement Survey](#) to include diverse community leaders across 100 counties. The survey was distributed to residents to better understand the specific challenges each community faces, with emphasis on housing, food access, education, infrastructure, elder care, and childcare. The results are assisting the state with better addressing recovery at the community level, with the goal of creating an index and dashboard to measure economic resilience.

Project Summary

The North Carolina Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO) was created to distribute COVID-19 recovery funds and lead the state economic recovery process. Under the first round of CARES funding, the NCPRO allocated COVID-recovery funding to 525 of the smallest towns and 97 of the smallest counties in the state. When the Governor's Office received the EDA Statewide Planning Grant, NCPRO was tasked to better understand recovery at the community level by using these funds to develop and distribute surveys; the information gathered through this outreach was used to further research local workforce issues occurring in the state, and ultimately create an index and dashboard measuring economic resilience.

The survey was conducted in partnership with researchers at East Carolina University and was designed to understand local perspectives and analyze local and regional quality of life trends, such as housing, broadband, infrastructure, food access, education, and more. The community

engagement survey was launched in parallel with a Business Survey to generate insights from business owners across the state; the results from both surveys will lead to findings that can help create an improved economic ecosystem across North Carolina. The [latest trend report](#) shows results from October 2022 – September 2023.

Using the survey, NCPRO created [data dashboards](#) to showcase findings, both at the county and sub-county levels, and an economic resiliency index. The goal of the index is to establish a reliable definition of a “good quality of life” in North Carolina and to look beyond traditional economic development by incorporating community issues. NCPRO is also conducting a study specifically on nursing and the future of the healthcare industry. North Carolina will continue to focus on healthcare, working with organizations like the Institute of Medicine to improve community health.

North Carolina’s grant project is particularly noteworthy in that it exceeded expectations in response rates for the statewide community survey. Initially, it was expected that with a monthly survey, the response from the community would be low. However, through collaboration with Economic Development Districts (EDDs) and other local organizations, the survey received over 7,000 responses each month, showing high interest in improving these issues. Without aligning goals with local organizations, this project may not have been as successful.

“What we currently have in place isn’t working; economic development isn’t addressing issues like childcare or healthcare. We want to put in place a more reliable definition of what it means to have a good quality of life and to be resilient, not in the tradition of smaller economic development, but truly looking at the people living in that community.”

- North Carolina Pandemic Recovery Office

Alignment Spotlight

There are 14 EDDs in North Carolina and each one approaches their work differently. Due to variations in local politics, capacity, and level of alignment with state agencies, distinct approaches are needed to work with each EDD. Thus, one strategy cannot be applied across the state to collaborate with all EDDs. Improving communication with the EDDs is a priority to increase trust between the organizations and to better understand each of their competencies and needs.

The North Carolina Local Stakeholder Working Group (LSWG) was established to assist with collaboration by regularly convening relevant local organizations and stakeholders. This group includes EDDs, the Association of County Commissioners, the League of Municipalities, and other important partners. The group supports capacity building, planning, and technical assistance, largely related to the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFR), but also discusses other efforts related to recovery. By convening the EDDs, Association of County Commissioners, and the League of Municipalities together on a routine basis, NCPRO was able to stay abreast of multiple issues across the state, especially with projects such as the community survey. Through this process, NCPRO seeks to build trust among local organizations.

The Statewide Planning Grant process has provided an opportunity for the state to further collaborate with EDDs¹ and meet with them regularly to work on key issues identified through the community

¹ North Carolina generally refers to their EDDs as Council of Governments (COGs) or Regional Councils. A list of North Carolina’s EDDs can be found here: <https://www.eda.gov/grant-resources/economic-development-directory/nc>

engagement survey. Traditionally, EDDs have only been involved in state-led projects in the final steps of the process. However, in the state planning grant project, NCPRO engaged with EDDs earlier and involved them in project development. EDDs also assisted in implementation stages by distributing the community engagement survey and reviewing results. NCPRO now regularly speaks at EDD meetings to encourage consistent participation in the survey and to assist with distribution. Currently, there are not enough responses to be statistically valid at the county level, but there are at the EDD level, so all participating EDDs will receive monthly data to learn about specific challenges in their communities.

Roadblocks and Areas for Improvement

NCRPO did not face extensive roadblocks with the project. However, administrative challenges like navigating the EDA grant management portal were among the minor project roadblocks. Improving relationships with federal agencies and creating a streamlined communication process can alleviate these difficulties in managing future grants.

Federal Linkages

The Federal State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFR)² program was distributed amongst the local organizations in North Carolina, with \$10 million going to the EDDs, \$10 million to the Association of County Commissioners, and \$10 million to the League of Municipalities. These funds increased the capacity of the local organizations, which assisted in their ability to contribute to the Statewide Planning Grant tasks. NCPRO meets with the EDDs twice a month to receive updates on how they are using the funds, and the groups participate in the LSWG to discuss this funding alongside the Statewide Planning Grant project and other related activities that may benefit from state-local alignment.

Lessons Learned

North Carolina learned some key lessons through managing the project and collaborating with local stakeholders:

- Aligning new programs and activities alongside existing initiatives can better coordinate the capacity of local organizations to participate. With the local stakeholder group forming after the distribution of the SLFR funds, incorporating Statewide Planning Grant discussions was a natural fit due to these groups already convening.
- It is essential to be persistent and intentional with relationship building, as these connections will benefit the long-term outcomes of the project. State governments and

² The Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program authorized by the American Rescue Plan Act, delivers \$350 billion to state, territorial, local, and Tribal governments across the country to support their response to and recovery from the COVID-19 public health emergency.

EDD's were able to improve their relationships by focusing on establishing trust and adapting to local differences. This will be instrumental to sustaining long-term linkages.

- Improving transparency on future work and better understanding the role both the state and local organizations can play in economic development projects will lead to greater success.

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