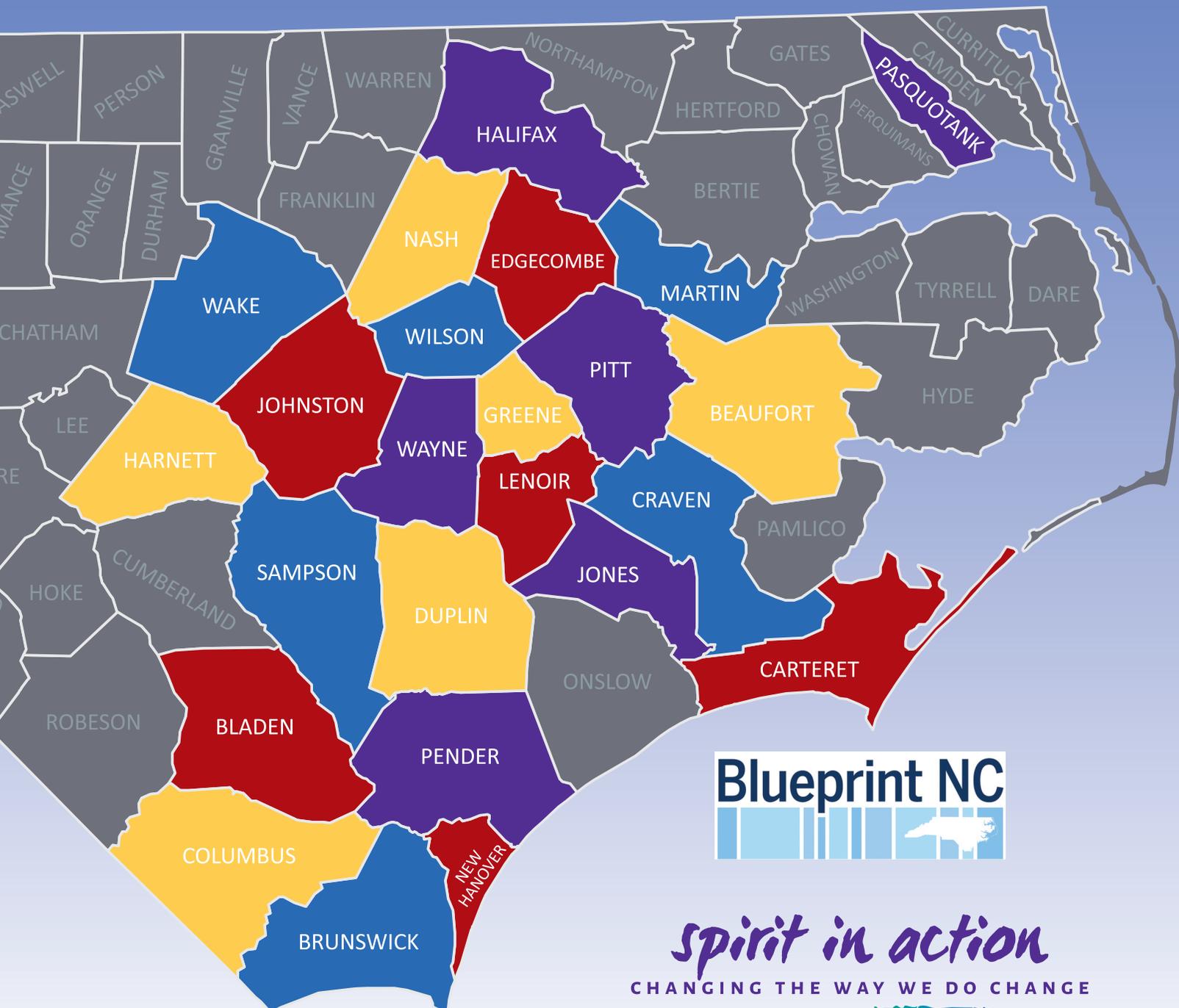


How Rural Organizing Can Build Power



spirit in action

CHANGING THE WAY WE DO CHANGE





TABLE OF CONTENTS

Setting the Scene: A Context for Recommendations	
The Most Undesirable Land	1
Rural Organizing Is Different	2
Service Programs Build Power	2
The Threats Are Different Too	2
Where We Go From Here	3
The Eastern North Carolina Groups	
List of Organizations and Map	4
Organization Profiles	
A Better Chance A Better Community	5
Alpha Life Enrichment Center	6
AMEXCAN	7
Columbus County Forum	8
The Cornerstone CDC	9
Episcopal Farmworker Ministry	10
Faith & Victory Christian Church	11
Kinston Teens, Inc.	12
Men and Women United for Youth & Families	13
NC Association of Community Development Corporations	14
New Hanover County NAACP	15
Pender United, Inc.	16
SunShineStation	17
Recommendations	
Systems	19
Education	20
Opportunities For Growth	22
Seek Outside Help Now	24
Political Power Building	26
TAKE 10	
.....	28

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Blueprint NC is a partnership of almost 60 formal partner (C)(3) organizations and a web of network allies committed to building independent power for an anti-racist, inclusive democracy. They believe that inclusive democracy requires open, reflective and responsive governing institutions. They know that structural racism and economic inequalities shrink and weaken democratic process through laws, practices and culture that have for too long excluded many – Black people, people of color, poor and working class people, women, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities – from access and representation. Therefore, they sustain and grow an expanding progressive infrastructure capable of shifting policy, hearts and minds.

Throughout this report, images of North Carolina quilts and Mexican embroidery are used. These historical and cultural artifacts symbolize the fabric of our diverse community and how those fabrics and threads – or counties – can be stitched together to create something that is strong, functional and beautiful.



SETTING THE SCENE

A Context for Recommendations

In June 2021, Spirit in Action staff visited 13 groups we had only encountered over Zoom during our monthly TAKE 10 training. For the last 18 months and bi-monthly, these groups worked with us online to build political power and leadership among rural organizers. Funded by Blueprint NC and donors from Spirit in Action, our purpose was to evaluate the training, determine next steps for upcoming elections, and assess what these organizations will need to elevate their communities.

The Most Undesirable Land

In this part of eastern North Carolina lies the “Black Belt.” The name originally came from the rich, fertile, black soil in a region that extended from East Texas to Virginia. This was where cotton and tobacco grew and plantations thrived, as a result of the labor of enslaved Black people who were the majority of the population.

However, poor farming techniques degraded and eroded the soil down to the limestone base. After the Civil War, the now sandy, poor farmland was occupied and farmed by descendants of the same enslaved people who once lived and worked there. What had been one of America’s richest and most politically powerful regions became the largest, poorest, most rural region in the country.

Exclusionary zoning, restrictive covenants and redlining all played a role in segregating neighborhoods, putting Black families on flood-prone low ground and white families on higher ground. Those development trends were common in the South after the Civil War, according to a 2006 study¹ by Jeff Ueland and Barney Warf, two geography professors. Their research demonstrates that historical and institutional racism pushed Black communities into less desirable and low-lying land throughout the South.

By 2018, some of the groups we visited were continuing to work hard on long-time issues like better housing (using Community Development Corporations – CDCs), coping

with on again/off again state funding of vital programs, and serving impoverished communities to provide food, housing, health care, education, immigration services and social services that the state ignored. When Hurricane Florence hit this region in September with a “once-in-a-lifetime flood,” housing was devastated, unemployment grew (especially among migrant workers) and hunger ran rampant. Reeling from Florence, a subsequent hurricane (Michael) battered them less than a month later, only reinforcing the sense that the effects of climate change were here to stay.

The flooding spread toxins on farms from nearby industrial and agricultural facilities and damaged local food sources. One Blueprint NC leader, Courtney Patterson, worked with other leaders in the region to organize help. Along with Operation Airdrop, they dropped food, supplies and voter information to these landlocked communities that were completely surrounded by flood waters for weeks, and cut off from accessing any help from the outside.

Rebuilding and planning for the next storm remains a constant concern here. More hurricanes and tornadoes in the following years highlighted that in communities of color, clean-up never stops and insurance does not cover the costs involved in recovery. The \$2 billion the federal government appropriated to the state for hurricane relief has barely trickled into these primarily Black areas. Some communities have never recovered and you can still see the devastation and disaster as you drive through.

¹ <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2006.tb00387.x>

Rural Organizing Is Different

Most of these leaders have lived here all their lives and know everyone. As Chris Suggs of Kinston Teens says, “It takes special handling to go against the government when your mother sits on the City Council, your cousin is the mayor, and you all have to sit down together at Thanksgiving Dinner. It takes a different approach.”

Take10 participants are often integrated into their communities in ways that make traditional needs assessments or strategic plans drawn up by outsiders ineffective. Some rural organizers do not use words like “needs assessment,” “strategies and tactics,” or “environmental and climate justice” with their communities. Local people do not relate to these terms most often used by urban organizers and funders.

Rural organizing is also very family-focused. Often you see two or three generations working together in the organization. Sometimes you see entire families working together. Many have family members on their boards. Executive director’s and volunteer’s mothers or grown children, nieces and nephews are involved as volunteers, staff or board members. Having family members on the board or as staff can lead to complex problems, but can also be a strength and is prevalent among these rural organizers.

Young organizers in these organizations often face cross-generational conflicts. Older people will say, “Young people don’t want to do anything. I hear that all the time.” On the other side of the inter-generational divide, you hear about “old school organizing folks who don’t want to hear us out.” Frequently we heard on our visits that, “Adults assume that young people cannot effect change because we lack the financial resources, life experiences and political capital that often comes with age.”

Our change-making youth described how such social adversity is a challenge that can be overcome and put aside so that all may succeed.

Eight percent of North Carolina residents are immigrants, and an additional seven percent are native-born U.S.

citizens who have at least one immigrant parent. These communities, including isolated migrant camps, are another feature of rural organizing where undocumented people are at high risk of being picked up by ICE, removed from their families and deported.

Climate disasters have an especially negative impact on undocumented communities, which

never see federal funds and must be supported by private dollars. Here, bilingual information is critical for grassroots community organizing to be effective.

Service Programs Build Power

This is a region that has been traditionally ignored in favor of urban Black and People of Color voters. Many of these groups are new to grants for civic engagement and building power. Because of historic, systemic oppression, many struggle with the idea of “power” as something they can actually achieve. There are many strong leaders who have traditionally worked around service who understand that civic engagement is integrated into this work. Consequently, organizing is often very service-oriented but it is a way to build connections to engage people.

Building relationships based on providing service in the community is seen as a way to build power. They believe it is hard to organize people to do other things if they are hungry and without housing. But they also see this as a way to build connections, trust and long-term social change work by getting people registered to vote and eventually, volunteer for other actions. Many of the volunteers started out as one who had received services, later thinking their job was to pay back and help others.

While most of these groups are small, many new to building power, understaffed and underfunded, they are determined, courageous, and filled with an abundance of love for their communities and region and

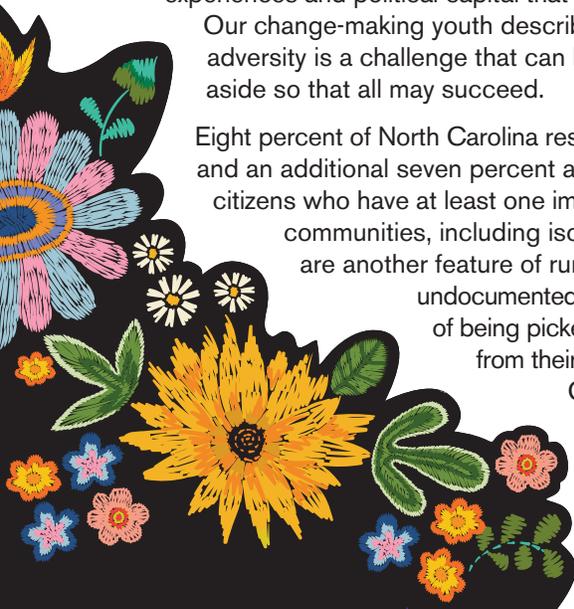
the work they are doing. They are resilient and creative, and have a strong sense of taking care of each other.

When they set up voter registration and 2020 census sites, COVID-19 testing sites, food distribution or housing help, they start connecting people there. They will put GOTV flyers in the 500 bags of food being distributed from a food pantry to recruit volunteers. They will register people to vote while they are providing vaccinations. Immigration issues are addressed at the same time as hurricane recovery, health care or food boxes. Through service programs, they bring in volunteers to help protest the killing of a Black man by the police. Relationships are built when they are meeting the needs of the community.

The Threats Are Different Too

The visible threats we see on national TV, like the killing of Andrew Brown Jr. in eastern North Carolina, continues to be an issue for many of the groups. There is more. Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and other white supremacist groups appear in trucks at voting sites with Confederate and Nazi flags flying, driving around to intimidate. They park nearby with semi-automatic weapons drawn. Vans and pick-up trucks lurk in people’s driveways or out on the street. They sit there at night, sometimes blocking people in, creating so much fear that people are reluctant to reach out for help.

“If you want a community to trust you, they need to believe that you understand their pain.”
– STACEY ABRAMS



More insidious threats stem from history. People are taught from childhood to be afraid of white power structures, though they do not always know why. This is evident from the way people refused to speak to us about these threats in public places, surrounded by a majority of white folks.

History, like the Wilmington Coup of 1898 where hundreds were massacred, is not discussed. On November 10th, white supremacists overthrew the democratically elected Black state and city government, and burned Black businesses, while the white press in Wilmington described the event as a race riot caused by Black people. Black families ran away from Wilmington and hid in nearby swamps for weeks trying to save themselves and their families. People still react from this and other historical traumas even though there is a focus on putting the past behind them and moving forward.

Even between generations of Black families there can be conflict. Older people have been taught not to “make waves,” speak out or show their anger, and this is based on real events – like racial profiling – and ongoing trauma. Attending a public protest, then, requires great courage, for the older adults themselves or their children.

Anti-immigration laws, and sheriff's departments that collaborate with ICE and encourage racial profiling, target Latinx communities. Despite the governor's opposition, many rural sheriffs do cooperate and sign an agreement that allows them to ask anyone detained for their IDs or work papers. Law enforcement will put detainees in jail to be turned over to ICE if they do not have them.

You know the threats from white supremacists are ongoing, the TAKE 10 participants told us. As you drive into eastern North Carolina, there are enormous Confederate flags, and

a campaign to get as many of them up on private property along the interstate as possible. These diatribes of hate are fostered through private militia training camps and also among businessmen who may have put away their robes and masks but are now doing their best to undermine Black and People of Color power with trumped up accusations of mismanagement, lawsuits, financial chicanery and sophisticated technology that spreads disinformation. They pay some Black people to undermine their own communities by making “donations” and turn people against each other as they try to sabotage nascent Black power structures. They target individuals who are key leaders, many among the TAKE 10 participants.

Where We Go From Here

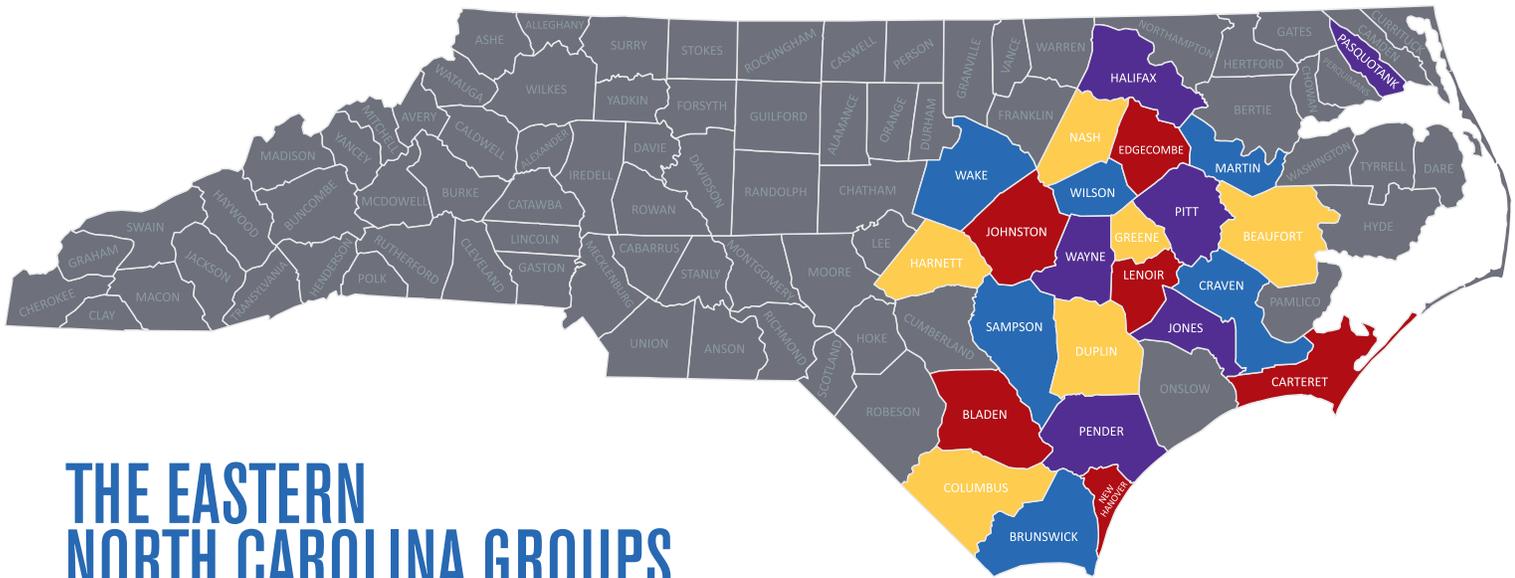
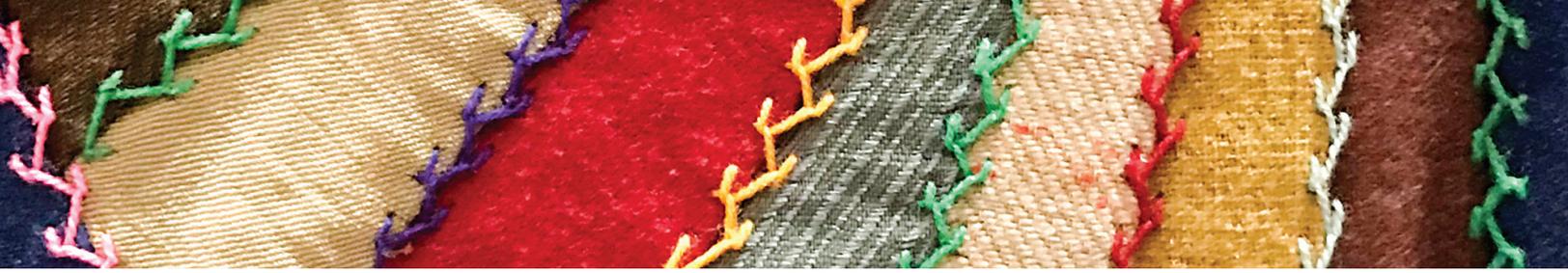
From interviews with the TAKE 10 groups, listening to their personal stories, visiting their communities and seeing the extraordinary work they can do with little support or funding, eastern North Carolina stands as a clear example for other rural southern regions of how to organize, the challenges they face and what they will need to build grassroots political power. Each one of our recommendations is based on the reality TAKE 10 groups face plus their hopes and dreams for the future. There is a story to tell with every recommendation.

It took Stacey Abrams 10 years to regain and engage rural Black and People of Color voters in Georgia in order to build a progressive voting bloc. We believe that for North Carolina to engage and mobilize a majority of people to become a strong progressive voice in the South, this area in eastern North Carolina that has been historically ignored must be given priority attention. This is a prime state for this, because traditionally it has been a state that has flipped back and forth between moderate and conservative representation. Many races are won or lost by just a few votes.

For funders and supporters of the work these groups do, who desire to help them build the power they need, we provide these caveats:

- 1. Every county is different. Some counties have more community representation and others have none. Most are controlled by white supremacists in government and business, a constant reminder of a precarious political situation.**
- 2. Groups in eastern North Carolina's Black Belt organize differently and talk about organizing differently. Groups need to be able to speak in their own words and be believed when they say, “This is what our communities need and this is how we know it.”**
- 3. Groups are so integrated into their communities that traditional needs assessments or strategic plans drawn up by outsiders are ineffective.**
- 4. People in eastern North Carolina value their lived experience and relational organizing that recognizes the importance of service.**

Rural organizing IS different.



THE EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA GROUPS

A List of Organizations

A Better Chance A Better Community

Enfield, Halifax County
www.facebook.com/ABetterChanceaBetterCommunity

Alpha Life Enrichment Center

Washington, Beaufort County
www.facebook.com/AlphaLifeEnrichmentCenter

AMEXCAN

Greenville, Pitt County
www.amexcanncc.org

Columbus County Forum

Whiteville, Columbus County

The Cornerstone CDC

Warsaw, Duplin County
www.thecornerstonecdc.info

Episcopal Farmworker Ministry

Dunn, Harnett County
www.episcopalfarmworkerministry.org

Faith & Victory Christian Church

Elizabeth City, Pasquotank County
www.fvccfamily.org

Kinston Teens, Inc.

Kinston, Lenoir County
www.kinstonteens.org

Men and Women United for Youth & Families, CDC

Delco, Columbus County
www.menandwomenunited.org

NC Association of Community Development Corporations

Battleboro, Edgecombe and Nash Counties
www.ncacdc.org

New Hanover County NAACP

Wilmington, New Hanover County
www.nhcnaacp.org

Pender United, Inc.

Burgaw, Pender County
www.penderunited.org

SunShine Station

Elizabeth City, Pasquotank County
www.facebook.com/sunshinestationinc

The groups we interviewed work across 24 counties in eastern North Carolina. This area alone is larger than Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island combined.

ORGANIZATION PROFILES



A Better Chance A Better Community

A Better Chance A Better Community (ABC2) in Enfield connects underserved and marginalized communities to empower youth and advocate for healthier lifestyles and community solutions. They organize under four pillars: healthy living, active living, civic engagement and entrepreneurship.

One of their programs, the GIS Club, encompasses all four pillars. GIS – Geographic Information System – teaches youth to use mapping zip code areas to determine health outcomes, access to transportation or Internet, educational opportunities or their lack, crime, poverty or where parks can be if people can access them. “You can see on a map what is going on in your community,” says Chester Williams, the executive director and founder. ABC2 is teaching how GIS can help set policy, tell community stories, prepare for environmental disasters, determine health outcomes where there is little to no access to health care – especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic – or identify funding opportunities.

They also ask the right questions. “Do you have cellphone service?” in a rural area is not the same as asking, “How good is your cellphone service where you live?” Using GIS to show the fair, good, excellent service on a map is more useful than just answering yes or no.

The youth, ages 10–24, are leaders in civic engagement in their communities. They design, plan and execute each civic engagement event. In 2018 and 2020 they organized “party at the polls,” and provided information about voter registration, how to find the voters and polling places. There was food,

music, water and a pure joy about voting. “Hands with Purpose” teaches young people about civic affairs, builds their decision-making skills and helps them develop a sense of understanding and confidence connecting to others.

Disaster planning and preparation is a great concern for this area that has suffered multiple hurricanes. ABC2 has opened one resilience hub¹ in Halifax County. Given the increasing frequency of climate disaster events, more than one hub is needed for each county. ABC2 would like to be able to use GIS to tell residents what to expect. “We are using the GIS system to get out of poverty and create resiliency in all our communities.”

Although ABC2 is non-partisan, they are identified as being radicals because they are young, Black and working in low-income communities. Most of the staff at ABC2 are young, and elders often do not see their value or disparage what they are doing for the community. “Youth leaders are not seen as ‘true leaders’” says Williams, lamenting the ageism they face, “and we are tokenized to get funding.

“We are world changers as game changers,” adds Williams. “We see ABC2 communities operating their own chapters and growing across the country. Each chapter will be unique to the community being served.

“We can become a global phenomenon.”

“We are world changers
as game changers.”

¹ Resilience hubs are community-serving facilities that support residents and coordinate resource distribution and services before, during or after a natural hazard event.



Alpha Life Enrichment Center

“We are turning our 40-acre family farm into a teaching farm,” say Miriam and Bill Booth, supported by their six adult children. The Booths started Alpha Life Enrichment Center in 1979 when their children were little, and their sons and daughters grew up participating in all aspects of the farm. They started out working with at-risk youth, providing them with an alternative to school after they had been expelled. “We were kind of a Big Brother/Big Sister to many kids. We had all kinds of programs for the youth – whatever they needed.”

The Booths became involved in civic engagement and social justice work at the same time, and Bill ran for local office. “I met with the all-white City Council and told them we needed to have Black involvement,” Bill recounts. “They said they didn’t see the need.” So he registered as a Republican and got more votes than any other person of color had ever received, but not enough to be elected. They brought a lawsuit against the county to change to block voting and in two years, elected the first Black to the City Council.

Near Alpha Life was a trailer park, and the Booths started helping out the Latinx community there, thinking they could help them get green cards. “We would love to have a green card,” the Booths were told. “But more importantly, we need clean drinking water.” As they visited the trailer park they noticed that residents would store water in pitchers and bottles and

the water was brown from too much iron. The Booths decided to organize for clean water first, and brought Blacks, Latinx and whites together to address this.

In fact, when they approached the Environmental Health Section of the Division of Public Health, it transpired they had a list of complaints about the water from the Latinx community for more than 20 years. As Bill tells it, “I asked them what they did about it, and they told me they let the owner know.” Along with a friend who worked at NC State and Eastern Carolina University, they tested the water and it had ten times the amount of contaminates than what is legal to drink. After eight months, the county offered the owner the ability to hook up 212 trailers to county water. “So, people finally had clean water.”

One of Alpha Life’s major focuses today is on healthy eating and living, working with small farmers and providing meat, fruits and vegetables for food-insecure families. In the works is a cooperative grocery store with 12 local farmers. They are starting a cannery on the farm, using vacuum-sealed pouches to alleviate waste. Alpha Life donates all the food they grow to a farmers’ market they started in town.

Young people and residents lack opportunities in their area. The Booths want to see more children coming to the farm and show more residents how to be involved in farming with



community gardens, raised beds, permaculture demonstrations and trails displaying therapeutic plants. “Children will learn about the environment, agriculture, gardening and livestock,” they envision. They are working with a plant therapist who teaches people about medicinal plants. An on-site kitchen will host healthy cooking classes, in person and online. With more volunteers, funding and technological know-how, they can move forward with these plans.

“Other counties in the state are already calling us to find out what we’re doing,” they say. “The good thing about bringing in a lot of youth? They bring a lot of knowledge.”

“Children will learn about the environment, agriculture, gardening and livestock ...”



AMEXCAN

The Association of Mexicans in North Carolina, Inc. (AMEXCAN)'s mission is to promote the active participation of Mexicans and Latinos in their new communities and encourage the appreciation, understanding and prosperity of the Mexican and Latino (see *Note*) community through cultural, educational, leadership, health and advocacy. Though they started in Raleigh in 2001, three years later they relocated to Greenville because of the population growth of the Latino community in the northeast corridor.

AMEXCAN has partnered with 100 Latino community leaders to address the issues affecting the Latino community on a state and local level. The hope is that this partnership will be translated into advocacy and policy changes across the public sector and into legislation.

Civic engagement has been difficult in the Latino community due to the undocumented status of many in this area. AMEXCAN has created innovative ways to engage people in getting out the vote, like direct outreach to the children of the undocumented. This outreach has mostly happened at local universities and colleges. Door-to-door canvassing has occurred, but there is mistrust in the community about getting involved with any election conversations. Local and statewide Spanish language print, radio and television media encourages civic engagement and voting in the Latino community.

For the Latino community to be successful in the state, AMEXCAN believes North Carolina must resolve the language barriers between Latinos and public agencies, government agencies, schools and courts. For instance, the language barriers create challenges for the student and family in understanding school procedures and expectations. For students with disabilities or who need Individual Education Programs, the challenge is even greater. While many of the usual school forms are translated into Spanish, this is not true for many special education forms, in part because those forms and plans are unique and must be updated regularly.

North Carolina must resolve the language barriers between Latinos and public agencies, government agencies, schools and courts.

When a parent needs to communicate with staff, or vice versa, the language gap often creates additional problems. Many North Carolina schools do not have Spanish-speaking staff or access to a language interpretation service; thus, parents frequently must use their children as interpreters, even when the subject is themselves. Although Latinos are 10 percent of the total population in North Carolina, K–12 students are 16 percent of the school population.¹

Spanish is not the only language spoken by the immigrant community. There are indigenous people from Mexico who reside in the state and many indigenous immigrants speak limited Spanish and English when they first arrive.

Beyond language, key challenges to civically mobilize the Latino community include insufficient data collection, health access, anti-immigrant sentiment, cultural barriers and the lack of sufficient or sustained investment in engaging the community. “We have a core group of Latino consultants to lead community engagement trainings, translators, interpreters and cultural educators,” they say, “but materials and trainings need to be translated and in Spanish for the next election in 2024.”

AMEXCAN is poised to become a strong policy and legislative advocate in eastern North Carolina and the state. Hiring a policy analyst could support the growth of that work and the health, immigration, education and direct services they already provide. But first, deal with the language issue.

“Language is one of the main barriers to integration and engagement,” concludes Juvencio Rocha Peralta, AMEXCAN's executive director.

Note: Throughout this report, we use each organization's own language of self-identification.

¹ <https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/latino-college-completion/north-carolina>

Columbus County Forum

Columbus County Forum (CCF) started in 2018 by registering voters. “But the main thing is organizing grassroots people to develop a plan to address their issues,” states Curtis Hill, issues like environmental justice, housing, water and sewer, high speed Internet, disaster relief and preparedness, and education. “We’ve been helping people repair homes from Hurricane Florence but all the time, registering people to vote.”

Party politics do not deal with the issues people care about here, says CCF. Their area is one of the poorest counties in North Carolina and among the lowest in social health determinants. Environmental issues such as contaminated drinking water thanks to a nearby DuPont plant, frequent flooding, air pollution from industrial sites, all contribute to poor health. “We’ve actually made progress,” Hill says, noting that they are now 92nd out of 100 counties. “We were at 100 – the bottom.”

CCF builds power through relational organizing, and “rural organizing takes time,” admits Hill. They want to have a youth component because, “If we can get them engaged when they are young, then that affects them for the rest of their lives.” CCF used the churches heavily to engage with

young people but that ended with COVID-19. Because a lot of people don’t have Internet – and those that do may not be comfortable yet with Zoom – CCF’s work was stymied. “The people you want to reach are not engaged. So without being out in the community, it’s hard to get them involved.”

Searching for new ways to connect with potential voters they partnered with Black Voters Matter. Together, they drove an “Icee” ice cream truck through the community to get people registered. “The kids would come and their parents would come out. You’d be amazed at how much excitement that caused! We had motorcycle caravans. We played music and used a bullhorn. It was a blast!”

They made 60,000 phone calls in the 2020 election, used the Voter Activation Network (VAN) and showed other groups how to use the VAN list. But the lack of a Voting Rights Act has had a major impact on rural communities. They set up 26 safety sites in three counties. People stood in line to vote for hours.

“Civic engagement is what we do,” Hill declares. “We need to give people information about what’s really going on.”

“... without being out in the community, it's hard to get them involved.”





The Cornerstone CDC

In **“Emergency Management in a Changing Climate,”** the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) states: “The challenges posed by climate change, such as more intense storms, frequent heavy precipitation, heat waves, drought, extreme flooding and higher sea levels could significantly alter the types and magnitudes of hazards faced by communities.” It’s more than “could” – these climate change events have significantly altered the challenges low-income communities face. In places like Duplin County, they are one event away from disaster.

In the past several years, The Cornerstone CDC has helped thousands of families and individuals with programs and partnerships that educate, train and empower residents. “When hurricanes hit Duplin County, we were there!” reports Cornerstone. “When COVID-19 forced the community to shutdown, we were there!”

The Cornerstone CDC began by offering training programs to the community, such as computer literacy, ESL classes and disaster preparedness. They also created partnership agreements and action plans with the local health department, Department of Homeland Security, Veterans Administration, senior services and FEMA.

They created the Cornerstone Drone Academy to address unmet needs during the many climate disasters they experienced. Training was provided by a partnership with Air Probe UAV. Once certified, the Cornerstone volunteers will get messages and supplies out to residents who live in isolated areas and require medicine, food and other items common to disaster recovery.

The impact of tropical storms and hurricanes on individuals, children, the elderly and families is long-term. Many have lost everything. The Cornerstone CDC serves as an information and support center for long-term disaster recovery.

“When hurricanes hit Duplin County, we were there!”

The Cornerstone Long-Term Recovery Group is a collaborative partnership of public, private and government agencies. They work with FEMA, the American Red Cross, churches and local volunteers to assist families and individuals long after the disaster has passed. This may include food, medical supplies, clothing, shelter, blankets, personal items and emergency gift cards. Since 2018 the Cornerstone has provided recovery services to more than 3,000 residents of Duplin and the surrounding counties.

The Cornerstone is a family affair and a beloved community. They are staffed primarily by volunteers and their programs are developed in line with the emerging needs of the community.

Executive Director Darlene Leysath’s mother pays the water bill for the building that was gifted to Cornerstone by Leysath’s father, and is also home to veterans groups. There is a mural there dedicated to veterans, and Cornerstone participates every year in the 100-year-old Veterans Day Parade in Duplin County. During COVID-19, Cornerstone made direct cash payments to landlords and banks to help families through the housing crisis.

“This is an exciting time for the Cornerstone, as we plan for the future in a time of COVID-19,” says Leysath. “During Hurricanes Matthew, Florence and Dorian we found thousands of families and individuals cut off from vital services. We see the value in training a new generation in the technologies and needs of the future.”



Episcopal Farmworker Ministry

“Migrant workers are invisible to each other,” explains staff members from the Episcopal Farmworker Ministry (EFWM). “It is a major barrier to providing service and makes community organizing nearly impossible.” These migrant workers, low-income Latinx and Haitian immigrants, are also a rapidly growing population.¹ They work in the fields, plant nurseries, packing houses, meat-processing plants and on poultry, swine or livestock farms.

Workers are housed in camps, located far apart, and are prohibited from applying for driver’s licenses. Guest workers may stay in North Carolina for two to 11 months, moving from harvest to harvest. “The employers pretty much control their whole lives,” says EFWM.

Housing must be provided by law. It varies from farmer to farmer, ranging from bunk beds in trailers to newer housing units with small kitchens and bathrooms. EFWM reports that many places they visit are full of bugs and fungus, with dirty bathrooms and leaking pipes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, EFWM tried to advocate for housing stimulus checks to improve housing conditions but, “Governor Cooper was not interested,” further isolating the migrant workers.

Providing food to farmworker families is another program of EFWM, and they are a food hub for the communities they serve in Duplin, Harnett, Johnston, Lenoir and Sampson Counties. They distributed food boxes to 200–300 families on a regular basis during the pandemic. EFWM has also provided disaster relief after hurricanes, reaching 4,000 migrant workers.

“It is been a roller coaster, literally,” acknowledges their executive director, Lariza Garzon. COVID-19 has taken a tremendous toll, and the migrant camps lost many workers to the disease. Due to poor reporting by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the exact numbers are unknown. “But for us, we can count at least 25 of the workers and community members that we worked with in the camps who have died.”

EFWM also provides mental health services, English classes, and has organized a women’s group where they exchange traditions of medicinal healing practices, culinary arts and crafts. “The migrant community does not have access to health care,” they observed, “So why not use the traditional knowledge of our *abuelas* – our grandmothers?”

Community education, advocacy, policy and leadership development are among the most inspiring aspects of EFWM’s programs. Immigration reform is paramount, and they have developed alliances and coalitions with statewide and national organizations to fight for immigrant rights. Workers become empowered leaders who feel comfortable as public speakers, policy advocates and community



“These are changes that will benefit not just migrant and immigrant communities, but all of humanity.”

educators. EFWM prides itself on a model of leadership that begins with community members becoming community organizers, then staff members, policy analysts, lobbyists and legislators. “It is a very long process for people to feel trust and comfort with this type of organizing,” they concede. “It can potentially lead them to deportation. Wearing masks helps with anonymity these days.”

The list of barriers that migrant farmworkers face is long and the needs are many, which is why civic engagement is so important. Inadequate housing and food, the inability to get a driver’s license, social isolation, lack of health care, detention and deportation are just the beginning of their advocacy. The systemic change EFWM calls for means immigration reform, an agricultural policy that breaks down the invisibility of the workers, translation services in the schools and clinics, and safety from violence.

EFWM wants to build capacity in all areas of direct service, leadership development and community education. To do that, they will need to hire more staff and community organizers, as the group—and the communities they serve—have grown exponentially and will continue to grow. They are optimistic they can achieve their goals. “These are changes that will benefit not just migrant and immigrant communities, but all of humanity.”

¹ Between 2010 and 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that North Carolina’s Hispanic population grew by 226,000 new residents, an increase of 28.3%, faster than the growth of this population nationwide (19.6%). Though the Hispanic population is smaller in more rural counties, many of these counties have seen faster growth in this population over the past 28 years. As a result, Hispanic or Latinx residents comprise a greater share of the population in many less populated, rural counties.



Faith & Victory Christian Church

The Faith & Victory Christian Church (FVCC) is a non-denominational church in Elizabeth City, NC. It is a modern-day church, active much like churches of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Also like churches during the Civil Rights Movement, they have faced ugly threats, frightening intimidation, stress, anxiety and outright violence from white supremacists.

FVCC began in 1992 under the leadership of Dr. Larry and Pastor Gloria Brown. Their mission is to build power through partnership, outreach and community participation. They serve a mostly Black and low-income community that surrounds the church and they work with local pastors and churches throughout the county. Programs range from health education to civic engagement and are open to all. Both children and adults participate. Their only staff is their pastor; everyone else is a volunteer. "All that we do is just a drop in the bucket of what we could do," they explain. "We hope to expand our outreach to the community in the next few years." Lacking enough space to do that is a major barrier.

They achieve much with what they do have. Health education is a priority, from making sure community members go for annual exams to knowing how to eat and exercise. They have a community garden, partner with the Health and Human Services

Department on programs, run COVID-19 vaccine clinics and testing sites, offer cooking classes, help people get Medicaid and cope with diabetes. FVCC was heavily involved with voter registration and get-out-the-vote using multiple, creative strategies, even working with local hairdressers to identify unregistered potential voters and then follow-up to enroll them.

FVCC volunteers go to city council meetings, "Healthy NC/Healthy Albermarle" meetings and discussions about mental health, then educate their community on news and the latest policy recommendations. After the sheriff's department killed Andrew Brown Jr., members supported the bereaved family every day, took water and snacks to demonstrators, participated in marches and acted as "comforter counselors" for people dealing with grief and anger over the killing. They tutor children, teach teens about college and testing, and help them apply for scholarships.

Across the street from FVCC is land they are eying to build a bigger family worship and community center. They want to offer more programs for children, such as after school and college prep, and create a recreation area for youth. "It could be a place where the community can come for their

"People have shattered because of COVID-19. We need to deal with this."

own events," they say, "even for funerals, graduations and weddings, because there is no place in our community for larger gatherings." They need a security system, a paved parking lot, more (paid) administrative support, updated software and computers. It would mean quadrupling their current budget to make this happen.

In the midst of their vision, hopes and dreams, white supremacy stops them in their tracks. Shots have been fired around the FVCC church and pastors' home. Dr. and Pastor Brown are nervous about calling the sheriff. Drivers act aggressively, doing wheelies in the parking lot and front yard of their church and home. While walking down the road in their own neighborhood, a man came out to the end of his driveway and pointed an assault rifle at Dr. Brown and one of their young

ministers. The man started talking about the Confederacy.

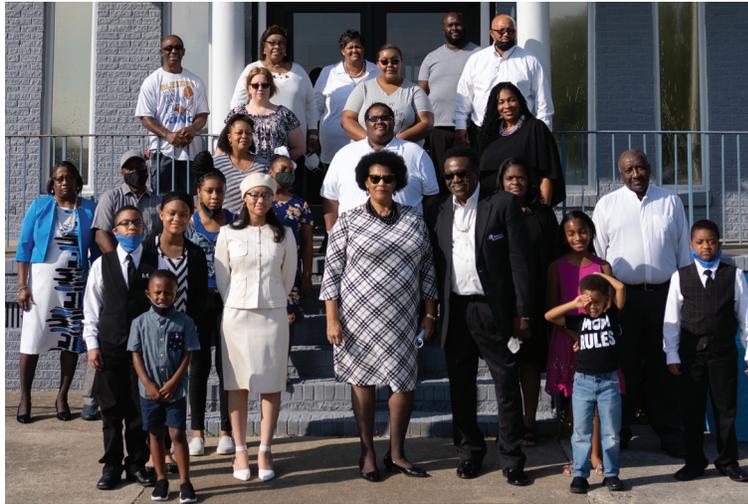
A city councilman who owns a local funeral home and who marched in the protest against the sheriff's department slaying of Andrew Brown Jr. filmed the sheriff actually urinating on the funeral home's lawn, apparently in retaliation for speaking out. Another FVCC member said she is afraid to go out of her house in the evening. A

white couple from Elizabeth City, who marched with FVCC at the protest and are close family friends of Dr. and Pastor Brown, were threatened to the point that the couple moved out of state.

In the short term, FVCC wants to expand its space, add a full-time staff person to handle outreach and programs, and increase programming – with better social media outreach – for children and teenagers. "We need staff to be able to focus and direct volunteers, and keep everyone going," they explain. "People have shattered because of COVID-19. We need to deal with this." They also need to build capacity, get help with fundraising and training, and find funding for general support, infrastructure, and security that would keep people safe on the church grounds and in their homes.

"In the future I want to see justice for all people, not just for some people," one FVCC member said during a visioning session. "I want to see all children get the same opportunity that helps them grow and achieve greatness in life."

Added another, "We need greater unity in our community churches, family, nation and worldwide."



Kinston Teens

When Chris Suggs started Kinston Teens, he was just 14, in high school and regularly disparaged as an upstart leader with too much to say. “A lot of people dismissed young people and our work,” Chris explained, leveling accusations at them such as “How could you do all this and do well in school? You’re cheating somewhere!” Some community members felt threatened by his success, but that changed in 2017 when more Blacks were elected to the city council and the new mayor was Black. Kinston Teens provided the community support that helped that happen.

Kinston Teens is located in their city’s East Kinston neighborhood, a predominantly Black area. Census Tract 103 is home to more than 2,000 citizens and comprises the geographic bulk and most densely populated area of East Kinston. It was ranked the #1 most economically distressed census tract in the state of North Carolina when Kinston Teens started. Their mission is to amplify the voices of all youth in Kinston and to create civic engagement and community service opportunities for their peers in an area beset by gun violence.

“Our organization operates at the intersections of youth empowerment and community development,” they state. “We provide those who have been most marginalized and disenfranchised from leadership a chance to shape and influence the future of their neighborhoods.”

With only one staff person and an intern, Kinston Teens seeks more paid help to provide the programs they already do: projects like mapping the area to find unregistered voters, COVID-19 education and vaccine clinics, food boxes for the



hungry and speaking out about environmental justice. But wages are low, and Kinston Teens needs to be able to pay more so employees do not have to work two jobs to support themselves.

In all, Kinston Teens have made an impact on the lives of more than 4,000 youth throughout their region with programs like a youth summit, community workshops, leadership development seminars and assemblies at local schools. Over time,

they acquired 18 city lots that have been made into green spaces, community gardens and a small office. Today they need better space to host larger gatherings, more trainings targeted to young people, and especially, air conditioning that works.

Even though they are too young to vote, that has not stopped them from having a political voice! Kinston Teens have advocated before their city council and state government and even testified before Congress in D.C. They attend all city council meetings and school board meetings, keeping themselves well-informed on the issues that affect the teens. They are very active in voter registration and Get-Out-the-

Vote. Their success stems from their hard work as much as their pragmatism.

“I’m part of a network of youth executive directors that run youth organizations,” Chris reveals. “In the big cities like NY and LA, they see their city council as the enemy. But when your mother is on the city council, and the mayor is your cousin, I’d much rather see folks like that as partners.

“I’m going to advocate in such a way that we can still respect each other and have a good Thanksgiving dinner later on.”



“We provide those who have been most marginalized and disenfranchised from leadership a chance to shape and influence the future of their neighborhoods.”

Men and Women United for Youth and Families, CDC

“We are mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers,” says Men and Women United for Youth and Families (MWUYF). “We are men and women, children and adults. We are family, we are community. We believe in the power of strength and self-resiliency.”

MWUYF goes on to explain, “In underserved communities, inequities are interconnected. That means the solutions we create to address those inequities must also be interconnected.” Their work promotes economic and personal development in rural communities of Bladen, Brunswick and Columbus Counties. These communities typically have been ignored for services like Internet and telecommunication, compounding inequality in the distribution of resources. Some of these communities are 30 miles away from any major corridor to services.

With resource partners, MWUYF assists clients in job training, finding gainful employment, GED/education and life skills training, disaster recovery assistance, mental health services, counseling, COVID-19 relief, a resiliency community hub, criminal justice support, support of more than 40 farmers regionally to provide healthy foods to communities, and creating intergenerational wealth. “If we can’t do it,” says Executive Director Randolph Keaton, “we will find someone who can and will.”

Yet the precariousness of funding – and the need to keep funders happy – threatens the very work they do. They rely on grant funding, marginally supplemented by individual donations and events, and most of their funding goes to direct

program expenses. This often leaves no room for operation of the organization. “Lack of funding to build organizational capacity is one of the major stumbling blocks to addressing the needs of the communities we serve,” MWUYF reveals.

“Lack of funding to build organizational capacity is one of the major stumbling blocks to addressing the needs of the communities we serve.”

Keaton goes on, “When it comes to civic engagement and grassroots organizing, we can’t be too vocal because of the political climate and who funds us.” They reveal that Black Lives Matter threatens civic engagement because, “It just hasn’t been able to get through the wall of the churches involved in community issues.” Conservative, evangelical Christian churches, predominately white, control resources and funding. There are also conservative, evangelical Black churches with different values and ways of viewing how change happens. “It is difficult to have any type of leverage with these two opposing views of how change and civic engagement happens,” explains Keaton.

They also receive funding from the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council, whose members are appointed by county commissioners. “County commissioners are very partisan,” as a result, and “going against their values is not very good for continued funding.” So MWUYF has to be careful about what they say about the formally incarcerated population they work with and how much harm incarceration has caused to the Black and Brown population in their area.

Looking ahead, Keaton says, “We must let the youth lead the way to freedom.” Their Youth Ambassadors Programs provides life skills and entrepreneurial training to middle and high school-age youth. “They have proven themselves to be resilient,” and entrepreneurial, especially with a three-year-old Vacation Vittles Program that provides fresh, locally grown produce to vacationers at beaches and farmers’ markets.

Long term neglect of the needs of low-income people does result in the intergenerational poverty in this area of North Carolina, and it is exacerbated by funders more interested in promoting their own values and ideas than listening to the communities they fund. “We need a regional approach to economic development here that is community-centric,” states Keaton, “where community members decide what it looks like and who leads the efforts.”



NC Association of Community Development Corporations

The two counties of Nash (predominantly white) and Edgecombe (predominately Black) split the metropolitan area of Rocky Mount. Located just an hour away from Raleigh, the historic Black downtown in Rocky Mount is increasingly attractive to real estate developers and those who cannot afford to live in Raleigh. Money is pouring into Edgecombe and Nash counties. After years of disinvestment in Edgecombe, there is now an Intermodal Transportation Hub, a new Chinese-owned tire manufacturing plant and a downtown event center. A 2019 land use study predicts that this area is “on the edge of a new chapter in the city’s history with the opening of the Rocky Mount Event Center and additional public and private investments that are poised to bring new residents and entrepreneurs into the neighborhood.” As a result, gentrification and land use are the two biggest issues the NC Association of Community Development Corporations (NCACDC) faces.



There are 14 under-resourced neighborhoods in Edgecombe County. NCACDC works with these disinvested communities from an equitable development perspective to help people have a role in policies that directly impact their neighborhoods. “We want to make sure their values and voices are present in the discussion,” says NCACDC President, Susan Perry-Cole.

This area of North Carolina has been controlled by white supremacists for a long time, and opposition from the white community to any investment in Edgecombe has been fierce, reports NCACDC. City Council hearings about the event center sited on the Black side of town were packed with furious white people, opposed to building black power. The majority Black County Commission and Council have not been

accepted. A concerted effort to destroy and destabilize the Black leadership in Edgecombe County is ongoing.

Real estate speculation in the neighborhoods NCACDC works in is increasing. Perry-Cole recounts, “In the past, we’ve worked on one or two development issues at a time, but now there are five or six areas that we are working on full-time.” The Black City Council in Edgecombe has a 14 point Strategic Housing Plan agenda for this development, especially in the historic downtown area, which has been Black since the Civil War.

Edgecombe has been the stepchild of Rocky Mount and there is a legacy of imbalanced development between the two counties, as evident in the vacant properties on the Edgecombe side, very poor health outcomes (ranked 97 out of 100 counties in North Carolina) and low-performing schools. North Carolina slashed grant funding to NCACDC and their budget fell from \$1.2 million to \$250,000. “That’s not enough to keep up with the work we need to do,” says Perry-Cole, “and make sure there is enough good housing in our area for working families.”

Their Community Academy Program is the primary tool for civic engagement, and this has provided them with numerous “wins” along the way. “When we started,” explains Perry-Cole, “there was little community participation in neighborhood housing development. Everything was done behind closed doors. People were starved for the opportunity to express themselves.”

The Community Academy is advocating for fair housing through the City of Rocky Mount’s Assessment of Fair Housing process. The Community Academy hosts trainings to educate citizens about the process, as well as engage in public outreach efforts. This led to unprecedented levels of citizen participation in the public hearings.

“Now, we identify a leverage point, the consolidated planning process for example, break it down” into bullet points and talk to their leadership group about participation. “Then we organize a public hearing and develop talking points to share. We follow up with written recommendations by Legal Aid, one of our partners. More often than not, our recommendations and talking points are incorporated at some level,” states Perry-Cole.

“We need to look at possibilities, not barriers, and acquire the resources to get our work to the next level.”

Looking ahead, “It begins with what we’re doing now,” says CFO LaVerne Joyner. “We need to look at possibilities, not barriers, and acquire the resources to get our work to the next level.”

“It’s difficult,” adds Perry-Cole. “But it’s worth the battle.”



New Hanover County NAACP

“I envision all elected offices in New Hanover County filled with BIPOC¹ communities,” says Deborah Dicks Maxwell, president of the New Hanover chapter of the NAACP. “I would like to see Young Leaders of the New Hanover County chapter lead us.” They are working now with those aged 20–40 to prepare them to move into this work.

Maxwell explains that this dream is far from current reality. Local elections that are “at-large” are a huge barrier to participation. Some officials create at-large districts to limit the influence of minority communities. Both Republicans and Democrats in New Hanover have fought representative voting, so “all white folks can stay in power. We just got one African American elected to the city council last year,” she recounts about the ongoing difficult election process.

“I’ve applied to the community college board, but they are a white, good ‘ol boy network. Same thing at the state community college level.” As more retirees, primarily leaning conservative, move to this part of North Carolina, the voting power balance has tilted. In nearby Brunswick County, Maxwell says, “You can’t elect a progressive dog catcher now.”

The chapter has conducted mini-workshops regularly on how to look at voting data, how to fill out voting forms, how to see

which of your family or friends are registered (or not), what it takes to build power and how to run for office. They would like to do even more so the community is better politically educated, and young people are sitting on boards and commissions that impact their community.

People of color voters have been trending upwards despite the obstacles to voting. Most of the early voting sites are in white communities, with three sites in one wealthy, white zip code in the last election. One site was supposed to be in the Black community, Maxwell reports, near public housing and municipal offices but the place was deemed “too much money” to use so there was no site in a community where mostly People of Color lived. Since then, some of the white church ministers said they would open up their churches for Black voters, if needed.

“We would like to increase from 66 percent voting to 75 percent, especially in local down ballot elections,” says Maxwell. “And develop a more educated community about civic engagement and political power.”

¹ The acronym stands for Black, Indigenous, People of Color.

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Pender United

“If we see a problem, we are going to open our mouths!” says Darlene Adams, Pender United’s executive director. “There are many conversations about how to help the undeserved in our communities,” they say. “Our research leads us to believe it is due in part to a lack of digital knowledge and access.”

Pender United is working to help those that find themselves in need after multiple climate disasters since Hurricane Florence in 2018. They aim to educate, strengthen and empower under-served communities through digital community engagement, advocacy and training. In 2020, their communities found themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide as schools across the country switched to online learning during the pandemic.

Statewide, 24 percent of households in North Carolina do not have high-speed Internet access that allows video streaming, like classes. In Pender County, 6.8 percent of

students do not have computers and 27.5 percent do not have high speed Internet. “When there is no Internet access in rural areas, it presents problems in terms of students doing homework,” said County Manager Chad McEwen at the time. “A lot of them have to get in cars and come into Burgaw or other areas where Wi-Fi is available. It just logistically causes a lot of problems and challenges for students.”

Last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded ATMC, an Internet provider, a \$21.6 million grant to help expand high-speed Internet access to more than 7,000 addresses in rural Pender County. Yet, Pender United itself needs a computer and software to manage their work. “We need basic funding,” says Adams. “We’re in the community, we do what we say what we are going to do. We tell the truth about everything, even if it isn’t great.”

“We’re in the community, we do what we say what we are going to do.
We tell the truth about everything, even if it isn’t great.”

SunShine Station

SunShine Station serves disadvantaged persons in rural North Carolina, with a special focus on communities with limited resources like Elizabeth City. They believe that eliminating poverty in North Carolina is possible by ensuring that every person has access to resources by way of the “Informational Network.”

This area is isolated and lacks resources that the Black, low-income and disenfranchised communities so desperately need. Isolation is reflected in the inability to access real news services from the area. Executive Director Keith Rivers explains that most of their news comes from the neighboring state of Virginia. Rarely do they get news of what is happening in the state capital of Raleigh. “Unless a major event comes along like the murder of Andrew Brown Jr.,” he says, “in general, the capacity to get information in and out of here is nonexistent.” Without local news outlets, obtaining information about COVID-19, testing and vaccinations has been daunting.

“Even if we were to use the radio stations” to get the word out, “people do not listen to them. We need door-to-door outreach to get information out to the community, and out-of-the-box outreach methods to engage community members on the issues affecting them.” Hence their improvised Informational Network and their “Souls to the Polls” van to provide safe transportation for those who need it on Election Day.

SunShine Station operates from a “what’s needed on the ground at the moment” model of organizing. During the pandemic and quarantine, K–12 age students needed access to the Internet for home schooling. SunShine Station procured a small grant to distribute hot spot devices and a year-long Internet subscription for the households.

The lack of agency and mobilization in the Black community has been demoralizing, but SunShine Station is determined to inform. One of the ways this organization does outreach for civic engagement is going door-to-door to local businesses that are in contact with the wider community daily. These are barbers, beauticians, taxi cab drivers, gardeners, grocery store clerks and teachers. “Go where people are going to hear you,” they say, and help people realize how important the issues are that they are facing. Then find out what to do about them.

“We are reaching people who are marginalized and those that cannot be reached in the traditional ways of churches, clubs or civic engagement groups,” they explain. SunShine Station spends a lot of time educating the community about the issues. For example, they had been pressuring law enforcement to wear video cameras for four years, finally getting enough community support to vote affirmatively on the issue. Now police officers wear video cameras.

“... this community now understands that change happens through voting.”

“That word ‘change’ is not just some word that’s thrown around here,” says Rivers. “That word ‘change’ is a reality, and this community now understands that change happens through voting.”

The issues they are addressing are a litany from years of abject poverty, lack of health care, inequality in the educational system, racial inequality, hatred and violence, a criminal injustice system and decades of oppression and suppression of communities of color. Keisha Dobie, a volunteer, says, “Our schools have not done an excellent job at teaching our children civic engagement. We should create civic engagement clubs for kids, so that they come out understanding that local politics is important. Things just don’t happen in Washington, D.C.”

“This is the way we build power in Elizabeth City, through word-of-mouth, each person teaching another one, and so on we go.”





OF MEXICANS IN NC

AMEXCAN
ADVOCACY
CULTURE
LEADERSHIP
HEALTH
EDUCATION
BINATIONAL INITIATIVE

EXCAN
RAL EVENTS



Asociación de Mexicanos en Carolina
"Fomentado el aprecio, entendimiento
de la comunidad mexicana y
través de la abogacía, cultura, educación, lle



RECOMMENDATIONS

Systems—Build organizational capacity that is appropriate for the groups, where they are now and what they seek to be.

All need to develop organizational systems – some have varying degrees of systems and some have none.

We are recommending that better systems will benefit them significantly over the long-run, such as:

Data Collection

Some rural organizers do not collect data or keep lists of contacts because they know everyone. Their networks – the churches, the PTA, sororities, the local hairdressers and barbershops – allow them to call everyone they know when they need people to help or volunteer. Many do not have the systems in place, do not know how to collect and input data, and do not have the time to do what they see as work that takes them away from their primary mission.

While these networks and knowing people is a strength of rural organizing, it is also a weakness, since they are not using the contacts they have as a tool to develop leadership and reach more people. Consequently, they reach the same people every time.

Membership/Volunteer Systems

This is a priority and notably, where data collection is crucial. Having these systems in place allows groups to grow their leadership. Most do not have the technology or people to input this kind of data.

Fundraising

None have any individual donor fundraising and many do not know how to write proposals for foundations. No group had a fundraising or development plan.

Finance

Almost all need training about developing budgets, managing budgets and explaining financial statements. Very few could produce an annual budget that was comprehensive. Or if they had a budget, it often did not reflect their actual expenses and income. Many could not even envision a budget to grow their organizations.

Technology/Social Media

We think all need support around technology and maintaining websites that tell the whole story. Many older organizers need training in utilizing technology for organizing. There is definitely a digital divide due to lack of training and resources. Some lack any digital infrastructure.

Human Resources

One group described needing to hire an HR person and others talked about needing help with increasingly complex HR issues. There may be a non-profit network or outside group that could provide this service when needed and alleviate this concern.





Education—We are recommending education and training in strategic planning and how to build capacity, using popular education methods, supplemented by on-going coaching.

The professionalization of community organizing has often led to misperceptions that rural southern grassroots organizers do not have the skills or ability to effect change. All of the leaders we met with in these groups have college educations and some have advanced degrees. There is a class and urban bias about rural southern organizing. It is not seen as skilled because people talk about it and experience organizing and power differently. Sometimes this leads to the misperception that they are less educated than their counterparts in the movement.

Strategic Planning

We think all the groups need strategic planning and recommend a three-day facilitated process that results in a strategic plan with action steps, goals and a work plan. Specifically, we recommend: one day for the whole group – staff, board, volunteers – to come together and do visioning, update or write their mission/vision; one day for action planning and setting goals with their leadership (staff and board); one day with staff for work plan implementation.

We asked each group whether they had a strategic plan or even a work plan for the year. Only one group responded affirmatively: “Someone came in a couple of years ago and helped us do a strategic plan and we have it somewhere.” A consultant wrote it for them and now it is collecting dust. Groups are so integrated into their communities that traditional needs assessments or strategic plans drawn up by outsiders are ineffective.

Instead, we recommend that the groups need to do the work themselves, not the consultant, taking three days with

an outside facilitator familiar with how these groups work so they can invest in the work themselves. We advise not to use the language traditionally in a strategic plan. Rather, use words like: how, when, what is needed, *who will do it* (who will do it determines if the plan can work). Any strategic plan needs an action plan that allows them to respond politically, respond flexibly to current situations and build toward the goals they have identified. It also necessitates forward thinking in the context of their longer-term vision.

Capacity Building and Program

We think most need training on what capacity building is traditionally considered to be versus program work. When we asked them what they need for capacity building, they mostly talked about the program.

The capacity building proposals we saw were more about expanding programs and not internal organizational development. When we asked specific questions about organizational fundraising and financial systems, most easily talked about their capacity building needs, which were significant.

Popular Education Training

Groups are very involved politically but need ways to communicate better with their constituency.

“People need to see it as well as hear it to understand it,” one group leader told us. Education through experiential learning is an engaged learning process whereby students “learn by doing” and then by reflecting on the experience so that they can communicate with others. Training should provide media-ready civic engagement programs that deliver multi-platform content to accommodate a variety of learning styles.

Popular education is grounded in notions of class, political struggle and social transformation. Training needs to use popular education – experiential as well as collective. People are very oriented to organizing through storytelling. This allows groups to learn from their own knowledge and wisdom, not just through trainer presentations. (This is not to say that trainers cannot provide a mini-teaching moment around what they think is new information.)

By using popular education methods, training can then be implemented with an action plan that groups will revisit – seeing what worked, what did not and where there were problems or questions. We have found that follow-up, collective coaching after people have implemented the training is where some of the most effective learning happens, often more

By using popular education methods, training can then be implemented with an action plan that groups will revisit – seeing what worked, what did not and where there were problems or questions.

than the initial training. This is because people have “tried it out” and then can bring it back to the group to tell their stories and discuss their results and challenges.

Coaching

Executive directors need one-on-one coaching with an executive resource person who understands and has experience with rural organizing in Black, People of Color and immigrant communities.

This person, hired by Blueprint NC, would be available for calls and be proactive about monthly check-ins. We might need different people coaching different groups. Many leaders have not been executive directors before, or anticipate being leaders of their organizations. With other groups, we believe strongly that they need support to learn to delegate, build a board that supports them and the organization, create leadership among their board and volunteers, and learn how to look at the whole picture instead of being in constant crisis mode.

In many cases, the executive director was the only staff person and struggled with sharing leadership. Some were not sure how to hire for staff positions and take advantage of professional networks that offer consulting and advice. While some groups had active board leaders, others had boards who did not want to step into leadership roles or fundraise. Many had family members on the boards, which is not uncommon in rural organizing (often whole families are involved in an organization), but some would benefit by more diversity than just family.





Opportunities for Growth

General Operations

All need increased funding for general operations and capacity building.

Staff and especially executive directors need competitive wages and benefits (only one organization had an appropriate budget for work they currently do, and yet still cannot meet the demands of their constituency). Most had very modest aspirations and expectations. Some leaders must have additional jobs with flexible hours so they can do the organization's work.

Almost all were working with very small, inadequate budgets. When we asked each group how much money they needed to cover their actual work, no one could answer with an appropriate amount. Most named extremely small amounts. Two groups named a very high unrealistic amount. No one knew what a suitable budget for their needs should be.

Several use their own property for offices, farms and/or community gardens and pay for utilities out of their own pocket. It is part of their life's work and not a conflict for them to do this. Yet, all need to refurbish and update their offices or acquire more space, provide ADA accessibility and ensure disaster preparedness.

Possessing their own space takes on a new meaning for oppressed groups. Although the Episcopal Farmworker Ministry uses the Episcopal church building, they are worried the diocese may sell it and do not feel secure there. A common theme was needing a place where people could feel safe gathering together. Kinston Teens say they "need a safe space where people can talk, argue and discuss – away from eyes and ears – so we can walk out of the room as a unified body." Owning their group's space connoted safety and power to people.

Sheila Perry, FVCC: “When you submit your information for a grant, the language they want you to use pulls you away from talking about your needs or that which you are looking to support. It makes you think that what you are doing is not so important because it doesn’t fit their language. I try to write in accordance with how the questions are asked and sometimes what I write loses effectiveness. Everybody is not in the same circle, the impact is different, and when everybody kind of writes the same way, you lose something. But I’m going to do all we can to get what support we can.”

Develop the Narrative

Groups require help to talk and write about issues of survival, and the ways it affects their constituencies’ daily lives and the work that they do. They are often responsive, rather than proactive about what they need.

Most work on it in some way, and all need to be talking about environmental, climate change and disaster issues. Although they are deeply aware of the problems and discussed it with us, from flooding to unsafe drinking water to poisoning of the waterways, they are not describing it in their social media or funding proposals in the language that foundations use.

The groups need to be able to talk about their work in a way that shows the world what they do on websites and social media. They need funding for web development and telling their full program story, with someone dedicated to social media or grant writing. We had to extract the information from them, spending several hours talking to them about their programs, but on the whole, it is not communicated in written materials or social media. We believe that if they could do this, it would open up many more avenues of funding.

Evaluation

Groups need to evaluate their programs and get feedback from constituents.

None of the organizations have formal evaluations. But as part of a strategic plan, a yearly gathering of folks to say what is working, what is not working and what they need to do differently is critical. We do not advise using the language of SWOT analysis (“weaknesses”) because these are loaded words for systematically oppressed people and reinforces the fear that they are weak, rather than playing to their strengths. We would substitute “challenges” or “barriers” in evaluations.

Needs Assessment or Listening Project

We recommend that all groups do a needs assessment with their communities though this is not the language we would use. Groups need training on how to bring their community together to conduct a “listening project,” a way of reaching out and determining what folks want to improve, hear their concerns and talk about what they love.

A listening project will help them continue to recruit volunteers, encouraging people to come together and to become engaged on issues they care about. People love the idea of being listened to and often will join and take action from the interaction. It also builds leadership, since volunteers need training to do the outreach.





Seek Outside Help Now—Groups need education about how to talk about and deal with threats.

Some groups just take it for granted, as a way of life, so they do not think threats are something they need to talk about, and many are afraid to do so. We do not know if anyone has answers to what to do about this in a systemic way. But there needs to be a way to address it.

We recommend that Blueprint NC organize a briefing to deal with threats and build a network of support.

We believe we are just dealing with the tip of the threat iceberg based on what groups shared with us. Many did not feel safe talking about threats if we were around other people or even in a building not owned by the group.

Community groups find that when majority Black government officials are elected locally, threats and sabotage escalate. Organizations do not have a legal perspective to inform their decisions about how to protect themselves. A few groups have had volunteers even take money from white supremacist groups without realizing it. People in the community (not the leaders) are being paid to vote in a certain way and unfortunately, some Black leaders from other groups actually work at dividing the community.

Chris Suggs, Kinston Teens:
“White people hate me because they think I’m too loud, too radical and have too much influence.”

Funding

Funding from outside their community is desperately needed.

Inside, the community is generous but there is not enough money to meet the needs of the people who live there. Groups need to diversify funding sources.

The organizations seem to be mostly funded by Blueprint NC, private foundations introduced to them by Blueprint NC, and/or local community foundations. Some have a few foundation funders but no plan of what they would do if that funding was not renewed. At least two groups received government funding.

Lack of resources and ways funding has been granted has caused some unhealthy competition. Many organizations do not collaborate as a result. We hope that foundations begin to focus on collaborative funding.

These groups are organizing from their lived experiences, because their lived experience mirrors their community. This creates its own set of issues, because one group believed they could not say anything that would “rock the boat.” Some spoke specifically about getting funding that was available, but did not support their programs, leading them to start programs that may not meet their mission. United Way sometimes does events with People of Color groups but in all cases that we heard about, United Way would not give money to groups doing social change work. We discovered that the organizations did not get United Way funding because it was mostly led by the local, white, power structure.

It is also important that groups form a major donor program that would provide stability and sustainability. While there is a lot of interest in this, most do not have the staffing and infrastructure to start a strong, major donor fundraising campaign.





Political Power Building

Avoiding Burnout

Some of the group leaders were on the edge of burnout, often because they are doing two jobs at once: working for the organization and going to another, paying, full-time job as well.

The precariousness of non-profit funding, the ongoing community needs, and the threat of another hurricane disaster keep volunteers and staff on edge. Even though they are accomplishing a lot of good work, few cannot begin to envision or look toward the future in a strategic way.

Working like this, with little capacity, amidst a pandemic, the unending disaster recovery, the inability to see how they can ask others for help, keeps them underwater all the time. Groups need resources to learn how to create realistic work plans, and to do self-care and mutual care of their staff and volunteers in order to reach their goals of building political power in their communities.

Redistricting and 501(c)(4)s

Groups understood the importance of the census and actively helped their communities to overcome fears of providing personal information on the census. Similarly, groups need more education and awareness about redistricting and its impact. Only two groups we spoke to are even thinking about the impact of redistricting now. Additionally, they also need clarity about who they can support or take money from, and the difference between raising and spending 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) types of money.

A 501(c)(4) group has more freedom to engage in lobbying, while a 501(c)(3)'s lobbying has to be "insubstantial" compared to the money it spends on its primary mission. A few people have run for office and do not have a clear understanding of the need to step down from their 501(c)(3) organization. Some groups could develop a 501(c)(4) but still need to develop their 501(c)(3) organizations first. This evolution needs to be part of a long-term, issue-based strategy.

Focus on Issues

Highlight the issues that resonate with their communities and talk about it in the language that their communities understand. Housing, food, immigration and economic issues are discussed, but often the root causes are not addressed.

Climate justice can come from job creation. Mold resulting from waves of floods is addressed through housing reform, not a new paint job. Black farmers face barriers and many were not even aware that \$5 billion in the recent American Rescue Plan should go to farmers of color, who have lost 90 percent of their land over the past century because of systemic discrimination and a cycle of debt.

There are at least 150,000 farmworkers in North Carolina every year and they are the backbone of the state's \$70 billion agricultural industry. Yet, low wages and minimal labor organization make farmworkers one of the state's most economically disadvantaged and unprotected group of laborers. The dominant white culture has created an "us versus them" narrative of fear among People of Color, dividing communities in eastern North Carolina who should be working together. A powerful coalition could be built if immigration issues are included as a priority in all grassroots organizing.

Beaufort County, the home of the Alpha Life Enrichment Center, is home to the Aurora mine, the largest phosphate mining and chemical plant in the world. It sits on 70,000 acres, with wetlands, streams and tidal creeks that are nursery areas for many species of fish found along the Atlantic coast. Environmental groups have called this the single largest destruction of wetlands in North Carolina history.

Prison reform touches all communities but "criminal justice/school-to-prison pipeline" language was seldom used. Food deserts plague the region, where grocery stores with fresh food are few and far between.

Build a Network

We recommend that Blueprint NC organize a regional gathering to develop a strategy for eastern North Carolina.

This strategy could focus on issues such as politics/GOTV, sustainability ("climate justice"), economic issues and/or immigration; then explore how to work together. The goal would be to build trust among groups and raise more money instead of

competing for scraps. Eventually, they would become the spokespeople for the region.

- Bring all groups in eastern North Carolina together in a regional gathering to come up with a strategic plan for the region.
- Build trust and understanding among groups rather than competition.
- Create a strategy to put political pressure on those issues most affecting the region.
- Create an agenda of priorities for the region.
- Determine which groups in this coalition could work on the different issue areas.
- Create a network governance structure and ability to empower organizations to affect policy change and advocacy. This would allow them to build actual political power as a region. This takes time and would probably not happen in the first gathering, but with ongoing work, it could happen during the second or third gathering.
- Continue to bring groups together on an annual basis.

TAKE 10

At Spirit in Action, we train leaders to listen and respond to the realities of the issues they work with, and gain the skills and tools needed in a constantly changing society. Our TAKE 10 model of organizing **propels grassroots leadership that rural and low-income voters seek to develop and support their activities for civic engagement.** It is led by people working on the front lines who are most directly impacted by decades of racism, poverty and voter suppression.

Blueprint NC's strategy to engage voters in eastern North Carolina built on the TAKE 10 model of organizing. They recruited the 13 groups who participated in the training.

It is not enough to simply educate non-voters on how to register and cast their vote. In order to give them equal access in the democratic process, they must also feel confident in their knowledge of the issues and the solutions that will be affected by their decisions.

Support and problem solving is a critical part of the training. For example, every training is followed by a coaching session, where participants reflect on the previous workshop and determine 1) what worked and was successful, 2) what challenges and questions remain, and 3) the opportunity to seek advice from their peer groups as well as Spirit in Action trainers.

Part of the critical work we do is to establish trust between groups working on different issues (i.e., health care, veterans, youth organizing), so that they can learn from and support each other. We need to address the different issues rural and marginalized voters face along race, economic class, education and ideology.

Our curriculum spans two years so that year two's new cohort can learn from the leadership who has been trained from year one. This methodology is popular and effective because two trainers, Kierra Sims and Linda Stout, come from the same rural southern areas as the volunteers. With trainer Bethsaida Ruiz, they can provide training in both English and Spanish.

An invaluable member of our training team is Anthony Rominske, who facilitates communication and technical support for the trainings.

Bethsaida and Linda grew up in poverty. Kierra, who describes herself as growing up "having enough" and at times, "less than enough," brings a decade plus of experience as a youth organizer in the South and central Appalachia. Bethsaida's professional career as a trainer and coach centers on the development of progressive leaders and social activists. Linda Stout, Spirit in Action's founder, was born in rural North Carolina to a tenant-farming family. In parts of the state that are regional-centric and don't like "outsiders," this type of training builds a strong, committed volunteer base that feels validated and understood.



Kate Brennan, Organizing and Community Outreach Director, Maine Equal Justice: “We are so grateful that Spirit in Action’s TAKE 10 model has come here. They have trained a cohort of low-income leaders to draw on the most important resource we all have: our people. No pollster or party or politician knows our people like we do. It’s critical that grassroots community leaders are supported to do deep organizing work. TAKE 10 helped us understand that when low-income communities can connect relationships, the power of stories and the lifeblood of culture with new systems for mobilizing, powerful things can happen!”

TAKE 10 Training Team



Anthony G. Rominske has worked for social justice for more than 25 years. He was born and raised in rural northern Wisconsin where his family lived on their 125 plus-year-old farm. He served in the USMC, earned a BA from the University of Wisconsin and an MA from Ohio University, served as a VISTA volunteer in rural Ohio, worked at the Peace Development Fund and volunteered in the fight for marriage equality in Massachusetts. He has worked with Spirit in Action since 2012 and believes that we all have the ability to make change we want to see happen in the world.



Bethsaida Ruiz is an activist, transformative and restorative justice change agent, who has worked in the nonprofit and governmental agencies for more than 25 years. She is driven and adept at cultivating high-performance teams and developing collaborative relationships with a wide range of diverse communities, stakeholders and government agency partners. Her primary commitment is in focusing and healing the effect of and relation to the legacy of intergenerational historical and cultural trauma by connecting authentically to the ancestral benefits, strengths, and creative resilience that aid BIPOC communities to live joy-filled and integrated lives.



Kierra Sims is a facilitator, movement builder and educator who is dedicated to moving resources to radical, imaginative ideas. She brings more than a decade of experience as an organizer in the U.S. South and central Appalachia to Spirit in Action, from focusing on the school to prison pipeline to introducing restorative practices to young people and creating a just transition away from a coal dependent economy. She is the Development Director at the Center for Third

World Organizing, a social justice organization committed to building a thriving racial justice movement led by communities of color.



Linda Stout has been a grassroots organizer and activist for more than three decades. A thirteenth-generation Quaker born to a tenant-farming family, Linda founded a successful grassroots organization in 1984, in a conservative region of North Carolina called Piedmont Peace Project (PPP). PPP worked successfully to forge extraordinary alliances across race and class lines and won major public policy changes. Linda’s awards include a Public Policy Fellowship from Harvard University, Honorary Doctorate for Allegheny College, and the Freedom Fighter Award of the Equal Rights Congress. She is the author of *Bridging the Class Divide* and *Collective Visioning*.

BECOME A TAKE 10 volunteer
PLEDGE to register, educate and get 10 people to the polls on Election Day, November 3, 2020.

10 things I will do to build power within my community:

1. Attend the TAKE 10 workshop.
2. Reach out to 10 people I know:
 - In my family
 - From a local organization
 - Belonging to my church
 - Around my neighborhood
3. Hand out materials on:
 - How to vote
 - Our issues
4. Talk to people about the issues that impact our community.
5. Help my 10 people to vote early or create a plan to vote on Election Day.
6. Make sure they have the information they need for voting (sample ballot, voter guide, ID if required).
7. Contact my 10 people the week before the election if they have not voted:
 - One week before (October 27)
 - The weekend before Election Day (October 31–November 1)
 - The morning of Election Day
8. Help people get rides to the polls if they need them.
9. Celebrate by attending the volunteer party after election!
10. Attend TAKE 10 training on next steps to keep the momentum going!

Questions? Call our hotline: 413-221-5584

spirit in action
 CHANGING THE WAY WE DO CHANGE
 514 Rose Hill Road, Asheville NC 28803
 spiritinaction.net

"I have come to see . . . that one of the most decisive steps that [we] can take is that little walk to the voting booth. That is an important step. We've got to gain the ballot, and through that gain, political power." -Martin Luther King Jr.



We cannot have an inclusive democracy without clean air and water, access to affordable housing, equitable public education, justice in policing and health care because these are necessary pre-conditions of full participation in a democracy that can actually work for all of us. We are an invitation to movement, and a scaffold for the builders of a North Carolina in right relationship with its people.

– Blueprint NC