

Community Engagement and Transparency:

Buncombe County, North Carolina

The Appalachian Regional Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency are highlighting the innovative ways that Appalachian communities are using [American Rescue Plan Act](#) (ARPA) funding. ARPA is directing significant funding into Appalachian local governments, through the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, which is a unique opportunity to spark transformative, long-lasting economic change. This case study highlights how Buncombe County, North Carolina's ARPA planning efforts and deployment strategy demonstrate commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

BACKGROUND

Anchored by the City of Asheville, Buncombe County is home to nearly 270,000 people in western North Carolina. Known as the "land of sky" region, Buncombe County and surrounding communities have enjoyed a growing economy, anchored by core strengths in tourism, manufacturing, health care, and agriculture. The area has increasingly become an in-demand location for newcomers, especially those attracted by Asheville's creative scene.

The region's rapid economic growth has challenged its longtime affordability and livability. Traditional challenges also remain in areas such as community health, economic engagement, and essential infrastructure, including broadband, childcare availability, and water/sewer services. The county has used ARPA funds to support projects addressing these issues, including enhancements to area mental health services, housing assistance, and specialized programs to fund businesses owned by people of color.

THE CHALLENGE

The area's local economic and community development efforts have focused on addressing the challenges of managing growth and responding to long-standing community needs that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Buncombe County's ARPA plans and projects build on previous planning efforts, including those led by the [Land of Sky Regional Council](#), the [Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce](#), and [Buncombe County's 2020-2025 Strategic Plan](#).

A BRIEF LOOK AT BUNCOMBE

Population estimate (2021): 271,534

Unemployment rate (2020): 6.3%

Poverty rate (2019): 12.2%

Median household income (2019): \$55,448

Share of working-age population with high school diploma or more: 91.7%

Share of working-age population with bachelor's degree or more: 41.4%

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Buncombe County Commissioners have embraced a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. In 2020, they supported a formal resolution seeking community reparations for African Americans in Buncombe County; they also created a [Racial Equity Action Plan](#) to guide the county's ARPA funding priorities and future initiatives.

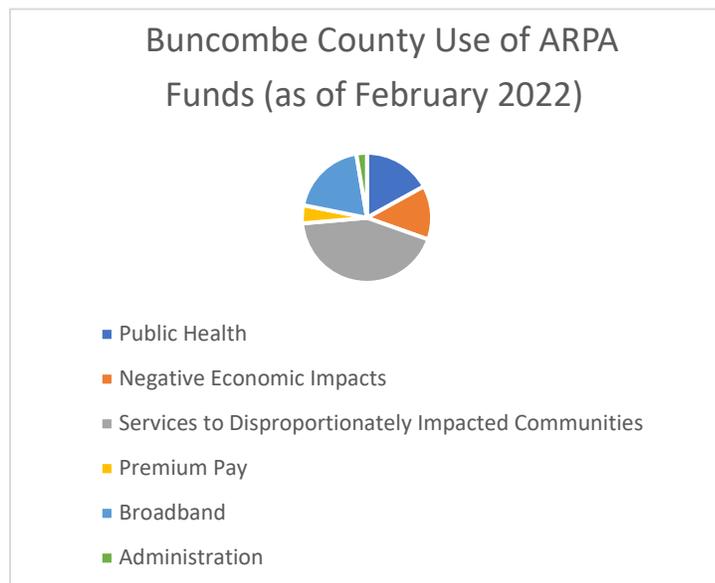
FINDING SOLUTIONS: SUPPORTING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Like many communities across Appalachia, Buncombe County has opted to use ARPA funding for various programs addressing community-identified issues. As of February 2022, the county has [deployed more than \\$23 million](#) to address affordable housing, broadband access, and capital access for pandemic-affected small businesses. Examples of ARPA-funded innovative projects include the following:

- The Eagle Market Streets Community Development Corporation Equity Fund makes small equity investments in businesses owned by people of color, indigenous peoples, and women.
- The We Give a Share/SSK Community Kitchen provides culinary training and career pathways while also providing healthy meals to local seniors.
- The Verner Center for Early Learning supports extending the hours of childcare programs to provide better support for working parents and their children.

These projects represent only a small part of Buncombe County's diverse ARPA-supported programming. When developing their strategy for ARPA deployment, county leaders sought to craft "a recovery response that would engage the local community and provide an [inclusive process for fund distribution](#)."

Buncombe County's rollout of its COVID-19 recovery plans followed a clear, transparent, and inclusive process designed to engage all residents.



To identify priority areas for investment, the county issued a community survey in spring of 2021 to identify priority areas for investment. It garnered 7,600 responses. The top ten priority areas identified were affordable housing; mental health; homelessness; workforce development; K-12 education support; early childhood education; business relief; infrastructure and broadband; food systems; and environmental

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preservation. In addition, three virtual public input sessions were held to gather other community ideas.

Using this information, the county sought proposals from community partners and county agencies to address identified challenge areas. County staff hosted virtual workshops in multiple languages to provide an in-depth overview of the request for proposals (RFP). Staff were also available to provide additional technical assistance as needed. A total of \$23 million was made available, and funded projects ranged in size from \$50,000 for a small project to \$4 million for broadband expansion. There were 187 workshop registrations, and when the first grant round closed in summer of 2021, the county received 141 proposals seeking nearly \$244 million in requested funding. All proposals are available on the [Buncombe County website](#).

This approach was so successful that county leaders have relaunched the grant program. A second RFP round was opened in spring of 2022, making an additional \$27.6 million in ARPA funds available to eligible entities addressing the top community priority areas noted above.

LESSONS LEARNED

Get Real About Equity

Buncombe County has made a strong commitment to equity. It is a critical component of the county's existing strategic plan, the regional strategy developed by the Land of Sky Regional Council, and the City of Asheville, which created its own office of Business Inclusion. This equity commitment was reflected in the county's process for reviewing options and deploying ARPA funds. For example, the county provided program materials in English and Spanish; informational workshops in both languages were widely publicized; and the community priority list was based on community feedback collected via a survey. All RFP funding requests also required a discussion of how the proposal would address root causes of inequity and contribute to a more equitable COVID-19 recovery. Finally, the county ensured that its internal review team reflected the community's diversity, with 21 county staff from 16 agencies reflecting significant diversity in race, age, and gender identities.

In 2021, Buncombe County further bolstered this equity commitment with its [Racial Equity Action Plan](#) and the county's formal adoption of a non-discrimination ordinance. It has also chartered an Equity and Inclusion Work Group composed of county staff volunteers to guide the development and execution of the Racial Equity Action Plan.

Build on Strong Foundations

Recent strategic plans at the regional, county, and city levels all identified pressing challenges facing Buncombe County, especially those related to equity and inclusion. In response, Buncombe County's strategic plan was organized around three key pillars: equity, operational excellence, and resources.

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Due to this foundational work, embracing equity as a core part of the ARPA planning and investment process proceeded smoothly. The county's longstanding commitment ensured that equity was prioritized in the deployment of ARPA funding, and ARPA helped to further fuel the county's progress in this commitment area.

Embrace Community Engagement across all Processes

Effective community engagement is necessary to successfully design ARPA plans and strengthen long-lasting community support. The entire process of community outreach must incorporate engagement and transparency. Buncombe County identified its priorities via an open community engagement process, vetted investments via a public RFP process, and is now committing to further transparency in the review and evaluation process. The [Buncombe County Recovery Funding website](#) includes all relevant materials, such as applications, reports, and interactive award information.

County staff have also committed to providing specialized technical assistance to grantees to assist them in complying with funding requirements. In addition, the county will soon unveil a public dashboard to track program progress and report on how ARPA investments are supporting disadvantaged and underserved populations.