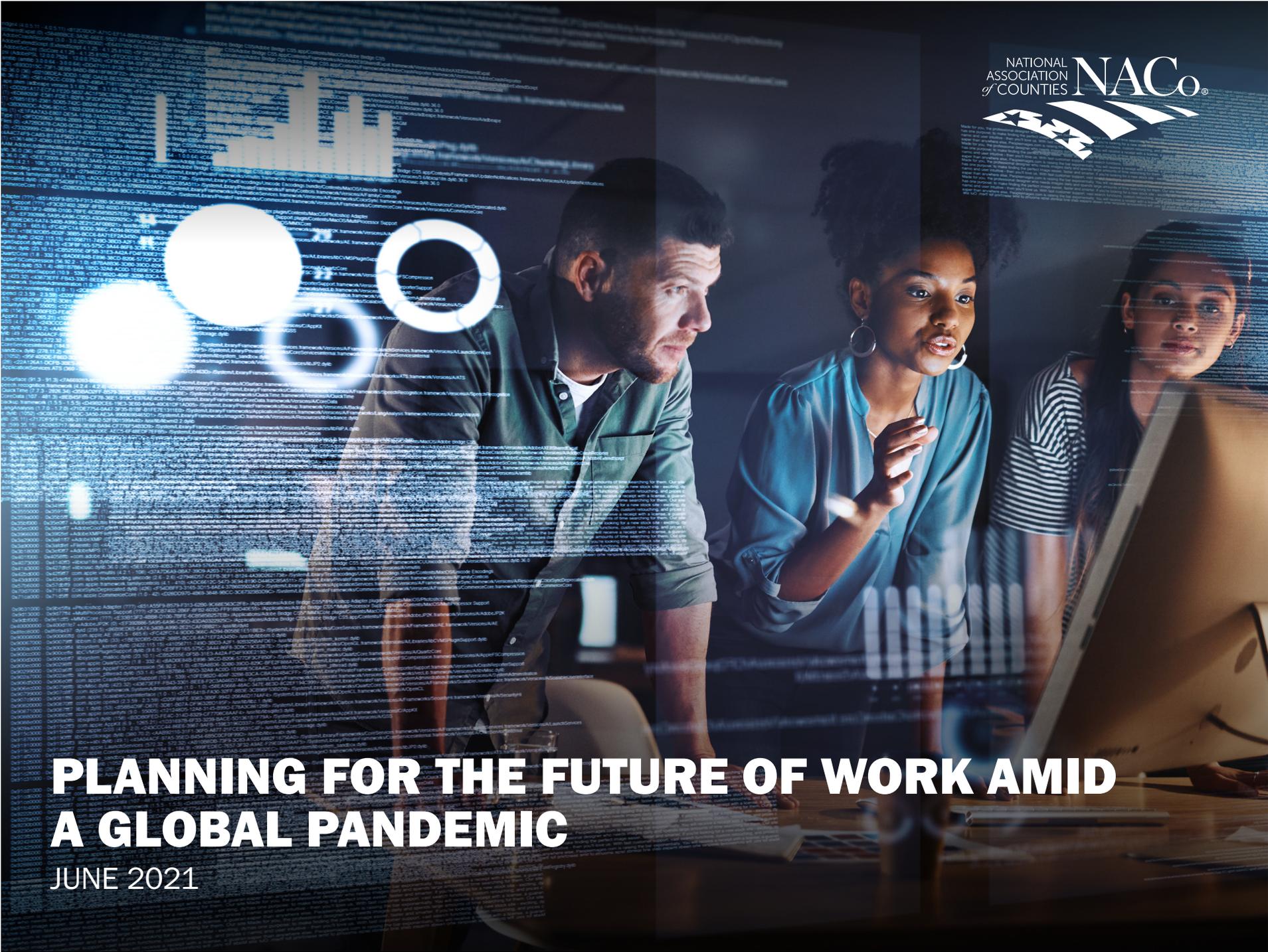




# PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK AMID A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

JUNE 2021



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Strengthen America's counties.

## **NACo's VISION**

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- **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.

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## KEY FINDINGS

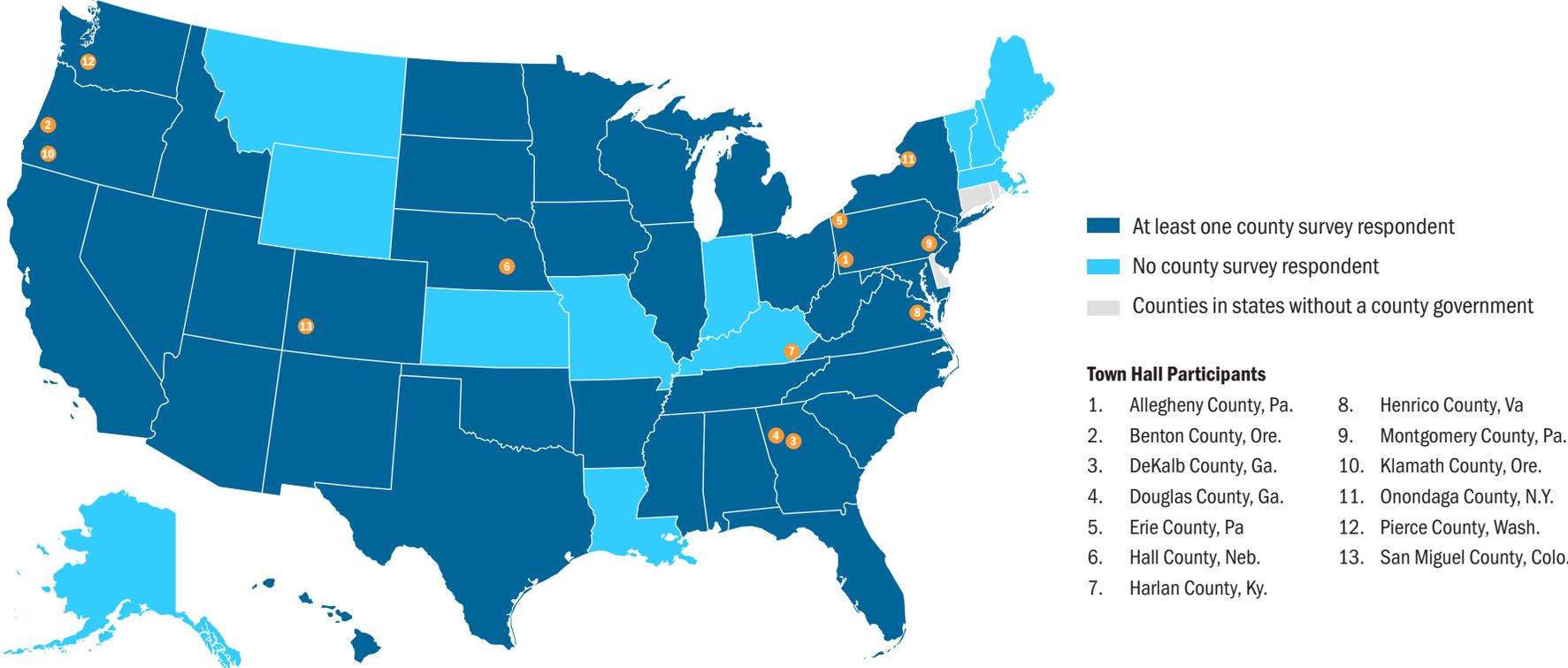
The urgency of planning for the Future of Work<sup>1</sup>, coupled with new resources from the American Rescue Plan (ARP), create an opportunity for counties to prioritize recovery needs through efficient resource allocations. County success in this endeavor relies on a variety of supports to plan for the Future of Work:

- 1. Platforms for cross-county idea sharing on targeted topics.** Workforce and economic development experts believe conversations with other county leaders about topics such as solutions which can incorporate Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding and attracting and retaining new businesses are key forums for local innovation. Sixty-eight (68) percent of county leaders agreed that this type of collaboration and information sharing is useful.
- 2. Information on promising practices for engaging local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) and other partnerships.** Some counties are successful in partnering with WDBs and other regional economic partnerships, while others experience fraught relationships. Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of county leaders believe information sharing on cultivating partnerships will help advance engagement with WDBs.
- 3. Resources and partnerships for enhancing broadband access and bridging the digital divide.** As counties predict a permanent shift to more remote work in the future, ensuring access to quality broadband connections and digital literacy is critical.
- 4. Support and programs for retraining workers.** This need is particularly prevalent in areas that have seen a massive decline in certain industries, such as rural counties that have experienced a decline in the coal industry or counties reliant upon a hospitality industry devastated by the pandemic.
- 5. Resources specifically directed toward low-income residents and residents of color.** The disproportionate impacts of both automation and the pandemic on the employment prospects of communities of color necessitate direct, dedicated support for county residents of color and low-income residents. Counties need information on practices and funding to address disparities through Future of Work programming.
- 6. Information about funding opportunities for the Future of Work and economic recovery planning.** Eighty-five (85) percent of county leaders indicated a need for additional information about sustained funding opportunities.

<sup>1</sup>The Future of Work is a term used to encapsulate the rapid changes transforming the traditional workplace and highlight the shared uncertainty around what the workforce landscape will look like in the coming years.

# COVID-19 HAS SHIFTED THE FUTURE OF WORK LANDSCAPE

Future of Work Survey respondents and town hall participants represent a diverse landscape of counties



Source: NACo Research 2021

The global COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced the uncertainty around the Future of Work. The plans county officials had prepared or implemented in January 2020 were, in many cases, put on hold or abandoned altogether as county governments became frontline workers in the fight against COVID-19. As 2021 continues to unfold, county leaders are balancing a need to address urgent pandemic-related economic hardship, plan for economic recovery and consider the implications of the Future of Work for local economies.

Just as the impacts of COVID-19 have been felt more profoundly in some communities than others, the Future of Work will have differential impacts. Workers of color, already disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, are at particular risk for displacement by automation due to overrepresentation in impacted jobs.<sup>1</sup> This reality existed prior to the onset of COVID-19, and it is likely to be even more pronounced as these hard-hit communities face an uphill battle to economic recovery. Such inequities are just one challenge county leaders face when planning for the Future of Work and an equitable economic recovery in the coming years.

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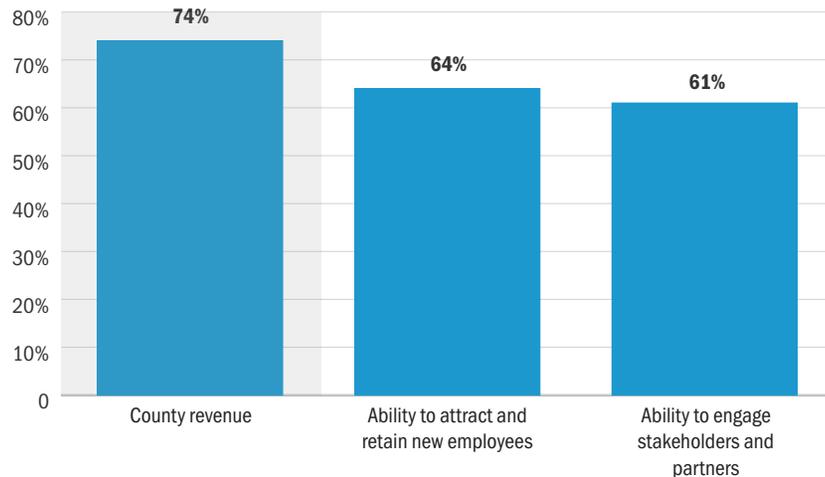
**“I’ve been in the industry for over  
20 years, and this [pandemic] is  
the first time I can’t crystal ball my  
way out of this.”**

– Montgomery County, Pa.



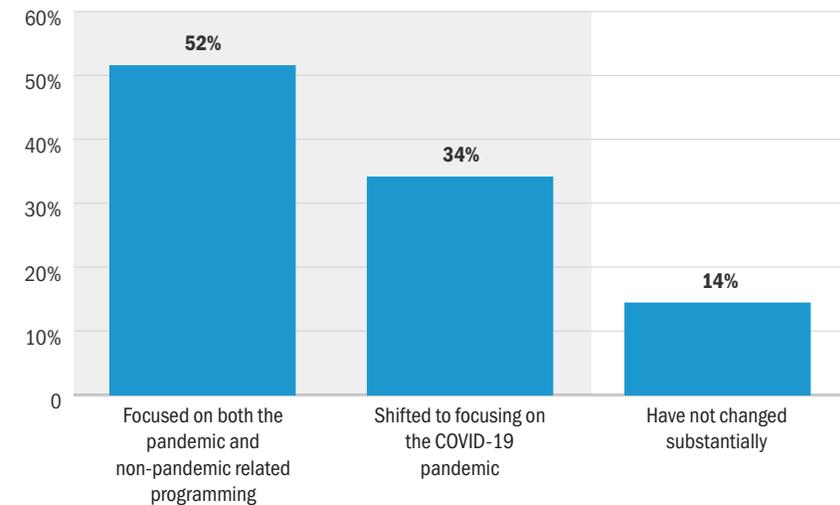
# COUNTY WORKFORCE PRIORITIES HAVE EXPERIENCED DISRUPTIONS

Revenue loss is the top pandemic-induced barrier for Future of Work planning



Source: NACo County Member Survey, 2020 – 2021

Many county leaders were forced to adapt or shift workforce planning



County leaders across the country experienced unprecedented disruptions to workforce planning because of the pandemic. As the severity of the pandemic became apparent in early 2020, many county governments had to shift or delay upcoming workforce development plans as new priorities emerged. Along with new workforce needs, the pandemic generated increased uncertainty about the future.

Priorities shifted to focus on immediate pandemic-related workforce needs. As unemployment increased, many county governments began to play a new, more active role in coordinating with unemployment offices or developing creative ways to ensure unemployed residents received Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits.

In an effort to establish a more collaborative working relationship with the local UI office, **Montgomery County, Pa.** asked to receive a list of UI claimants set to exhaust benefits in March 2021. With this information, the county can to conduct direct outreach to unemployed workers. That outreach, plus ensuring that eligible individuals are receiving UI benefits, are top priorities for Montgomery County. As a senior workforce development expert stated, “If even one county resident has yet to receive UI who was laid off in March 2020, that is unacceptable.”

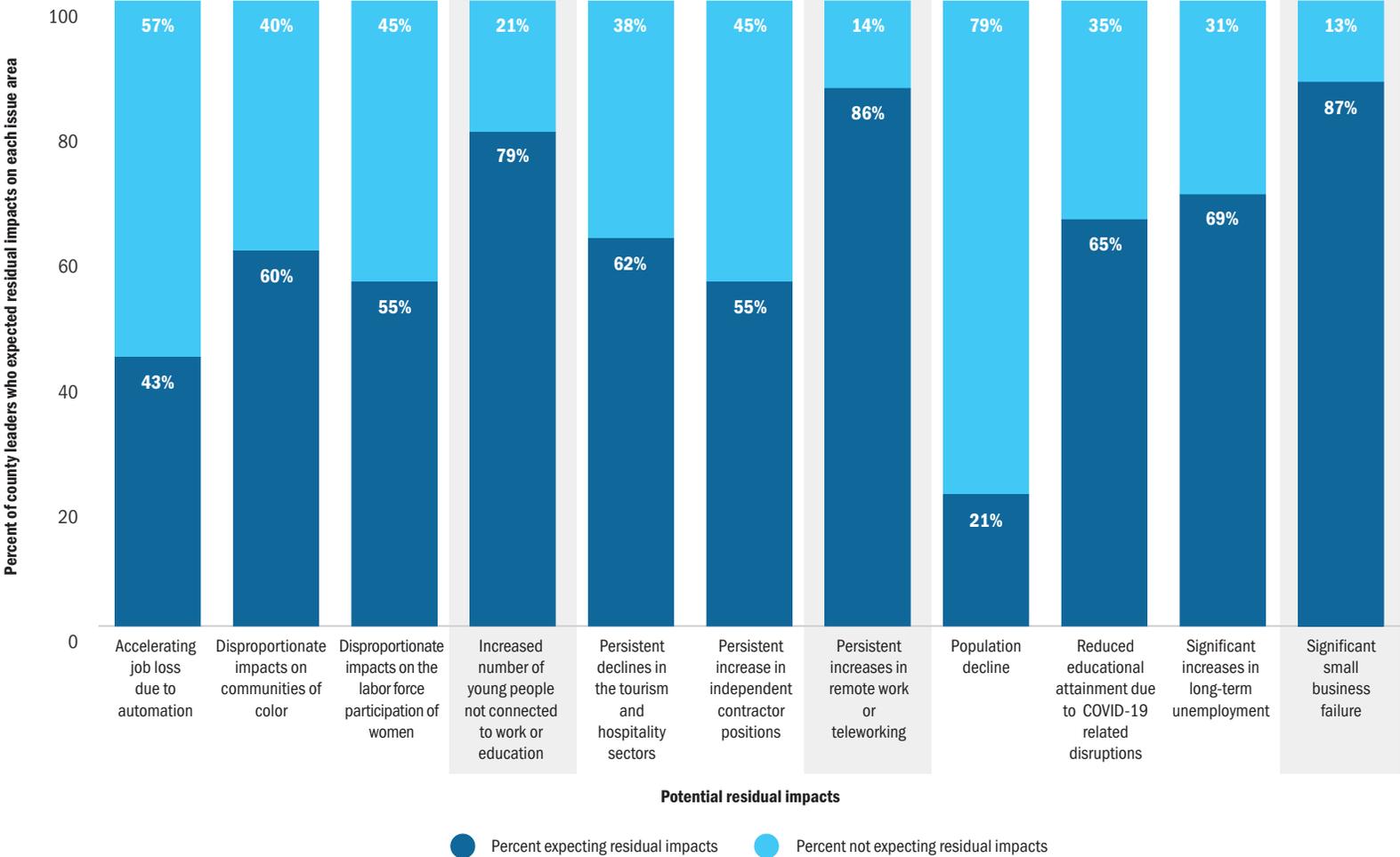
## County solutions in workforce planning disruptions

**DeKalb County, Ga.** used funds from WIOA and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act to support dislocated workers through the [DeKalb Career Pathway Initiative](#). The program connected workers who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 to training in high-demand occupations such as information technology, health care, business technology and advanced manufacturing. Participants received up to \$1,500 to offset basic costs such as food, housing and transportation while going through the training. **READ THE FULL CASE STUDY**

# COUNTIES EXPECT RESIDUAL IMPACTS ON LOCAL ECONOMIES

As the worst of the pandemic subsides, county leaders are transitioning from reactive problem-solving to proactive planning to address long-term needs

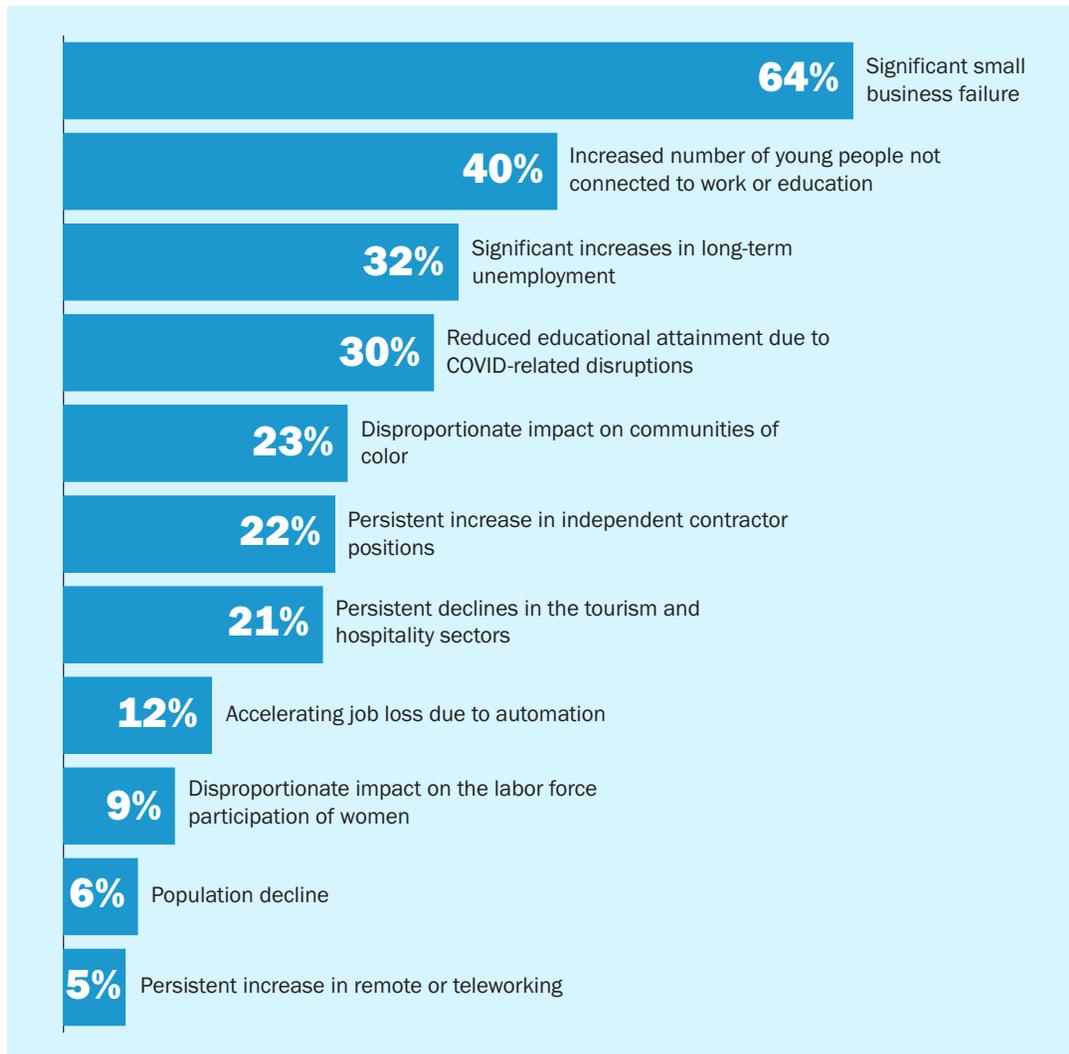
Residual impacts such as increases in remote work, significant small business failure and increases in the number of young people not connected to work are among the top expectations for counties in planning for the Future of Work in a post-pandemic world. Over 3 in 4 county leaders, however, do not expect pandemic-related population decline in the county.



Source: NACo County Member Survey, 2020 – 2021

# COUNTIES PRORITIZE TOP CONCERNS AS THE NATION RECOVERS

Among all pandemic impacts, small business failure is the top concern for county leaders



**Note:** Respondents selected up to three responses. Percentage reflects the number of respondents who ranked each item as one of their top three concerns. The table represents 134 total responses from county leaders.” so the whole thing will read: “Note: Respondents selected up to three responses. Percentage reflects the number of respondents who ranked each item as one of their top three concerns. The table represents 134 total responses from county leaders.

**Source:** NACo County Member Survey, 2020 – 2021

Counties anticipate that many of the pandemic-related disruptions to local economies will continue to be top concerns, including the need to address significant small business failures and the number of young people not connected to work or education.

In **Hall County, Neb.**, the pandemic gave rise to nontraditional jobs<sup>ii</sup> for county residents, such as personal shoppers. Nontraditional work is considered a positive opportunity by many gig economy workers, due to the potential for flexible hours and easy access to work. However, nontraditional work often creates challenges including low and inconsistent wages and lack of critical benefits.<sup>2</sup> As the share of the labor market within a county seeking nontraditional work increases, so too do these intrinsic challenges for local policymakers surrounding both workforce development and minimizing disadvantages due to the lack of traditional worker benefits.

Continuing conversations around long-term needs will be crucial as counties rebuild local economies in the wake of the global pandemic.

<sup>ii</sup>Talk of nontraditional work, sometimes referred to as “gig work,” often evokes discussion of app-based services such as personal shoppers on Instacart or ride-share drivers like Lyft or Uber. Nontraditional work, however, spans a wide variety of industries and careers, from graphic design and consulting to healthcare or carpentry.

# COUNTY WORKFORCE PLANNING ADAPTS TO LOCAL AFTERSHOCKS

Different counties face very different recovery and workforce planning needs in the post-COVID era.<sup>3</sup> Although some recovery trends may follow geographic contours, not all needs will be the same – even within a similar geographic region.

- **Counties of similar sizes face different recovery needs.** **Pitkin County, Colo.** (home of Aspen) and **Phillips County, Ark.** may be similarly rural in total population (each fewer than 20,000 residents) and population density, but the needs of a tourism-focused county like Pitkin County are markedly different from the needs of a largely agricultural county like Phillips.
- **Industry composition is a key determinant of recovery time** – that is, the time it will take businesses to return to pre-COVID levels of GDP contribution. Some industries (like health care and social assistance) project a much shorter timeframe for recovery than other industries (such as hospitality and entertainment).<sup>4</sup> Counties relying on dominant industries that face a longer time horizon to economic recovery will need to consider how to support and upskill workers whose jobs will not be coming back for a long time, if at all.
- **Workforce development and economic development are two sides of the same coin.** To attract new businesses and jobs to a community, counties need a workforce with the right skills; at the same time, to train workers with the appropriate skills, counties need jobs. **DeKalb County, Ga.** explored joint employment models which could have one full-time employee working half in the economic development office and half in the workforce office.
- **Workforce planning requires a holistic approach to accommodate other factors which could attract or deter businesses from relocating to the area.** **Benton County, Ore.** and **San Miguel County, Colo.** are exploring the links between affordable housing and economic and workforce development. In the former case, a lack of affordable housing has been an obstacle to attracting new businesses to the region and retaining highly skilled workers. In the latter case, location-neutral entrepreneurs who have moved to the area because of its natural beauty have driven up housing costs, exacerbating the shortage of affordable housing for other workers.

## Addressing workforce needs often requires prioritizing economic development

In **Douglas County, Ga.**, many workers have historically commuted to nearby Atlanta (Fulton County) for work. Now that workers have had the opportunity to work remotely due to COVID, many of them would like to make that shift permanent. However, not all employers plan to remain remote indefinitely and local employers in Douglas County cannot offer salaries equivalent to what workers would find in Atlanta. County residents desire an influx of highly paid jobs, but to attract new employers, the county may need to take on cost-prohibitive projects, such as enhanced transportation infrastructure.

Chambers of commerce are one important stakeholder counties use to help navigate the needs of local businesses while considering workforce development needs. Local chambers of commerce in **Harlan County, Ky.** have played an instrumental role in connecting with workers and understanding businesses, allowing Harlan County to better understand the needs of the local business community. Similarly, **Hall County, Neb.** has worked with the local chambers of commerce to disseminate information about available COVID resources to local businesses.

County leaders face complex challenges and trade-offs while planning for the Future of Work; challenges which have become more difficult than ever in the COVID era. County leaders from **San Miguel County, Colo.** noted that raising the minimum wage – something that was on the county's agenda before COVID – may now be viewed as either a necessary support for workers or as a policy punitive to struggling local business owners. County peer sharing on successful ideas and strategies has proved helpful to many leaders navigating these challenges.



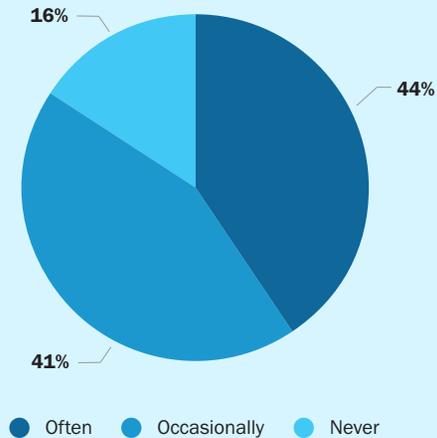
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**“The only way to attract  
new industries is to have a  
trained workforce.”**

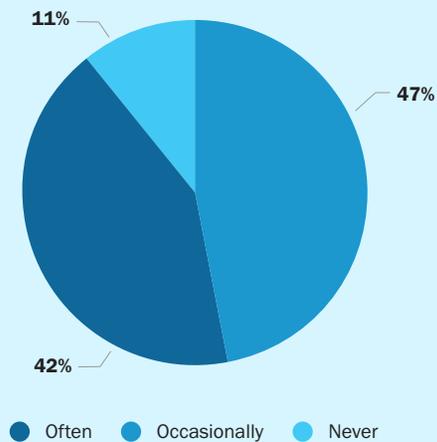
– Onondaga County, N.Y.

# COUNTIES LEVERAGE PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Frequency of engagement with community or technical college



Frequency of engagement with the local workforce development board



County leaders sustain strong partnerships to support county workforce development goals, leveraging these relationships to plan for the Future of Work and address COVID-related economic hardship.

## Counties and education, non-profits and industry organizations

**Onondaga County, N.Y.** engaged school districts, foundations, manufacturing associations and the local chamber of commerce to provide programming and workforce training development. The county also engaged advanced manufacturing employers as part of a partnership the local community college where the employers committed to hiring a set number of graduates from the new training program.

## Community colleges in our counties

**Henrico County, Va.** is looking to partner with community colleges and workforce development organizations to gain insights on how to best achieve workforce goals.

**Erie County, Pa.,** sought input from business leaders in the county to understand the skillsets needed and how to align those business needs to training opportunities, using this information to help develop the first community college within the county.

## Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) and WIOA

Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) are part of the state and local structure that oversees the implementation of workforce programs authorized under WIOA. Local governments play an important role in determining the membership of the WDBs, which include representatives of local businesses (who must be the majority of the board), representatives of the workforce community and representatives of education and training. Three-quarters of counties surveyed reported having representatives on their WDB. Among counties with representation on local WDBs, 45 percent of counties reported having significant influence over the plans and strategies of the local WDB. Counties without WDB representation reported less sway.

Workforce development partnerships work best in conjunction with training providers and programs to support specific populations.

**Montgomery County, Pa.** partnered with workforce systems like WIOA Title II providers to create strategies that could support adult education and skills development programs. The county also partnered with the local vocational rehabilitation agency and small community-based organizations to pick up job seekers and drive them to interviews.

Source: NACo County Member Survey, 2020 – 2021

# REGIONAL COORDINATION IS KEY TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Regional coordination is vital to facilitating local workforce planning efforts. Many counties participate in regional workforce planning efforts, working in unison with other counties to enhance coordination and workforce training processes.

- **Montgomery County, Pa.** has a WIOA regional plan that includes Philadelphia and five counties outside of the city. This partnership has been instrumental in helping align policies and processes across counties to improve the experience of job seekers. In this densely populated urban environment, it is normal for a person to live in one county, work in a second and attend a training program in a third. The partnership also supports employers' recruitment efforts because most employers are pulling from several counties when recruiting employees.
- **DeKalb County, Ga.** Coordinates with four other WDBs to implement a regional workforce plan. The region used federal grant funding to contract with United Way to help operationalize the regional plan and engage key stakeholders. As part of the regional approach, the area has a regional Eligible Training Provider List for WIOA to ensure that community college training programs and private training providers are meeting federal and state standards. A regional approach simplifies the process for people seeking training and training providers.

Connecting with industry and business partners has been critical for workforce development planning during the pandemic. Many counties have seen disruptions to service sector and retail industries over the course of the pandemic, yet planning needs related to the Future of Work are very different for a county that relies heavily on a manufacturing base than for a county that primarily relies on tourism or agriculture jobs.

- **Pierce County, Wash.** Created an economic recovery committee for industries to meet every two weeks to talk about industry trends and needs, creating a forum for county leaders to better understand the impacts the pandemic has had on local industries.
- County leaders in **DeKalb County, Ga.**, saw the pandemic accelerate the demand for fields in information technology and established a technology roundtable that brought together business leaders and county staff to ensure that county workforce development specialists understand industry priorities and offer trainings to meet those needs.

Partnerships with industries and businesses also flourished to respond to employee and company needs.

- **Onondaga County, N.Y.** addressed the employment barrier posed by lack of transportation through a partnership with the ridesharing company Lyft. The county paid for Lyft rides for people who received job placements at locations not served by city or county bus routes. This partnership provided support for job seekers and allowed health care facilities and manufacturing companies to broaden employee recruitment to areas outside traditional bus routes.

## Local coordination ensures education aligns with employer needs

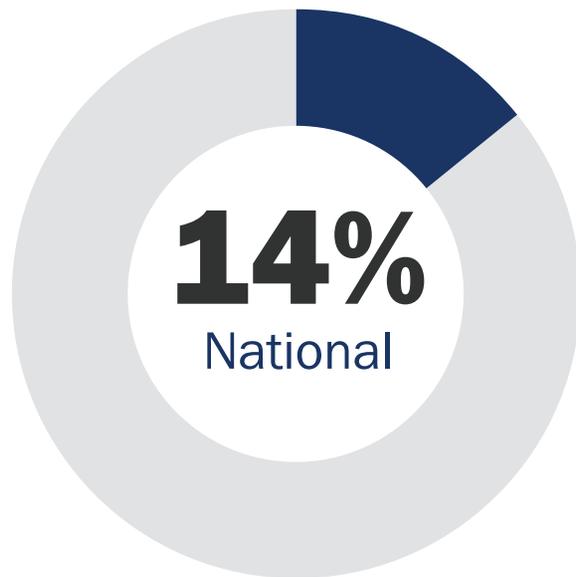
**Harlan County, Ky.** looks to a wide range of partners to advance strategic planning and economic development efforts. The county works closely with community colleges to ensure curricula align with employer needs. For example, in recent years, the community college system designed a new computer numerically controlled (CNC) machinery training program targeting dislocated coal industry workers. Harlan County works with the Center for Rural Development's Developing and Implementing Community Strategies Program (Flex-E Grant) to support these types of strategic planning efforts.

## READ THE FULL CASE STUDY

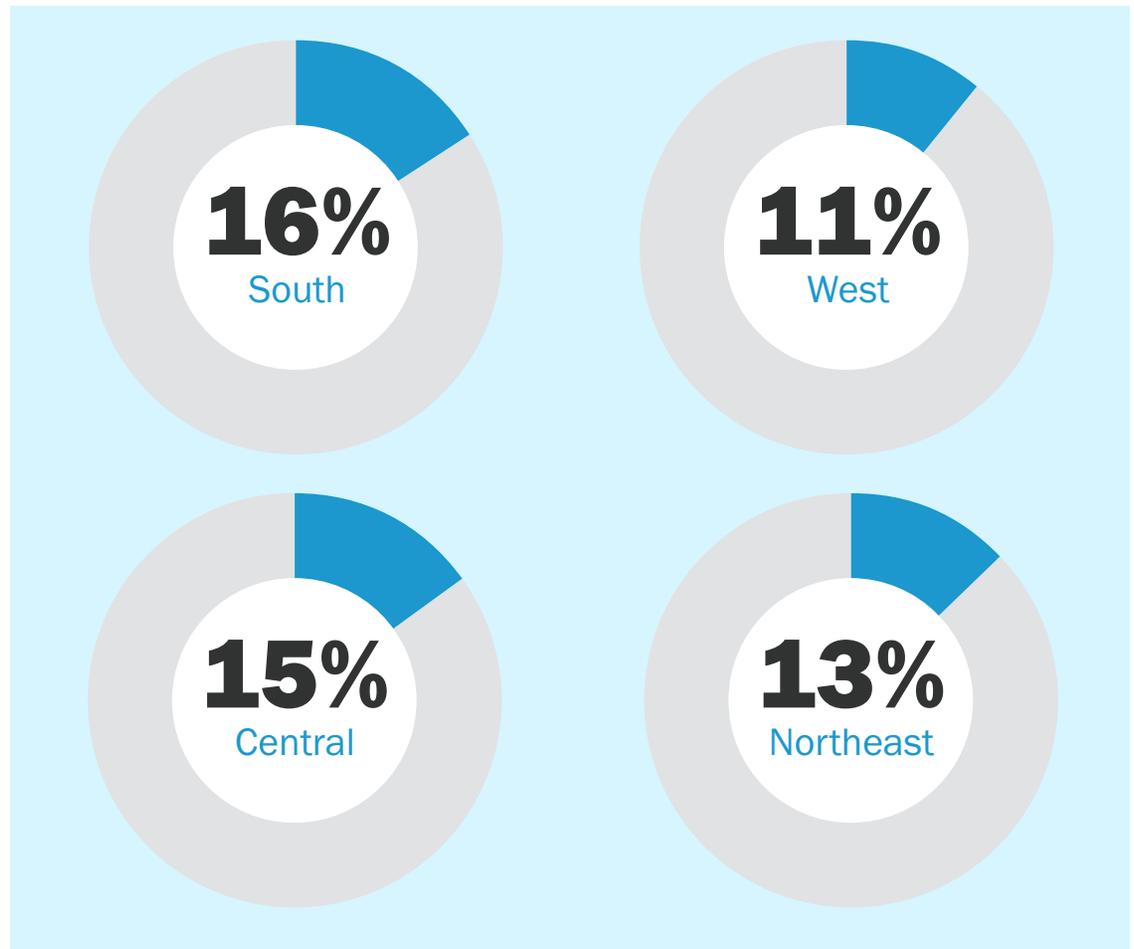
# COUNTIES ARE WORKING TO ENSURE ALL HOUSEHOLDS HAVE BROADBAND ACCESS

National statistics on broadband access illustrate the variation in broadband access across counties, but access concerns are not limited to rural areas. However, national statistics on broadband are limited to assessing access and thus do not consider speed or affordability. As an increases in remote work, education, appointments and other commitments persist, ensuring access to high-speed, affordable broadband connections and digital literacy will be critical.

The share of households **without** broadband access is highest in the South and Central regions



Fewer than 10 percent of county leaders surveyed reported full coverage of high-speed broadband across the entire county.



Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau – American Community Survey: Presence and Type of Internet Subscriptions in Household, 2019.

# BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF FUTURE OF WORK PLANNING

As COVID-19 shifted more companies to telework or remote work, the question of broadband infrastructure has become inextricably linked to the topic of workforce development and the Future of Work. Broadband has become a hot-button topic throughout the pandemic, but households in counties across the country face barriers to accessing fast, reliable and affordable broadband. As one county leader from **San Miguel County, Colo.** noted in a town hall, available does not always mean accessible or reliable.

- **Remote work will be an important component of the post-COVID local economy.** Eighty-six (86) percent of county leaders expect lasting changes to how workers and businesses operate, such as remote and hybrid working. One workforce development expert from **Montgomery County, Pa.** described how there are too many unknowns to make predictions about the future of remote work with any certainty. For example, as **Pierce County, Wash.** reported, understanding how to maintain high productivity remotely will help determine county workforce planning decisions as companies, like those in **Montgomery County, Pa.**, may continue to announce hybrid work-from-home models. Nevertheless, concerns persist over the viability of service jobs such as cleaning or landscaping and the stability of tax revenue if buildings become unoccupied.
- **Because counties are also employers, county governments face the same concerns as other industries, including whether remote work should become permanent.** To attract top talent, counties as employers also must offer flexible work environments. In some places, like **San Miguel County, Colo.**, the transition to remote work has been challenging given that there were no human resources policies in place to allow for telework and flexible schedules prior to the pandemic; though there is a need for flexible work environments, major updates to organizational policies can be challenging. In **Pierce County, Wash.**, county leaders are working with employee unions to reach an agreement on when it will be safe for workers to return to the office – or if that return is even necessary to maintain productivity. Remote work opportunities increase access to employment opportunities for some, including job seekers with disabilities.<sup>6</sup> However, some county employees face broadband connectivity issues making a permanent move to remote work disadvantageous to future opportunities.
- **Access to affordable, quality broadband for all residents is a concern for many counties.** Fewer than 10 percent of county leaders surveyed reported full coverage of high-speed broadband across the entire county. Less than one-third reported that all or most residents had the necessary tools and technology to access broadband from their homes, and nearly half indicated both access and affordability are major barriers. Rural areas and communities of color have faced long-standing and significant barriers to broadband access and affordability.<sup>7</sup> Some counties have used the pandemic as leverage for improving broadband access. **Onondaga County, N.Y.** partnered with Verizon in mid-2020 to establish Syracuse as one of the first places in the nation to launch citywide 5G. This initiative had a major impact on remote learning for students living in neighborhoods providing increased capacity and speed, which educators' can leverage to grant students a more collaborative and interactive learning experience.

**“There are some portions [of the county] served by fiber to the home and there are others that don’t even have the most minimal connectivity, thus exacerbating the work from home and homeschool or remote learning options.”**

– San Miguel County, Colo.

# COUNTIES LOOK TO NEW ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Groups of workers face different obstacles in preparing for and adapting to the Future of Work; the pandemic has only reinforced these obstacles. Concern over workforce outcomes of vulnerable populations who were disproportionately affected by the pandemic range from creating opportunities to bridge the digital divide for older workers, reengaging women who left the workforce due to COVID-related constraints and providing solutions for the mismatch in employment and training opportunities for younger workers and communities of color.

## Innovative worker wellness programs attract and retain the workforce

As an employer of 125 full-time staff, **San Miguel County** focuses on worker wellness to attract skilled talent to the area. Prior to the pandemic, San Miguel County offered services like lunchtime yoga and exercise classes to county staff at no cost. These programs produced an increase in productivity, workplace morale and interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

### READ THE FULL CASE STUDY

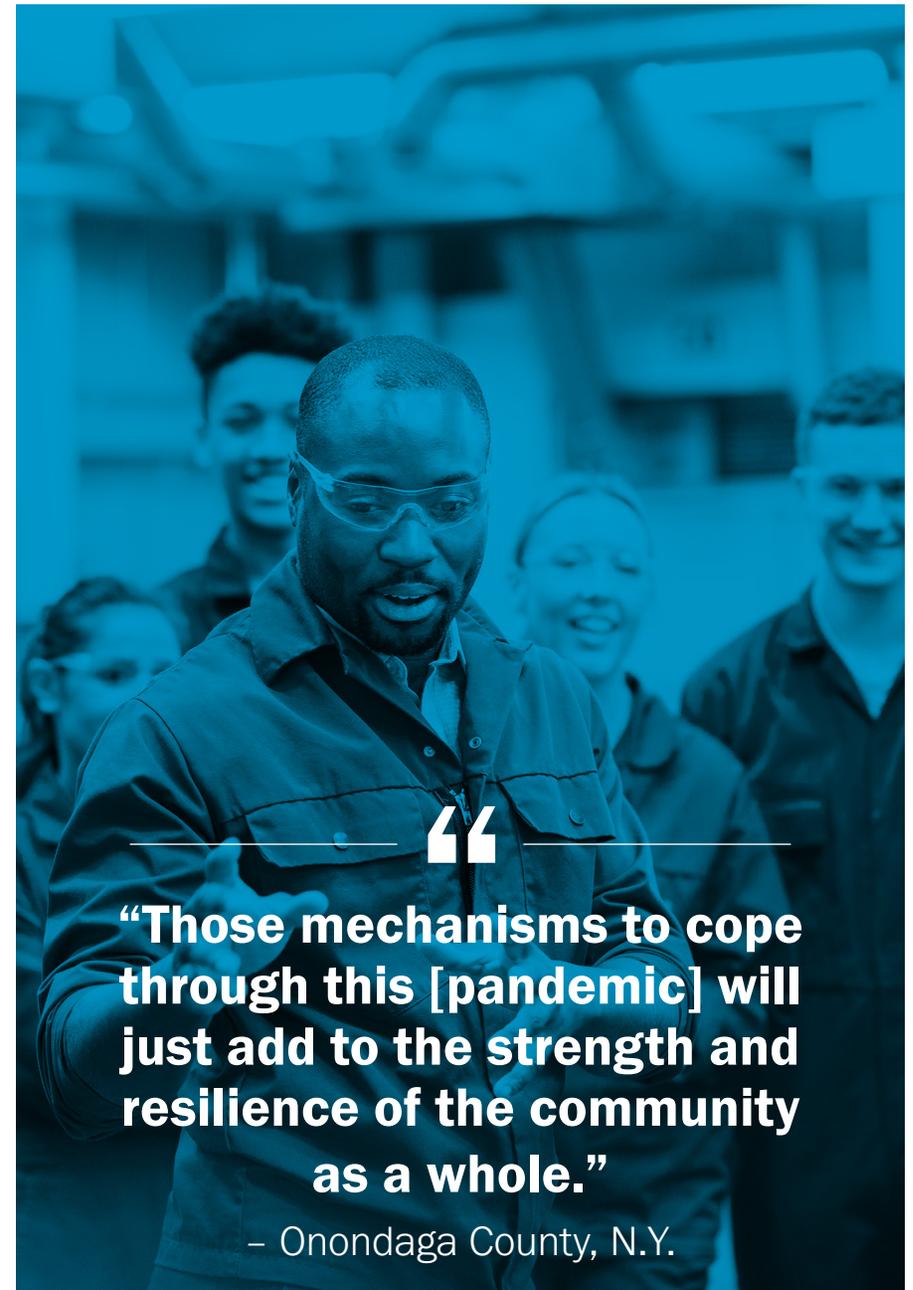
- **The pandemic has accelerated the digital divide for older adults.** With educational attainment, training and now online work, many in the aging population are falling behind. Programs that filled the gap in the technical divide – notably community libraries – closed or limited services during the pandemic. **Montgomery County, Pa.** libraries, often the first stop for older residents who needed support getting online, faced a disadvantage when locations were closed and services become online-only. As a safe return to normal occurs, county library services will once again be pivotal avenues for reducing the digital divide.
- **A disconnect between younger workers' skills and preferences and local employment opportunities persist.** Filling job gaps are top of mind at **Allegheny County, Pa.**, where county staff is focused on attracting and retaining students who move to the area to attend one of the many colleges and universities. **Harlan County, Ky.** expressed similar concerns over youth who felt they had to leave the county to find meaningful work and **Pierce County, Wash.** is focused on keeping students who come for university in the area after graduation, a particularly important aspect for counties experiencing outmigration of individuals with higher-education credentials.
- **Ensuring equitable access for women reentering the workforce is challenging, but necessary.** More than 50 percent of county leaders anticipate disproportionate impacts on women from the pandemic. Women of color, particularly Black and Latinx women, have suffered both significantly high unemployment and slow rates of job recovery resulting from the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> As such, equitable, diverse policy making that targets both race and gender to foster equitable recovery is a clear focus of counties.
- **Communities of color face disproportionate job loss and may face disconnects with job opportunity and economic recovery.** Even before the pandemic, communities of color faced disproportionate concerns about being left behind in the Future of Work, including due to automation.<sup>9</sup> Nearly 60 percent of county leaders anticipate residual economic repercussions due to the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color. More than one-fifth of county leaders indicated that the impact of the pandemic on residents of color was among their top concerns.

County leaders understand the importance of identifying new economic development opportunities as a means of pursuing jobs for local workers – particularly those historically overlooked. **Onondaga County, N.Y.** is beginning work on a major transportation infrastructure project that will require the hiring of many construction workers. County leaders are mindful of the need for specialized training to complete this project. The construction project affects a community that was split in half by the original highway construction, which led to place-based inequities, and ensures construction jobs go to local workers. This provides community members a stake in the transportation project in a way that they did not have previously.

## COUNTIES ARE LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

The impacts of the pandemic on the Future of Work in counties has been rapid, widespread and inconsistent. County leaders are addressing urgent needs among residents while also balancing long-standing concerns about the Future of Work in communities – both within daily responsibilities and long-term economic recovery planning. Understanding the impacts of the pandemic, automation, shifting demographics and other factors that influence the Future of Work requires a broad analysis of local needs with an intentional lens on small business health, community members that are disconnected from work and those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

County governments play a key role in driving the country toward a state of preparedness for the Future of Work and information on promising practices, funding and other resources are critical in this pursuit. Specifically, counties are interested in cultivating peer connections to share information on innovative and promising practices, avenues to engage with local workforce development boards, resources and opportunities aimed at bolstering community broadband access to bridge the digital divide. Counties are also soliciting funding opportunities and resources for retraining workers – a need particularly prevalent in counties that have experienced economic decline as the economy has transitioned – and resources specifically directed towards low-income residents and communities of color. With proper support, counties are acting as a critical convener, forging meaningful connections between workers, employers, community colleges, workforce organizations and other local stakeholders to thread the needle on workforce concerns unique to each community.



“Those mechanisms to cope through this [pandemic] will just add to the strength and resilience of the community as a whole.”

– Onondaga County, N.Y.

# METHODOLOGY

Data for this report come from a December 2020 survey of NACo member counties and three town hall conversations with 13 county leaders in January 2021. Survey findings are based on 134 survey responses representing 116 unique counties across 35 different states. Survey results presented in this report are not meant to be representative of all counties; instead, they are presented as a snapshot of county-level plans and challenges related to the Future of Work.

NACo and Mathematica partnered on this report to produce findings from county leaders' experiences across the nation.

This report was funded by Walmart. The findings and conclusions contained above are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of Walmart.



# ENDNOTES

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**“It is important to have these industry leaders tell us what they are seeing and what is really going on, otherwise we [may be disconnected from] what employers need.”**

– DeKalb County, Ga.



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