

Counties at Work

Wilson County, North Carolina
Case Study

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About NACo:

The [National Association of Counties](#) (NACo) **strengthens America's counties**, serving nearly 40,000 county elected officials and 3.6 million county employees. Founded in 1935, NACo unites county officials to:

- **Advocate county priorities** in federal policymaking;
- **Promote exemplary county policies** and practices;
- **Nurture leadership skills** and expand knowledge networks;
- **Optimize county and taxpayer resources** and cost savings; and
- **Enrich the public's understanding** of county government.

The National Association of Counties Research Foundation (NACoRF) is a non-profit organization recognized by the U.S. Department of the Treasury Internal Revenue Service as a 501c3 public charity providing education, technical assistance and research to counties. NACoRF's mission is to ascertain, develop and distribute knowledge about county governments and training of public officials, prospective public officials and other interested parties.

About NACo's Landscape Analysis:

In partnership with the [ECMC Foundation](#), NACo conducted a national landscape analysis on counties' role and decision-making authority in post-secondary education. This analysis identified impactful county efforts including directly allocating local funds, pursuing regional and intergovernmental partnerships to leverage federal resources and coordinating post-secondary education systems with county systems, such as health and human services, as well as with local private industry. Such efforts maximize educational and employment opportunities and increase access for residents. Recently, counties have led and supported their post-secondary education institutions in mitigating local challenges related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Through an electronic survey and group and individual interviews, NACo examined how county leaders:

1. Make decisions affecting the post-secondary education sector;
2. Allocate public funding impacting higher education institutions;
3. Create partnerships with the post-secondary education sector to strengthen its connection with other systems; and
4. Work to slow the spread of COVID-19 in post-secondary education settings.

In conjunction with NACo's report ["Counties At Work: Counties Support Post-Secondary Education and Workforce Opportunities for Residents."](#) NACo published a set of case studies sharing county examples and best practices in creating cross-sector partnerships with higher education systems to improve economic resiliency and mobility, workforce preparedness, educational attainment and gainful employment for residents. County leaders representing local colleges and universities, workforce boards and human services agencies participated in a series of interviews with NACo to share their local efforts and best practices. For more information, please contact Rashida Brown, Associate Program Director for Children, Youth and Families at rbrown@naco.org or Arabella Pluta-Ehlers, Program Manager for Children, Youth and Families at aplutaehlers@naco.org.

Counties Support Post-Secondary Education and Workforce Opportunities for Residents

Wilson County, North Carolina

Interviewees: Don Hicks, Program Manager, Family and Adult Services, Wilson County Department of Social Services (DSS); Ashley Higson, Employment Services Supervisor, DSS; Glenn Osbourne, Director, DSS; Candice Rountree, Program Manager, Grants/Community Engagement, DSS; Tinacious Perry, Child Support Services Supervisor, DSS

County name, state: Wilson County, N.C.

Rural, suburban, or urban: Rural

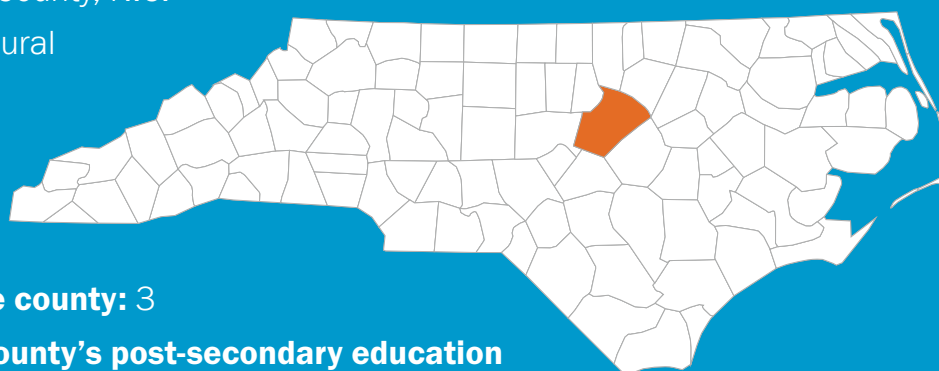
Population: 81,455

Poverty rate: 18.0%

Unemployment rate: 6.1%

Number of post-secondary education institutions in the county: 3

Student enrollment in the county's post-secondary education institutions: 4,000



About Wilson County, North Carolina

Wilson County, N.C. is a relatively small county in the eastern half of the Tar Heel State. Wilson County's businesses are supported by the Wilson Community College (WCC) Small Business Center and the Wilson Chamber of Commerce.ⁱ The county's commercial district is home to several banks, retail companies and local businesses. Wilson County's Corporate Park enables easy access to major consumer markets, international airports and deepwater ports.

Wilson County has invested in an infrastructure that supports major biopharma companies offering services such as pharmaceutical contract development and manufacturing, optical communications, mobile consumer electronics, display technology, automotive and life sciences vessels.ⁱⁱ Major pharmaceutical companies also call Wilson County home and are engaged in the overall production, research, development and marketing of prescription and over-the-counter medicines and healthcare products. Wilson County's collective of colleges, universities, and biopharma-specific training networks supply local businesses with a highly-educated and well-trained workforce by providing students with training and skills necessary for working in these local industry jobs.

The county role in post-secondary education

Wilson County has a seven-member county Board of Commissioners who approve local budgets, establish local policies and support community-based resources. The county operates under Dillon's Rule, wherein some decision-making authority over local matters falls under the jurisdiction of the state constitution and legislature.ⁱⁱⁱ

While the county does not have direct decision-making authority in higher education (i.e. university programming, operations and other functions), county government leaders are deeply involved in collaboration activities with post-secondary education institutions and connected with local workforce development board and health care centers. Cross-sector leaders meet regularly to strategize and explore ways to improve educational attainment and job readiness opportunities for residents within the region.

Funding for post-secondary education institutions and programming

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction provides funding to Wilson County's post-secondary education institutions and programming. These institutions also receive funding through the state budget process. Moreover, in FY 2020-2021, the Wilson County Board

of Commissioners allocated \$2,530,954 to the WCC to support its operating expenses and \$416,000 to provide a capital overlay for existing facilities costs.^{iv} This investment aligns with the county's commitment to supporting local colleges for residents to have the necessary educational resources and supports to remain competitive in the workforce. The county's investment also supports its budget priority of ensuring a superior education and workforce.

Coordination and collaboration for improved workforce outcomes

Wilson County Department of Social Services (DSS) collaborates with multiple local community colleges and technical institutes to help improve educational and workforce outcomes for residents. For instance, through its departments of workforce and employment training and adult and family services, DSS works directly with WCC to help students navigate post-secondary education enrollment and financial aid. Several staff from WCC split time or are co-located at DSS and serve as educational navigators to connect residents experiencing food insecurity and other economic barriers to relevant post-secondary education resources and food assistance



“One of the strengths of our county is that everyone works well together... there is a spirit of coming together and working together to solve [local] challenges. [County boards] do not work against one another but work for and in partnership with one another. That’s one of the [benefits] of living and working in Wilson County is the level of cooperation and partnership that we share.”

– Glenn Osbourne, Wilson County Department of Social Services Director

through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This staffing model is funded by WCC and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. DSS services also provide WCC students experiencing behavioral health challenges with crisis counseling. This approach supports students’ well-being and helps them to overcome any barriers that may hinder them from completing their higher education. To complement WCC’s resources and investments, DSS provides tuition assistance and grants for books, medical equipment and other materials that support adult learning for their consumers enrolled at WCC. To help improve



service access and coordination and higher education enrollment, DSS and WCC share data and other information to help fill equity gaps and increase students’ connection to vital services.

Wilson County DSS coordinates with post-secondary education institutions to grow the local health care workforce and improve health outcomes. The county has a growing medical and nursing industry that attracts DSS consumers in gaining prominent jobs in the health care market. To leverage that growth, DSS collaborates with Barton College and Area L Area Health Education Center (AHEC) in Rocky Mount, N.C., which is one of the three original AHECs. This program was established under a federal AHEC contract in 1972 to meet the state’s health and healthcare workforce needs.^v Area L AHEC provides educational programs and services that bridge the gap among academic institutions and communities by addressing health disparities and increasing health professionals in underserved areas. Area L AHEC also has a larger goal of improving the overall health of North Carolinians. Area L AHEC assists and recruits students interested in nursing, teaching and social work for post-secondary education programming that prepares and teaches them the necessary skills for entering the local workforce. According to the Health Resources and

Services Administration, a federal sub-agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, all N.C. counties in Area L AHEC's region have been designated as full or partial Health Professional Shortage Areas.^{vi} To help address the unique needs of the county, Area L AHEC works with Wilson County DSS and Barton College in utilizing a trauma-informed curriculum and hands on learning program to provide students with the necessary skills for working with disadvantaged populations experiencing trauma. DSS is considering extending its trauma-informed curriculum to high schools for students to engage in helping professions early and learn practical applications using trauma-informed approaches.

Several Wilson County government agencies collaborate with Wilson Academy of Applied Technology (WAAT) to increase and strengthen educational programming for youth interested in manufacturing, automotive systems, applied engineering and building construction technology, biotechnology, criminal justice and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Through WAAT, students are dually enrolled in high school and college at the same time.^{vii} They can graduate with a high school diploma or complete a five-year program with an Associate degree from WCC for free. Students may also choose to enroll in a four-year post-secondary education institution or immediately enter the workforce. To help them gain the skills needed for local industry jobs, they participate in job shadowing and internships and engage in programs of study that provide hands-on training and foster learning that teaches them how to operate professional equipment and utilize advanced technologies. WAAT is supported by several local foundations, WCC, Wilson Chamber of Commerce and the Wilson County Commissioners, School Board and Economic Development Department. These entities serve as active community partners by providing start-up funds to help launch the program and sustain its activities. Community partners also collaborate with WAAT to help shape the program of study, recruit potential students and support field trips, internships and job shadowing opportunities.^{viii}

Through its child welfare prevention and child support programs, DSS assists parents that have educational attainment and employment goals as a part of their family stabilization plan. Child neglect reports and complaints are sometimes linked to poverty.^{ix} To help address economic barriers in family households, DSS provides post-secondary education enrollment support and counseling services. Families are also connected to behavioral health services,

“Many North Carolinians have become unemployed or had their hours reduced as a result of COVID-19. At the same time, certain businesses across North Carolina need to find new employees quickly because of increased demand [in other types of jobs],” thus NCWorks helps residents and employers in filling those employment gaps.

– Source: [NCWorks COVID-19 Jobs and Information](#)

child care and transportation assistance to support their participation in employment, training, job search activities and education. Moreover, the department's Working for Kids program works with non-custodial parents participating in its child support program. Non-custodial families are oftentimes in need of employment and post-secondary educational supports. Services involve career enhancement, self-sufficiency planning, relationship building, parenting skills, family group conferences and how to navigate the child support system.^x Working for Kids partners with WCC for non-custodial parents to complete their high school education or a General Educational Development (GED) credential. Additionally, the department's Links program supports youth aging out of foster care in obtaining their post-secondary education. DSS's Adolescent Parenting Program also serves pregnant and parenting teenagers in helping them complete their high school education and attain higher education.

Counties at Work: Counties Support Post-Secondary Education and Workforce Opportunities for Residents

Wilson County DSS is an active partner of the county's collective impact approach that fosters collaboration and coordination among community partners to promote post-secondary education attainment and employment outcomes for residents. Through Wilson Forward, DSS is involved in strategic planning efforts where cross-sector partners across human services, commerce, higher education and workforce development convene quarterly to discuss how to enhance the county's workforce development efforts, increase employment opportunities and determine effective strategies for providing whole-family, wraparound services and supports that promote career pathways and financial stability for residents. DSS also partners with Wilson County's NCWorks, which is the county's one-stop career center affiliated with the American Job Center network, to provide resume building and job seeking and placement services for low-income residents. NCWorks also supports employers with recruitment and online job posting and targets veterans, youth and persons needing assistance during their transition from employment to unemployment or retirement and unemployment to

re-employment. Services include referrals to DSS or community-based organizations providing referrals to child and family services, Medicaid, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, SNAP, legal aid and caregiver resources.

Data sharing among private and cross-sector partners is essential for increasing transparency and solving community problems. Wilson County's NCWorks has a data dashboard where job seekers and employers can gain access to local labor market data and post-secondary education matriculation rates. Employers and job seekers can also learn more information about the occupations in high demand and the educational, job and salary requirements necessary for being a competitor in today's job market. NCWorks also has a statewide dashboard providing information on its labor market including data facts on education and skills training attainment by county and region. Wilson Forward also created a data dashboard of 15 indicators that provide an overview of the social, health and well-being of Wilson County, including indicators





that review socioeconomic factors involving employment and education. The data is used to study community conditions and identify areas that need increased attention and collective action.

Slowing the spread of COVID-19 in post-secondary education settings

In Wilson County, public health officials, human services administrators and post-secondary education institution leaders communicate regularly to make decisions and explore approaches for slowing the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Wilson County's public health director releases video updates to stakeholders and the general public and created a COVID-19 data dashboard where data is coordinated and shared with Barton College and WCC. County government and higher education leaders review contract tracing data, which help inform decisions on in-person and remote learning.

The county is also collaborating with the state health agency on COVID-19 regulations and protocols. This includes increasing public education on how residents can protect themselves from contracting COVID-19 such

as handwashing, mask wearing, social distancing and avoiding congregate gatherings. Local colleges and public schools received CARES federal funding from their state to fund learning and other technical applications. To help slow the spread of COVID-19, DSS consumers enrolled in local community colleges have minimized their time on campus and engaged in remote learning. During the pandemic, public schools have also served as a food bank to help address food insecurity in family households.

DSS leaders have not observed negative economic or health impacts as a result COVID-19 among existing TANF and SNAP recipients. However, in June 2020, DSS reported that the county experienced a 33 percent increase in SNAP enrollment and an 18 percent increase in the Children's Health Insurance Program enrollment. These numbers have remained stagnant since that time. The county also reports that North Carolina has the shortest unemployment benefits periods in the nation, thus DSS is preparing for a wave of new cases in its income eligibility assistance programs as the economic crisis continues.

Through Wilson Wellness Collaborative (WWC), Wilson County government and community-based partners convene virtually to discuss approaches for promoting the social determinants of health during COVID-19 and develop a plan of action that is driven by DSS and Wilson County Health Department. WWC has a partnership with Wilson Forward, which serves as WWC's facilitator to numerous community partners who are providing diverse resources, experiences, and leadership to the structure and implementation of this holistic approach to community health. According to Wilson Forward's website, "WWC represents a cross-sector collaboration of community stakeholders committed to the improvement of health and wellness in Wilson County." By prioritizing the social determinants of health within this collaboration, WWC has been able to tackle some of the most significant challenges to improving the health of local residents.

Conclusion

Overall, due to Dillon's Rule, Wilson County's decision-making authority on post-secondary education systems and its ability to fund them are limited. However, the county provides an annual appropriation for WCC's campus facilities and operations, and through its department of social services, has strong partnerships with post-secondary education institutions and American Jobs Center to help strengthen the necessary skillsets needed for the local workforce. The importance of these existing partnerships has become even more evident during COVID-19 and have allowed for a strong collaborative effort to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on the community and improve the social determinants of health for residents.



Endnotes

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- ^{xi} NCWorks. (n.d.). *My Dashboard*. https://www.ncworks.gov/vosnet/dashboards/default.aspx?menuid=MENU_START_PAGE_DASHBOARD
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