

Hometown Strong Effort to Help Rural NC with COVID-19, Economic Recovery:

Mary Penny Kelley Named Executive Director of Hometown Strong

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Hometown Strong, an effort created to forge partnerships between rural communities and state government, will expand its focus to help all 80 rural North Carolina counties respond to COVID-19 and strengthen local economies.

Governor Roy Cooper has named Mary Penny Kelley as the new Executive Director of Hometown Strong. She takes charge of the rural initiative at a time when communities most need a partner in state government to deliver reliable information and resources during the coronavirus pandemic.

"Having grown up in rural North Carolina, I know well the great opportunities as well as the challenges there. The pandemic has put a spotlight on rural needs and we will listen to local leaders and work to get them the help they deserve," said Governor Cooper.

Governor Cooper created Hometown Strong in early 2018 to build partnerships between state agencies and local leaders to champion rural communities. The effort leverages state and local resources, identifies ongoing projects and community needs and implements focused plans to boost the economy, improve infrastructure and strengthen North Carolina's hometowns.

Now, Hometown Strong will help North Carolina's rural areas respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the economy, Hometown Strong will expand its county partnerships to serve all 80 rural counties. Working with the new [NC Pandemic Recovery Office \(NC PRO\)](#), the team will focus on key initiatives that help small towns and rural areas recover including improving access to health care, economic planning for commercial revitalization, and remote learning support for students and workers.

Since its launch, Hometown Strong has visited 40 rural counties and over 150 towns and American Indian tribes bringing dozens of state government experts to rural communities to listen to local priorities and connect them with existing resources. During a time when large in-person meetings are no longer advisable, Hometown Strong will combine use of online meeting tools and socially distanced one-on-one visits to build partnerships with the 40 rural counties new to the program.

"Hometown Strong for me is a return to the rural communities that are the very backbone of North Carolina. Rural communities grow our food, provide our outdoor adventures, greet us on Main Street, and rely on neighbor helping neighbor during times of trouble. The pandemic is

certainly a time of trouble, threatening our health and our livelihoods. It is time to pitch in with our neighbors and add our resources to the fight against the pandemic and to strengthen our hometowns,” said Kelley.

Prior to this appointment, Kelley served as the Director of Operations and Rural Engagement for Hometown Strong. She previously served in senior positions at the Department of Environmental Quality and the Attorney General’s Office.

Kelley moves into the Executive Director spot formerly held by Pryor Gibson, who was recently tapped to head the state’s [Division of Employment Services](#).

Through participation in Hometown Strong, state agencies have learned how to improve their programs to better serve rural communities. For example, through Downtown Strong the Department of Commerce provides planning assistance to small towns, broadband grants expanded rural connectivity, and the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources launched Hello NC to create marketing materials for rural communities. Hometown Strong has also helped rural communities through support for grants to make health care more accessible and hurricane resiliency created programs to build back better. Learn more at www.hometownstrong.nc.gov.

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