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WPCOG - Newsletter

January 2021

Area Agency on Aging

- Older Adults Feeling Isolated and Alone

Community & Economic Development

- Grant Funds Assist PPE Company, Create New Jobs at MSC in Conover

Community & Regional Planning

- Winter EIN Highlights Hickory MSA ACS 2019 Results

Regional Housing Authority

- New Year, New Goals

Transportation Planning

- MPO Calendar and Key Activities for the New Year

Workforce Development Board

- We Need People!

WPCOG Meetings Calendar

Workforce Development Board

We Need People!

Every week I hear from employers that, 'We need people!'. There are over 8,000 job openings in our local area of Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba Counties, and approximately 10,000 unemployed as of the [October 2020 labor market analysis](#) provided by NC Commerce Labor and Economic Analysis Division (LEAD). I wish I had an immediate answer to our employment demands, but unfortunately, I do not. However, I do have some suggestions that can help with a business's recruitment and retention efforts if the time and commitment are taken to implement these options.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECRUITMENT & RETENTION:

- Know what the current employees are saying about their experience working at the company. Word of mouth travels faster than the internet and is believed to be more reliable.
- Train current employees to be "recruitment ambassadors" for the company. Provide talking points for recruitment type conversations, but let them develop the talking points. (Their story of, "Why I like working here.")
- During the interview process, provide a tour of the facility.
- Be community/service driven. Does the company have a culture of help and support for community service projects? Community service projects help get the company positively recognized in the community. Let employees determine annual projects and agencies to assist.
- Read your companies reviews on Indeed, Google, Simplyhired, etc.
- Have a social media presence. If you cannot (due to corporate rules), reach out to your local Workforce Development Board (NCWorks Career Center) to help market your job openings.
- Use social media to highlight brief video vignettes where employees from the company provide a tour and/or talk about their experience.

Article by Wendy Johnson

Area Agency on Aging

Older Adults Feeling Isolated and Alone



Do you think COVID has you feeling isolated and alone? For an average individual, the thought of going through a day, a week, or even a month with no outside company is sad and depressing. Imagine that loneliness on an ongoing basis. For many older adults, this is their normal routine. The effects go beyond sadness and depression as we look at the effects isolation can have on older adults' health and psychological well-being. More than 12.5 million older adults live alone on an ongoing basis. As part of the fight against COVID, we began further isolation, lockdown and encouraged older adults to stay home and away from social settings due to the risk of COVID. The concern for the elderly worsens as we look at what research indicates about the effects of loneliness and isolation on seniors. Some of the effects of loneliness and isolation for our aging population include a higher risk of death for older adults, negative impacts on physical and mental health, and increased depression. Isolation can limit access to benefits and services. Supporting older adults in the community to maintain their independence, well-being, and normal functioning has become an urgent public health concern.

Computer savvy individuals have developed new ways of working and relating to others during their COVID isolation by use of virtual programs, like Zoom, and increased telephone outreach. While some seniors do not have the virtual capability, it can be taught, or the senior can be assisted with accessing the program.

The pandemic has limited personal interactions for us all. Many of us feel helpless to make a difference. But you can do something positive to help others, especially your elderly loved ones and neighbors. In this time of challenge, here are suggestions to help the older person cope with isolation:

1. Increase the frequency of telephone calls. It is amazing what a simple call to check on a senior can accomplish. It increases the feeling that someone cares for them; it boosts their confidence and reinforces their livelihood.
2. If possible, utilize social networking or virtual platforms to "see" the individual while you are speaking. Just having that face to see and talk to can help avoid those negative feelings.
3. Visit the senior within limitations. For example, visit them at their home, but stay outdoors and speak through the door or window, or call them on the phone and speak through the phone line while they can see you outside.
4. Visit and provide meals, small gifts, flowers, or cards on the doorstep.
5. Increase mail and written communication for your loved one. A thoughtful note, cute card, or letter can help the senior feel more connected and involved.
6. Offer to complete an online grocery order for delivery or pick up. Or offer to go grocery shopping for an older person.
7. Encourage older adults to turn off the TV/News and do things they enjoy: read, listen to music/books on tape, exercise, or call a friend.

8. Encourage connection to the local senior center. Many senior centers provide virtual activities for tech-savvy seniors, and some are providing free activity supplies such as puzzles, activity and adult coloring books.

Alexander Senior Center: 828-632-1717

Bethlehem Senior Center: 828-409-3742

East Burke Senior Center: 828-397-3397

Morganton/Burke Senior Center: 828-430-4147

Caldwell Senior Center: 828-758-2348

Catawba Council on Aging: 828-328-2269

Neighbor's Network (Conover): 828-464-1111

Much has been said about the need to have a community to raise a child. However, it takes the same community to keep our seniors healthy and engaged. Please utilize these ideas or others to assist your loved ones during the pandemic and during the isolated years of their life.

[Article by Karen Phoenix](#)

Community & Economic Development

Grant Funds will Assist PPE Company, Create New Jobs at MSC in Conover



The City of Conover has been awarded an \$850,000 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) to assist a textile manufacturer construct a new building on the campus of the Manufacturing Solutions Center (MSC) in order to make personal protective equipment (PPE) to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Nufabrx is building a 25,000-square-foot facility at an estimated cost of \$3.6 million. The company plans to create 10 new, full-time jobs with an average annual wage of \$60,903, substantially higher than the Catawba County average manufacturing wage of \$43,133. Per grant regulations, at least seven of the new jobs must be filled by low- to moderate-income individuals.

Since 2015, Nufabrx has occupied incubator space at the MSC. The company previously has patented a system to embed and time release medications on the skin through yarns. Nufabrx also has been at the forefront of PPE manufacturing since the onset of the pandemic. The new building will allow the company to engage in R&D, production and manufacturing of PPE-related products.

WPCOG staff assisted the City of Conover, MSC and Catawba Valley Community College in applying for the grant.

The grant award is one of the first through the North Carolina Department of Commerce's Rural Economic Development Division coronavirus grant program (CDBG-CV). The funds are a part of the federal CARES Act that was approved in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately \$27.5 million in funding was awarded to North Carolina by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the lead federal agency overseeing the grant program.

[Article by Paul Teague](#)

Community & Regional Planning

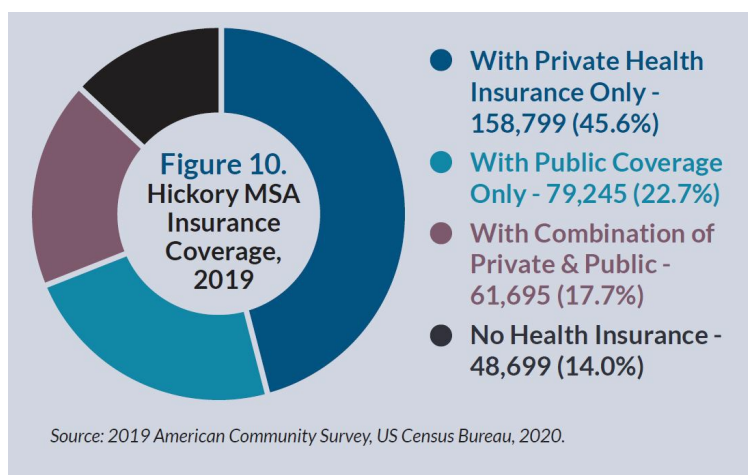
Winter EIN Highlights Hickory MSA ACS 2019 Results

The current issue of the EIN addresses Hickory Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) unemployment rates, Hickory Metro average annual wages, and Hickory MSA 2018 income and poverty, educational attainment and health insurance coverage results from the American Community Survey (ACS).

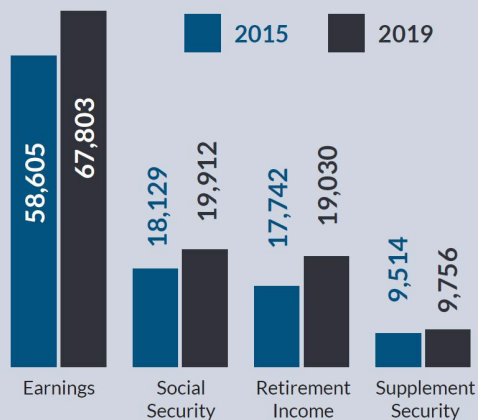
Here are a few key highlights of the EIN:

- After rising to 17.6% in April 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate in the Hickory MSA has fallen to 6.1% in October 2020.
- Between October 2019 and October 2020, the estimated number of employed persons decreased from 170,869 to 156,612 (-14,257), while the civilian labor force fell from 176,864 to 166,767 (-10,097).
- The percentage increase in Hickory MSA average yearly salaries between 2015 and 2019 (11.4%) was 3.9 percentage points higher than the US inflation rate between 2015 and 2019 (7.5%). The Hickory MSA's wage growth rate from 2015 to 2019 was lower than the NC average (12.6%) and the national average (11.9%).
- Nearly 83% of Hickory MSA workers in 2019 received income through private sector wage and salary jobs.
- About 6% of Hickory MSA workers were self-employed. ACS results indicated that the Hickory MSA had a sixth highest percentage of self-employed workers among NC MSAs. The Hickory MSA had the third lowest percentage of government employees (12.8%).
- The average Hickory MSA household income from earnings is \$67,803. Only five North Carolina Metros had lower mean household earnings than the Hickory MSA.
- About 37.4% of Hickory MSA households gained income from Social Security. Only the Asheville, New Bern and Rocky Mount MSAs had a greater percentage of households getting Social Security income than the Hickory MSA.
- The number of persons below the poverty level in the Hickory MSA decreased 3.7% from 55,976 (15.8% poverty rate) in 2015 to 53,908 (14.9% poverty rate) in 2019. Most age and ethnic/race groups, saw decreases in the number of persons below poverty level between 2015 and 2019.
- The number of persons over 25 in the Hickory MSA with an attainment level of "Associate Degree" more than doubled from 15,139 in 2000 to 32,844 in 2019. The 17,705 increase is the most of any Hickory MSA educational attainment category.
- In 2019, the Hickory MSA had the lowest percentage of persons over age 25 with an attainment level of high school or higher (83.7%) among the State's 15 metro areas.
- In 2019, the Hickory MSA had the third lowest percentage of persons 25 and older with a Bachelor's Degree or higher (19.6%) among the State's 15 metro areas.
- The percentage of Hickory MSA population that has health insurance coverage decreased from 88.5% in 2015 to 86.6% in 2019.
- The Hickory MSA had an estimated 48,699 persons (13.4% of population) without health insurance as of 2019.

See the selected figures below for additional information. The EIN is produced quarterly and is a publication of the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board. To subscribe to the EIN, please contact Taylor Dellinger, Data Analyst at 828-485-4233 or by email taylor.dellinger@wpcog.org.



**Figure 5. Hickory MSA Households by Type
Average Amount Received, 2015 and 2019**



Source: 2015 and 2019 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau, 2020.

Article by Taylor Dellinger

Regional Housing Authority New Year, New Goals

WPCOG begins its year assessing and strengthening its goals and plans.

WPCOG's Regional Housing Authority hosts a program focused on goals that is always open to new RHA participants. A new year offers a positive starting point - a time when new hopes and fresh slates for plans and dreams can launch new actions. REACH, a family self-sufficiency program, focuses on helping participants work on a path toward self-sufficiency with a case manager's guidance. It is possible to set a variety of goals, but employment is the final and most important one.

Landlords, tenants, staff, and community members who interact with RHA tenants can help by encouraging tenants who might be a good fit for the program to consider enrolling.

Referring and encouraging participation only requires the ability to see the potential in others. A good candidate for the REACH program is someone who:

- Aspires to make positive changes in their lives
- Understands that self-improvement and goal-reaching likely is a long game and instant fixes may not stick or even be possible
- Possesses the willingness to accept guidance; seeing it as a case manager removing barriers and not as their inability to do everything themselves
- Follows through on their plans
- Finds the resilience to regroup if unexpected life-turns happen
- Desires to seek suitable employment (Resources are available to assist all RHA tenants; a disability is not a barrier to the program)

Landlords, if you have limited contact with your renters, it may be difficult to see all of the above. However, a tenant who asks for receipts or keeps a rent book, who works with you when problems arise, and communicates well with you, would likely make a good participant.

If you know a good potential REACH candidate, please encourage them to ask for information about the program or contact Kim Duncan, REACH Coordinator, at 828.485.4299 or kim.duncan@wpcog.org, and she will call the tenant and share details on the program.

Article by Kim Duncan

Transportation

MPO Calendar and Key Activities for the New Year

The Greater Hickory Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is governed by a decision-making board called the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC). The TAC is comprised of local elected officials representing all of the four counties, six cities, and eighteen towns across the WPCOG region. Another group, the Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC), serves to make recommendations to TAC. The TCC is comprised of local community staff representing the same counties, cities, and towns of the region.

In 2021, the TAC and TCC will continue to meet separately on the same day but at different times. The TCC, or staff group, meets first at 1 pm, while the TAC, or elected officials group, meets second at 2:30 pm. Typically, these meetings are held on the fourth Wednesday of the month. Exceptions include February, November, and December when the meetings are held on the third Wednesday. January was also moved to the second Wednesday. Since the pandemic, meetings have been held remotely via Zoom and Facebook Live. Registered guests may obtain a Zoom link, while the general public may watch and interact via Facebook Live at facebook.com/WPCOG. Agenda packets are typically posted a week prior to the meeting dates online at wpcog.org/metropolitan-planning-org

The new year's key activities will include updating the Travel Demand Model, the Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP), and the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP). New 2020 Census data will update population and employment counts and inform projected population and jobs. Model projections are used to help analyze area roadway deficiencies and project future traffic volumes. The CTP serves as the regional vision for future roadway alignments and needed improvements for all facilities within the Federal Functional Classification System, from major collectors to freeways. The MTP serves as the financially constrained subset of the CTP, or the recommended improvements to be completed within the next ten, twenty, or thirty years. All of these key MPO activities require significant public involvement and local government coordination to inform the tough decisions needed to prioritize limited funding. Everyone interested in the future of our region is highly encouraged to stay involved as the MPO, TCC, and TAC address area needs through 2050.

Article by Brian Horton

WPCOG CALENDAR

All scheduled meetings are currently being conducted electronically.
For a listing of upcoming meetings and information on how to participate or attend, please visit www.wpcog.org/electronic-public-meetings.

Stay Connected



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www.wpcog.org