



HOME GROWN TOOLS

for ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Homegrown Tools tells the story of small towns that have successfully stimulated private investment and job creation. The tool is meant to connect public officials, practitioners, and researchers to successful small town economic development strategies and inspire small towns to leverage their unique assets. Homegrown Tools is managed by NCGrowth, an EDA University Center at UNC Chapel Hill, in partnership with the UNC School of Government, the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, the NC Rural Center, and the UNC Department of City and Regional Planning.



Jacksonville, North Carolina

Points of Interest	County Data
Population	72,436
Per capita income	\$21,927
Median household income	\$41,936
Poverty rate	13.8%
Minority population	31.4%
Proximity to urban center:	70 miles to Wilmington

Introduction

Having struggled with affordable housing for years, the city of Jacksonville, North Carolina has offered funds of up to \$100 per monthly utility bill in the wake of COVID-19.¹ Responding to the community's loss of income, Jacksonville has established the Utility Assistance Program. The city has received funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and is using a portion of these allotted funds to address the increasing need for well-functioning utilities coupled with higher unemployment.

The Community and its History

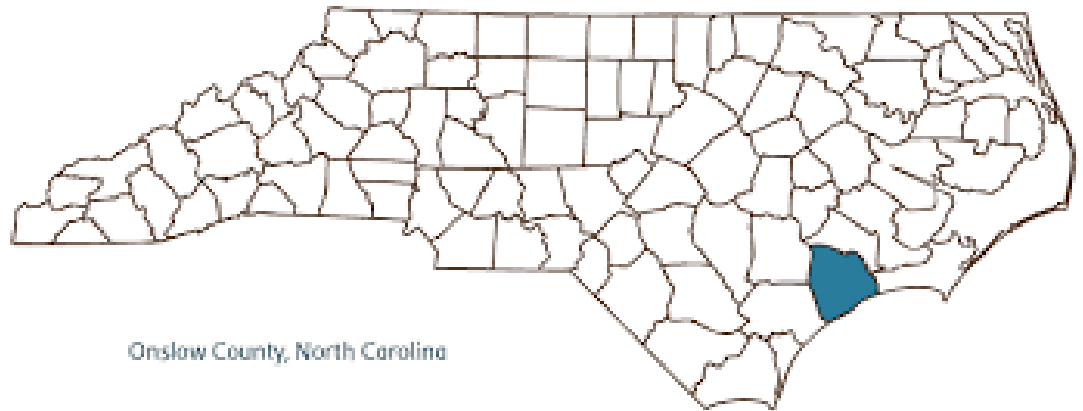
The City of Jacksonville was established in 1842, but its history dates to 1713 where it was the grounds for the Tuscarora War. The war resulted in permanent European settlement between Wilmington and New Bern. In the early 1700s, the land became known as a production center with easy access to the New River. Turpentine was a predominant export, but agriculture, specifically tobacco, corn, peanuts, and ham, and fishing were also large industries. The economy of this area, even prior to the establishment of Jacksonville, grew rapidly thanks to shipping along the New River.

The Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune was established in 1941, but the base camp did not join Onslow County until 1990.¹⁰ Today the camp comprises about one-third of the county's land. This annexation shifted the demographics of the county seat, Jacksonville, from maintaining a steady population growth to half of the county living in Camp Lejeune. Much of Jacksonville's culture is based on military pride, the New River that runs through the city, and the proximity to the coast.

Along with recreational activities such as fishing and kayaking in the New River, Jacksonville has various activities for residents and visitors. The downtown area features three distinct parks, hosting 17 miles worth of trails.⁶ The city's natural beauty is a source of local pride. Downtown Jacksonville is also home to the oldest continuous United Service Organization in the world, largely thanks to the high concentration of former and active Marine Corps members.⁷

Despite the jobs offered by Camp Lejeune, Onslow County has been identified as a Tier 1, or economically distressed, county by the North Carolina Department of Commerce. Jacksonville and surrounding areas are dependent on Camp Lejeune and there is a lack of industry diversity. The area also suffers from semi-frequent hurricanes and is still recovering from Hurricane Florence in 2018. Jacksonville's government has identified a need for the beautification of green spaces, hurricane relief, and affordable housing for its citizens.

Jacksonville, North Carolina has established the Utility Assistance Program in order to ensure that the city's citizens have their basic needs covered during the COVID-19 pandemic.



The Strategy

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Jacksonville, North Carolina identified mortgage, rent, and utility costs as a pressing issue in the community. The city recognized the effect of distancing measures on unemployment and income levels, making these mortgage, rent, and utility bills harder and harder to pay.⁹ In response, when the community was granted more than \$200,000 in federal COVID-19 relief funds, it allocated \$70,000 to the Utility Assistance Program and established a partnership with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).² The program is designed to address the necessity of functioning utilities while the community is forced to stay at home, as well as a loss of income due to COVID-19.

The city has created an online application for those who believe that they are eligible for this need-based funding. The application is straightforward, and the city is hoping to assist over 200 families. To be eligible, applicants must have the original City bill for which they are requesting assistance, meet low-moderate income requirements as described by HUD, be a resident of the city of Jacksonville, and provide evidence that they have experienced a change in income due to the COVID-19 global crisis. These applications will be administered and reviewed by Jacksonville's Department of Community Engagement. Funds will be distributed on a first come first serve basis.⁹ Successful applicants will receive up to \$100 for monthly utility bills delivered after March 27th, 2020 to be used for city landfill, stormwater, sewer, and water fees.¹¹ They are not expected to pay these funds back later. The program will continue until all these allocated funds have been used.

How and Why the Strategy is Working

COVID-19 is affecting the necessities of struggling communities. While most communities are experiencing economic downturns due to COVID-19 resulting in job loss and blows to small businesses, already struggling economies such as Jacksonville, NC are experiencing financial

threats to the basic needs such as running water and electricity. There was already an affordable housing issue in Jacksonville, NC, and when the COVID-19 crisis hit the city's economy, these housing issues were amplified. For this reason, Jacksonville had to prioritize the basic needs of their citizens.

The city created its own programs. Even though this program is federally funded, it is allocated to the needs identified by the city of Jacksonville. Each community is facing its own unique struggles during the COVID-19 outbreak, often based on previously existing issues, so granting municipalities autonomy over funding allows for them to address the most pressing issues in their community. Jacksonville's citizens needed utility assistance, whereas another community may need senior care.

Lessons Learned

Basics needs of communities should be the first allocation of funds. By having funding options for basic needs for all citizens during a time when work is hard to find and should be avoided for public safety reasons, a city is looking out for the struggling members of the population. Without ensuring basic needs and providing programs for assistance, those who are struggling the most may slip through the cracks.

Affordable housing issues are being exacerbated. With social distancing measures, citizens are spending more time in their homes, thus requiring functioning utility services. Perhaps in an economic crisis that was not also a public safety crisis, the inability to pay utility bills would be less of an issue. This is not to say that utilities are not a necessity in other circumstances, but just that they are needed even more now that residents are forced to stay indoors.

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