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News & Updates

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WPCOG staff , community partners hold event to assist Hilltop residents



WPCOG staff are devoted to assisting residents in the communities they serve. In the past several months, tenants from Hilltop Apartments, a property that straddles two municipalities, with the primary portion in Long View and a small section within the city limits of Hickory, have begun reaching out to WPCOG. They were seeking guidance due to several factors creating uncertainty about their housing situation.

In the past 18 months, the Regional Housing Authority stopped leasing to Hilltop and required its voucher holders to move to other units due to ongoing concerns such as safety of the grounds and units, sanitation issues, and complaints about the living conditions. WPCOG's Code Enforcement began receiving complaints last fall about overflowing dumpsters, water issues causing ceiling and floor problems, sewer leaks, bug infestations, and more.

On March 9, the Long View Town Council voted to issue orders for 28 apartments in the complex to be vacated due to structural safety hazards.

To assist the remaining Hilltop residents, WPCOG hosted a resource session on Wednesday, March 11. The Homelessness Response Team spearheaded the event, which was held in the WPCOG conference rooms from 4:30 - 6:30 pm.

Approximately 40 residents attended the session. Residents were given the opportunity to ask questions and then meet with the WPCOG department representatives from the RHA, Area Agency on Aging, Workforce Development, and Community and Economic Development. The RHA staff was able to offer some participants with children the opportunity to apply for Family Unification housing vouchers. The Homeless Response Team shared information on Bezos Day One funds that can help families with moving expenses, first month's rent, deposits, and other qualifying needs.

In addition to WPCOG staff, several community partners attended. Those included:

- **Partners Health Management** – Mental and behavioral health services, as well as housing resources
- **Shepherd's Hand Ministries** – Food and financial assistance
- **Catawba County DSS** – Representatives from Adult and Child Services
- **Hickory City Schools** – Information on the McKinney-Vento program to help children stay in their current school if they are displaced
- **Legal Aid** – Guidance on legal rights and next steps
- **CTS Health** – Integrated behavioral health care and rapid medical services
- **Ashure Ministries** – Food and financial assistance

WPCOG staff is still available to answer any additional questions Hilltop tenants may have.

(Staff and news reports provided information for this article.)

6 Ways to Reduce Your Risk of Dementia



It's common to misplace your keys or cell phone occasionally. But when memory problems become frequent or start interfering with daily life, they may signal something more serious. Dementia is not a normal part of aging, yet an estimated 7.2 million Americans are currently living with the condition. While there is no guaranteed way to prevent dementia, research shows that adopting certain healthy lifestyle habits may reduce your risk by up to 45%.

Move More, Sit Less

- Lack of physical activity can increase your risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity, which are all linked to an increased risk of dementia.
- It is recommended that adults get at least 150 minutes of aerobic exercise with moderate intensity each week, such as walking, swimming, or biking. It is also recommended that adults perform strengthening exercises at least twice a week.
- It is important to sit less and move more. Activities such as using a standing desk, taking the stairs, and parking farther away can help you reach your movement goals.

Limit or avoid alcohol use

- Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol can increase your risk of heart disease, stroke, and some forms of cancer, which can damage your brain.
- If you drink alcohol, try to limit your intake to 2 drinks per day for males and one drink per day for females.

Maintain good physical health

- Diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure can increase your risk for a stroke, which can damage the brain.
- Prevent and/or manage your diabetes and blood pressure by maintaining a healthy weight and taking your medication as prescribed.
- Learn how to manage your blood sugar levels.
- Talk with your doctor if you have concerns about your blood pressure.

Prevent or correct hearing loss

- A 2024 study has shown that hearing loss is related to an increased risk of dementia. Researchers believe that hearing loss may make the brain work harder.
- Early detection and treatment for hearing loss may reduce your risk of dementia.
- If you have hearing loss, it is important to use hearing aids. Wearing hearing aids has been shown to reduce your risk of developing dementia.

Maintain a healthy social life

- Social isolation can greatly increase a person's risk of developing dementia. Staying socially engaged and maintaining healthy relationships may add protection against developing dementia.
- Studies have also found that people diagnosed with depression are two times more likely to be diagnosed with dementia.
- Staying connected through volunteering, taking classes, or joining social groups can be beneficial.

Eat a healthy diet and maintain a healthy weight

- Healthy eating habits are associated with improved cognitive function.
- Following a balanced diet of whole grains, leafy greens, and healthy fats, as well as limiting your intake of processed foods, can help you maintain a healthy weight.
- Being overweight can increase your risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes, both of which have been linked to dementia.

Making Connections That Matter



In late February, NCWorks participated in the Point-In-Time Resource Fair at the Hickory Soup Kitchen, connecting with individuals and helping them take meaningful steps toward employment and stability.

During the event, staff shared information about workforce services, training programs, and available job opportunities, helping participants explore pathways toward meaningful careers. Events like this continue to strengthen community partnerships and ensure individuals have access to the resources and support needed to move toward a brighter future.

Article by Trey Hedrick, Business & Virtual Services Coordinator

NCWorks NextGen Success

Turning a Childhood Dream into a Career: De'Andre's Story

De'Andre's journey through the NextGen program is a powerful example of how determination and the right support can open doors to new opportunities. Through hard work and a commitment to learning, he successfully completed the evening CDL Class A truck driving training program at Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute.

Today, De'Andre is using those skills to work as an over-the-road truck driver. As he continues to grow in his career, he reflects on how the program helped him turn a lifelong interest into a professional path.

"The program impacted me in a very positive way. It gave me an opportunity to pursue a career that I've always wanted to pursue since I was a little kid. It gave me an opportunity to change my career path. I felt the assistance throughout the whole program was very important. I never felt like I was alone during the process. Help was always one call away."



De'Andre's experience highlights the impact that encouragement, guidance, and opportunity can have on someone's future. His story is a testament to perseverance, personal growth, and the value of a strong support system in helping individuals take the next step toward a successful career.

Article by Charity Patterson-Hamber, Workforce Development Board Director

Recalibrate Recovery Group and Workforce Partnership

Western Piedmont Council of Governments' Regional Housing Authority is one of just over 800 agencies in the country that offers a Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) Program. This means that WPCOG's RHA is a part of a small group, roughly 25 percent of agencies in the nation, which sees the true value of the program and administers it. The FSS program was labeled by one researcher as "HUD's Best Kept Secret for Promoting Employment and Asset Growth".

The FSS program gives participants the opportunity to set goals, such as obtaining training or improving their credit, which move their lives in a positive direction. Finding suitable employment is the primary goal that HUD requires each participant to complete in order to graduate from the program.

WPCOG's RHA renamed its FSS program in 2018, calling it REACH, with each letter representing one of the major cornerstones of the program – Resources, Employment, Advancement, Commitment, and Homeownership Education.

In 2025, five participants successfully graduated from WPCOG's REACH program. The average age of the graduates was 40. These graduates received a combined total of approximately \$32,500 in escrow funds that were given to them at their graduations. Their escrow amounts varied from \$1,900 to \$12,800.

Some of the goals completed by the 2025 graduates included:

- Receiving expungements
- Attending parenting workshops
- Attending NC Works virtual workshops



- Completing coursework to obtain a GED
- Receiving vocational rehabilitation services
- Completing a business plan with the Small Business Center
- Improving credit, learning budgeting through credit coaching

All of the 2025 graduates improved their employment situation while in REACH, with all graduates increasing their earned wages. One participant obtained a job that paid so well that she went over the income limits for the HCV program and released her voucher. Another participant took a temporary job that led to a permanent placement in a social service agency. With the increase in her income plus the raises she has received, she will likely go over income for her voucher within the next year and no longer need housing assistance.

Ten new participants enrolled in 2025. An additional nine participants were added to the program through the RHA's absorption of Hickory Housing's FSS program. A total of 51 families participated in the REACH program in 2025.

For more information about the REACH program, contact Kim at 828.485.4299 or kim.duncan@wpcog.org.

Article by Kim Duncan, Family Self-Sufficiency Coordinator

Stronger Together- Caregiver Support Groups

Caring for a loved one is one of the most meaningful roles a person can take on. It can deepen relationships, create moments of profound connection, and provide a strong sense of purpose. At the same time, caregiving is often physically demanding, emotionally exhausting, and, at times, isolating. Many caregivers juggle countless responsibilities each day—often without recognition or relief—making stress, burnout, and loneliness all too common.

Because of these challenges, seeking support isn't a luxury, it's essential to a caregiver's well-being. One of the most powerful ways to find that support is through caregiver support groups.

Caregiver support groups provide a lifeline during overwhelming times or times of uncertainty. Whether held virtually or in person, these groups offer:

- **Understanding:** A space where others truly "get it" because they're living it too.
- **Emotional support:** A place to express frustrations, fears, and victories without judgment.
- **Practical advice:** Tips, strategies, and resources shared by people who have walked the same path.
- **Connection:** A reminder that caregivers are not alone, even when caregiving feels isolating.



Simply being present—physical or virtual—with others who understand can ease the emotional weight caregivers often carry. Hearing someone say, "I've been there too," can be profoundly validating.

Why Sharing Your Story Matters

Many caregivers hesitate to talk about their experiences. They may feel overwhelmed, unsure where to begin, or emotionally drained. But sharing your caregiver journey can be transformative—not only for you, but for others.

- **It reduces isolation.** Speaking openly helps caregivers feel seen and understood.
- **It empowers others.** Your story may be the encouragement someone else needs to keep going.
- **It builds resilience.** Reflecting on your experiences can help you recognize your own strength.
- **It normalizes asking for help.** When caregivers share openly, it becomes easier for others to reach out too.

Becoming a Stronger, More Supported Caregiver

Connecting with a caregiver support group in your community can open the door to meaningful relationships, valuable resources, and a renewed sense of strength. These groups remind caregivers that they don't have to navigate this journey alone. With support, caregivers can become more resilient, more informed, and more confident in the care they provide

Connecting with a Caregiver Support Group

Connecting with one of these caregiver support groups in our region offers caregivers a community of understanding individuals, a space to gain valuable resources, and ultimately, become a stronger and more resilient caregiver.

Care for the Caregiver Support Group

Stony Point Methodist Church, Stony Point
2nd Tuesday of each month
6:30pm (For additional information contact 828-485-4256)

PACT (Partnering Adult Caregivers Together) Caregiver Support Group

Burke Senior Center, Morganton
3rd Monday of each month
5:30 pm (Sign-up to attend call 828-764-9390 or 828-485-4256)

Care for the Caregiver Support Group

Thrive (Formerly Caldwell Senior Center), Lenoir
3rd Thursday of each month
2:00pm (to sign up to attend call 828-758-2883 or 828-485-4256)

Care for the Caregiver Support Group

West Hickory Senior Center, Hickory
2nd Tuesday of each month
1:00pm (to sign-up to attend call 828-328-2269 or 828-485-4256)

Care for the Caregiver Support Group

YMCA of Conover, Conover
4th Tuesday of each month
1:00pm (For additional information contact 828-838-1564 or 828-485-4256)

Catawba Valley Parkinson's Support (for caregivers and Parkinson's patients)

YMCA C.O. Miller Teen Center, 701 1st St. NW, Hickory
1st Sunday of each month
3:30-4:30pm (For additional contact or to be added to email list contact cvpark.group@gmail.com)

For additional information about support groups listed above, or information about online caregiver support groups to join, contact Family Caregiver Support Program, mary.mitchell@wpcog.org.

Article by Mary Mitchell, Family Caregiver Support Administrator

Community and Regional Planning: High Demand for Digital Literacy Courses



During the fourth quarter of 2025, WPCOG's Digital Navigators in the Community and Regional Planning Department continued to expand access to essential digital skills for older adults, conducting **55 digital literacy classes** serving a total of **253 learners** across the region. Through the leadership of Digital Navigators **Shelly Smith** and **Susan Matheson**, a wide range of hands-on digital learning opportunities were delivered to help seniors build confidence using technology for everyday needs such as artificial intelligence, communication, healthcare, online safety, and shopping. Their work over the quarter also resulted in the creation of marketing materials that were posted at senior centers, recreation facilities, schools, and other community locations to ensure broad awareness of class offerings.

Class topics ranged from basic computer and smartphone skills to more advanced subjects such as artificial intelligence (AI), cloud storage, and online privacy. In addition to structured classes, Digital Drop-In sessions allowed participants to receive individualized support tailored to their personal devices and questions. Despite a few weather-related cancellations, class demand remained high, underscoring the continued need for accessible digital education in the region.

The impact of these efforts is reflected in both participation numbers and the variety of topics covered. Classes addressed practical concerns such as avoiding scams, managing passwords, and accessing online medical resources, while also introducing emerging technologies like AI. The table below summarizes the digital learning topics offered during the quarter and corresponding attendance, highlighting the breadth and depth of instruction provided by WPCOG's Digital Navigators.

The classes provided by the Digital Navigators resulted from a \$473,000 grant awarded to the Community and Regional Planning Department from the North Carolina Department of Information Technology, after the department completed Digital Access Plans for each county in the region.

4th Quarter Digital Learning Classes & Attendance (Oct–Dec 2025)

Topic	Individuals Trained
AI and Disinformation	18
Antivirus and Malware	8
Cloud Storage	17
Computer and Cell Phone Basics	24
Digital Drop-In Classes	68
Digital Coupon Codes	2
Facebook	16
Google Drive	3
Google Photos	14
Introduction to AI	27
Medical ID	6
Medicare	2
Online Rx Drug Resources	3
Online Shopping	6
Passwords and Passkeys	11
Podcasts	7
Protecting Personal Information Online	7
Scams	6
Smartphones	8
Total	253 learners / 55 classes

Article by Shelly Smith, Digital Navigator

Advancing Regional Growth Through Data-Driven Transportation Planning

The Greater Hickory Metropolitan Planning Organization (GHMPO) is continuing to advance its Economic Expansion and Accessibility Tool, an innovative, interactive mapping platform designed to support data-driven transportation decision-making across the region. Initiated in Fiscal Year 2026 and anticipated for adoption in Fiscal Year 2027, this tool will provide a comprehensive, multimodal view of the region's transportation network.

The platform integrates a wide range of datasets—including highway and bicycle/pedestrian networks, average annual daily traffic (AADT), Congestion Management Process (CMP) findings, and comprehensive business data. To provide highly accurate insights, this information is sorted using traditional Traffic Analysis Zones (TAZ) alongside a more constrained quarter-mile hexagon grid. This precise spatial analysis allows the tool to accurately target high-service areas and indicate specific zones primed for future growth.

A key feature of the tool is its ability to evaluate how current transportation projects align with this regional data, both now and over time. By offering a cumulative analysis of current and future projects across all modes, GHMPO and its partners can identify gaps, maximize regional impact, and determine which projects may need revisiting as the region's priorities evolve.

In addition, the tool incorporates detailed freight data and leverages traffic signal information to better understand congestion patterns along major corridors. By

identifying bottlenecks and signal-delay trends, the platform highlights specific areas requiring attention to sustain economic growth and prevent future logistical problems, ultimately improving freight mobility and overall system efficiency.

GHMPO also intends to utilize this tool as part of a structured scoring mechanism to support project selection for the upcoming Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) and Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP). By grounding project evaluation in consistent, data-driven metrics, the tool will help ensure that future investments align with regional priorities and deliver measurable benefits.

Ultimately, the Economic Expansion and Accessibility Tool will serve as a valuable resource for local governments, stakeholders, and decision-makers—helping to guide transportation investments, support economic growth, and enhance mobility throughout the region.

Article by Casey Fullbright, Transportation Planner

Empowering the Future Workforce



On March 25, the NCWorks team participated in the CVCC High School Job Fair, connecting with students as they explored future career paths. Students learned about career opportunities, training programs, and workforce resources to support their next steps. Our team also provided guidance on resume building, job search strategies, and tools to help turn goals into action. NCWorks remains committed to supporting our community and helping students build strong, successful futures.

*Article by Charity Patterson-Hamber,
Workforce Development Board Director*

Empowering the Future Workforce



On March 19, Catawba Valley Community College welcomed 7th-grade students from Catawba County Schools for a hands-on STEM career exploration experience.

With 20 local businesses providing interactive activities tied to real-world careers, students gained valuable insight into future opportunities. Representatives from the Western Piedmont NCWorks Career Centers were on-site, offering educational resources and guidance to help students and families take the next step toward career success.

Article by Charity Patterson-Hamber, Workforce Development Board Director

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