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Embargoed Until February 28, 2014

N.C. Metro Mayors Release Data on Pockets of Urban Distress Amidst Otherwise Vibrant Cities

CHARLOTTE – Members of the North Carolina Metropolitan Mayors Coalition today released data detailing pockets of severe poverty and unemployment –distressed census tracts – in North Carolina’s larger cities. The data shows that nearly 580,000 North Carolina residents live in distressed tracts, with 62 percent of these living in metropolitan regions. The report draws attention to the challenges growing urban cities face in ensuring all residents enjoy the economic opportunities being part of a large city affords.

A distressed neighborhood, or tract, is defined by the following characteristics;

- Unemployment 50 percent greater than North Carolina’s unemployment rate,
- Annual per capita income 1/3 lower than North Carolina’s per capita income, and
- Poverty rate 50 percent greater than North Carolina’s poverty rate.

As of 2010, the Census Bureau had designated 18 areas as urban in North Carolina, and the data shows each of these areas contains at least one distressed tract. Of the 162 severely distressed Census tracts identified, 106 are located in urban areas. Of the 56 tracts classified as rural, 45 are located in urban clusters and only 11 are in truly rural areas. Twenty of the 25 most distressed tracts in North Carolina are urban.

“While North Carolina’s metro areas have been the state’s economic engines driving growth and prosperity, cities have also been grappling with pockets of slow or stagnant economic recovery in neighborhoods that leave significant numbers of citizens struggling in poverty,” said Raleigh Mayor Nancy McFarlane, chair of the N.C. Metro Mayors. “Further study is needed to better understand and identify needs within the urban pockets of poverty. As we look at poverty across the state, it’s important that we develop targeted strategies to expand economic opportunities to all distressed areas, both rural and metro, to ensure all citizens living in poverty are being provided equal opportunities to improve their economic outlook.”

While North Carolina’s metropolitan cities are experiencing dynamic population growth and are included regularly in national rankings of the nation’s top cities to live in, the challenge lies in bringing that success to each neighborhood in the city. High-level views, such as

county statistics, fail to adequately capture the economic realities of these pockets of distress. The overall growth and opportunity experienced in the metro counties masks distressed urban tracts.

- The per capita income in urban counties is \$27,364 but is just \$12,059 in distressed urban tracts.
- The poverty rate in urban counties is just 15 percent but leaps to more than 40 percent in distressed urban tracts.
- The unemployment rate is 9.3 percent in urban counties but 21.4 percent in distressed urban tracts.

African-Americans, children and the elderly are disproportionately impacted by the poverty in urban distressed tracts. More than 60 percent of those living in distressed urban tracts are African-American, and 16 percent of North Carolina African-Americans live in a distressed tract. Nearly 60 percent of children living in distressed urban tracts live in poverty, compared with slightly less than 23 percent across the state. For those over 65, the poverty rate in these distressed areas is more than 20 percent, double the 10 percent rate seen across the state.

The data is drawn from the report, “North Carolina’s Distressed Urban Tracts: A look at the state’s economically disadvantaged communities,” authored by William High for the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For more information on the report, contact Todd Owen, associate director of the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at towen@email.unc.edu or 919-962-3076 or William High at williamhigh@gmail.com, or 404-345-0291. For information on the N.C. Metropolitan Mayors Coalition visit the website www.metromayors.com or call Julie White at (919) 539-7871.

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