



Creative Regional Solutions Since 1968

News & Updates

January | 2026

2026 Point-in-Time Count: A Community Effort to Understand Homelessness

Our region is once again participating in the annual Point-in-Time (PIT) Count, a vital community initiative that helps us better understand homelessness in the Western Piedmont. Conducted on a single night each year, the PIT Count includes individuals and families staying in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or places not meant for human habitation—such as vehicles, parks, or encampments. This year's count will take place on the night of **January 28th**.

Trained volunteers and outreach staff will work together to gather this information and, when possible, offer a brief voluntary survey to learn more about the needs of those experiencing homelessness. One of the key questions asked is: ***"Where did you sleep on the night of January 28th?"***

The data collected provides essential insight into local trends, service gaps, and the resources needed to help people move toward stable housing. These findings directly inform regional planning efforts and play a major role in securing state and federal funding for housing programs, outreach services, and supportive resources.

Why the Point-in-Time Count Matters

The PIT Count:

- Identifies who in our community needs housing and support
- Highlights gaps in services
- Guides funding for shelters, housing programs, and outreach
- Tracks progress over time
- Raises awareness and brings the community together around real, data-driven solutions

While one night cannot capture every experience, it offers a meaningful snapshot of homelessness in our region—and helps ensure that no one is overlooked.

Interested in Volunteering?

Community participation is essential to the success of the PIT Count.

To learn how you can get involved, contact Amber Brafford, Homeless Response Team Manager, at 828-485-4237.

Article by Amber Brafford, Homelessness Response Manager

Recovery Through Partnership: Supporting Older Adults After Hurricane Helene

On September 27, 2025, Hurricane Helene tore through Western North Carolina with devastating force, forever altering communities in its path. In the aftermath of the hurricane, our community was reminded of both the power of nature and the strength found in coming together. Recovery has not been quick or easy, but through partnership, compassion, and shared commitment, meaningful progress has been made.

Thanks to generous disaster recovery funding from American Association of Retired Person (AARP) Foundation, USAging, and the Southeastern Association of Area Agencies on Aging (SE4A), we were able to respond quickly to some of the most urgent needs facing older adults in our region. These funds supported critical tree and debris removal and cleanup efforts, helping restore safety and accessibility for older adults and families impacted by the storm.

In addition, funds were used to purchase essential supplies for Blue Ridge Community Action, which operates the Adult Day Care Center in Burke County. During the hurricane, the center experienced catastrophic flooding and lost everything inside the building. For participants and families who rely on this program for daily support, the damage was devastating. Replacing supplies and equipment was a necessary first step in helping the center begin its long journey to recovery.

Disaster recovery is about more than clearing debris or repairing buildings—it is about restoring dignity, stability, and hope. Every act of support helps rebuild not just physical spaces, but the sense of community that sustains us during our most difficult moments. We are deeply grateful to our funding partners and to the organizations and individuals working tirelessly on the ground. While recovery continues, these efforts represent an important step forward and a powerful reminder that, even after great loss, resilience and compassion prevail.

For more information on the Area Agency on Aging, please visit www.wpcog.org/area-agecny-on-aging.

Article by Sarah Evitt, Aging Program Manager

Housing Choice Voucher Homeownership Program

Many people are familiar with the Housing Choice Voucher program (Section 8) as a rental assistance program, but few know that it can also support homeownership. It is a valuable resource that helps eligible families move from renting to owning a home. Western Piedmont Council of Governments' Regional Housing Authority (RHA) offers the Housing Choice Voucher Homeownership Program. The program allows eligible families to use their Housing Choice Voucher to help purchase a home, providing a pathway from renter to homeowner. Currently, the RHA has 17 participants enrolled in the homeownership program. In 2025, three families successfully purchased their first homes.

What Is the Section 8 Homeownership Program?

Administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Housing Choice Voucher Homeownership Program is an extension of the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program. Instead of applying the voucher toward rental assistance, participants may use it to help cover monthly homeownership expenses, including mortgage payments, property taxes, and homeowner's insurance.

How It Works

Once approved, the RHA pays a portion of the monthly homeownership costs directly to the mortgage lender. The homeowner pays the remaining amount based on their income, in the same way rental assistance works under a Housing Choice Voucher.

Who Is Eligible?

Anyone who:

- Is currently participating in the Section 8/Housing Choice Voucher Program
- Meets minimum income and employment requirements
- Has completed a HUD-approved homeownership counseling
- Demonstrates readiness for homeownership, including credit and rental history
- Meets first-time homebuyer criteria

* Not all PHAs offer the homeownership option.

Why It Matters

The Section 8 Homeownership Program promotes long-term stability by helping families:

- Build equity instead of paying rent
- Strengthen financial literacy through required counseling
- Achieve greater housing security
- Invest in their communities

For many participants, the program represents an important step toward economic independence.

Key Considerations

While the benefits are significant, homeownership also brings responsibilities such as maintenance and repairs. In addition, assistance may only be available for a limited time for some households and finding an affordable home that meets program standards can be challenging.

For more information about the Housing Choice Voucher Homeownership Program, contact Kaleigh Reinhardt at 828 485 4234 or kaleigh.reinhardt@wpcog.org.

Article by Kaleigh Reinhardt, Housing Specialist

Recalibrate Recovery Group and Workforce Partnership

Trey Hedrick, Business and Virtual Services Coordinator with the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board, presented to participants currently enrolled in the Recalibrate Recovery Program in Alexander County. The presentation covered a range of topics, including how to utilize NCWorks services, available scholarship and NCWorks NextGen opportunities, and virtual workshops.

Lori Mason, Executive Director, shared the following about the experience:

“Trey, I want to thank you again for taking the time to meet with the Recalibrate program group in Taylorsville. The group, made up of individuals working hard to build lives in SUD recovery have a goal of workforce reentry but struggle to fill gaps in their experience and locate resources to help them. The entire group gained invaluable knowledge and resources from your presentation, thank you for both your time and the expert advice! Each one of the participants shared directly about how much they benefited from your information and the new resources you shared, thank you! In addition, the thing that was most appreciated was the encouragement you gave each of them. Many are working through a lot of shame and feeling that people will not be open to giving a second chance if they find out about their history. After your session, I believe they are felt encouraged at the prospects and hopeful about their opportunities. They also learned how to write a Letter of Explanation that serves as a way to demonstrate what they have learned, thank you!



We are enrolling one young lady in the Next Gen program after your presentation; she has begun her GED courses and is optimistic about the future for her and her son. We have several who have been able to access employment as well. You made a huge impact on the group! We will look forward to your continued engagement with participants of the Recalibrate program. Thank you!"

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

Greater Hickory MPO Initiates New Economic Expansion & Accessibility Mapping Tool

The Greater Hickory Metropolitan Planning Organization (GHMPO) has officially begun work on a new Economic Expansion and Accessibility Tool, an interactive, data-driven mapping platform designed to support smart growth, economic development, and transportation investment across the region.

Work on the tool began in FY 2026, with adoption anticipated in FY 2027. Once complete, the tool will provide local governments, economic developers, and transportation partners with a clearer picture of how people, goods, and jobs move through the region—and where strategic investments can make the biggest impact.

A Regional Tool for Growth and Mobility

This web-based, interactive mapping tool will integrate highway, transit, and bicycle/pedestrian networks with economic and land-use data to help identify opportunities and challenges related to growth and accessibility. By bringing multiple datasets into a single platform, the tool will support informed decision-making and help communities align transportation improvements with economic development goals.

Key data inputs include:

- Traffic signal and congestion data
- Average Annual Daily Traffic (AADT)
- Zoning and land-use regulations
- Traffic Analysis Zones (TAZs)
- Congestion Management Process (CMP) findings
- Disaster response and resilience considerations

What the Tool Will Show

1. The Economic Foundation – Where is the Value?

The tool will visualize where economic activity is occurring and where future opportunities exist, including:

- Business locations filtered by industry (manufacturing, warehousing, technology, and more)
- Employee concentrations using scaled symbols
- Current and future zoning areas
- Economic output and tax contribution data (where available) to help justify infrastructure investments

2. Infrastructure – How Do We Move?

Transportation networks will be clearly displayed to show how goods and people travel across the region:

- Roadway classifications, including freight-heavy corridors
- Project status tiers (funded, partially funded, and unfunded needs)
- Pavement and bridge conditions that may limit heavy vehicle access
- Traffic volumes and signal locations to identify stressed corridors and delay points

3. Accessibility – Identifying the Gaps

The tool will examine who can access jobs and how:

- 15-, 30-, and 45-minute commute sheds
- Transit routes and stops in relation to employment centers
- Multimodal gaps where sidewalks or bike facilities end before reaching major job hubs

4. Weakness Identification – The Analysis

Built-in analysis will highlight system vulnerabilities, such as:

- Bottlenecks where high-growth areas meet low-capacity roads
- Industrial parks with single access points, creating safety and resilience concerns
- Long-range demand projections based on growth trends and available land

5. A Dashboard for Decision-Makers

An executive-level dashboard will summarize findings through:

- A return-on-investment (ROI) estimator showing how projects could unlock jobs
- Comparisons between funded projects and unfunded needs
- A dynamic accessibility score that updates as users explore different areas or modes

Why This Matters

By connecting economic development, transportation performance, and accessibility, the Economic Expansion and Accessibility Tool will help the region:

- Better accommodate growth
- Prioritize projects with the greatest economic and mobility benefits
- Strengthen grant applications and funding justifications
- Improve transparency and collaboration among partners

GHMPO looks forward to sharing progress on this tool as development continues and working with local governments, businesses, and stakeholders to ensure it reflects regional needs and priorities.

Article by Averi Ritchie, Transportation Planning Director

Septic System Recovery Program Receives \$7.5 Million to Support Eleven Western NC Counties

The Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG) has secured \$7,556,854 in state grant funding to repair and replace approximately 300 failed septic systems across an eleven-county region in western North Carolina. The investment will help communities address both storm-related and long-standing system failures, with up to 150 repairs prioritized for damage caused by Hurricane Helene.

Regional Partnership to Deliver Services

WPCOG will lead the multi-county initiative and administer the program in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba counties. The High Country Council of Governments (HCCOG) will oversee implementation in Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, Wilkes, and Yancey counties.

Local health departments and health districts will play a central role by identifying eligible properties, issuing permits, and supporting on-the-ground coordination.

Addressing Widespread Damage from Hurricane Helene

Hurricane Helene brought severe flooding, landslides, and infrastructure damage to western North Carolina in September 2024. Health officials estimate that more than 240 septic systems were directly damaged, with hundreds more failing due to aging infrastructure and prolonged soil saturation.

All eleven counties included in the project were designated federal disaster areas, underscoring the scale of need and the importance of this investment.

Program Goals and Long-Term Impact

Beyond repairing or replacing failed systems, the program will incorporate resiliency upgrades to reduce vulnerability to future storms and extreme weather. Potential improvements include:

- Relocating systems out of flood-prone areas
- Installing watertight tanks
- Expanding drain fields
- Elevating system components
- Eliminating straight pipes that discharge into waterways

These measures will help protect public health, safeguard water quality, and strengthen long-term community resilience.

Timeline

The program is expected to move into full implementation following the release of funds, projected for March 2026.

Article by Duncan Cavanaugh, Advanced Research and Data Center Manager

Western Piedmont Council of Governments
www.wpcog.org



Western Piedmont Council of Governments | PO Box 9026 | Hickory, NC 28603 US

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)



Try email & social marketing for free!