

# Southern Data Infrastructure: Past Lessons, Current Gaps, and Future Opportunities

## 2026 LEARNINGS REPORT

Presented by:



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# LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS

Dear Colleagues,

In December 2025, the Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) and the Louisiana Public Health Institute (LPHI) convened a regional webinar titled *Southern Data Infrastructure: Past Lessons, Current Gaps, and Future Opportunities*. The session brought together data practitioners, researchers, public-sector partners, and community leaders to reflect on the current state of data infrastructure in the South—and to imagine what it could and should become.

Southern communities face some of the nation’s most persistent economic, health, and environmental inequities. At the same time, they are navigating increasing instability in public data systems, including the rapid removal of critical datasets and tools, a decline in data quality, and uncertainty about future data collection efforts. These challenges disproportionately affect community-based organizations and local and state governments that rely on timely, trustworthy data to make decisions, allocate resources, and plan for healthier futures.

This document summarizes key insights from that webinar, alongside perspectives from experts and practitioners working to strengthen data systems across Southern communities. It is intended as a learning resource for funders, data leaders, and partners seeking to support equitable, resilient data infrastructure that is accountable to the communities it serves.

The session was designed to balance shared learning with open dialogue. The first portion of the webinar featured SEAP and LPHI sharing ongoing, innovative data projects centered on expanding access to data and supporting data-informed decision-making in the current climate. This was followed by a robust conversation with three panelists, each holding a unique role in Southern data development, infrastructure and management: Heather Blonsky, Head of Data, Metopio; Lamar Gardere, Executive Director, The Data Center; and, Lori Thomas, Executive Director, Charlotte Urban Institute & Regional Data Trust. We ended with a breakout room discussion divided by industries in order to better understand the needs and interests of our participants.

The session was driven by shared learning objectives:

- identifying the impacts of data loss on community-based organizations and government agencies;
- lifting up successful data preservation and data generation efforts; and,
- envisioning the future of a comprehensive Southern data landscape, including what new systems are needed and how improved access to data can transform community outcomes.

Across the panel and breakout discussions, a clear theme emerged: **local and regional data organizations are already functioning as essential infrastructure in the South**. They preserve access to critical data, translate complex information for decision-makers, and maintain trust with communities—often with limited resources and visibility.

As you read this learning brief, we invite you to consider how these insights might inform your own work. Strengthening Southern data infrastructure is not solely a technical endeavor; it is a long-term investment in community capacity, democratic participation, and equitable outcomes.

**Sarah Beth Gehl, PhD**  
Executive Director  
Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP)

**Shelina Davis, MPH, MSW**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Louisiana Public Health Institute (LPHI)

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Southern communities face compounding economic, health, and climate challenges while contending with declining reliability and accessibility of federal data systems. This learning brief synthesizes insights from a practitioner-led webinar convened by the Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) and the Louisiana Public Health Institute (LPHI) to inform philanthropic and field-building strategies that strengthen Southern data infrastructure.

**Key Insight:** Local and regional data intermediaries across the South are functioning as essential infrastructure—preserving data access, translating complex information for decision-makers, and filling gaps left by federal and state systems—yet they remain under-resourced and vulnerable.

**“The problems that we have here are not unique, but they are particularly acute in the South, right? We do see the greatest wealth disparities in the South versus other parts of the country, and what that means is that the issues that we face are difficult everywhere, but they’re harder to solve here.”**

**- Lamar Gardere, The Data Center**

## Five Core Learnings

- 1. Local organizations are de facto data infrastructure.** Southern data intermediaries provide trusted, place-based data that directly informs policy, funding allocation, and service delivery. Their role is foundational, not supplemental.
- 2. Data loss and instability cause real harm.** The removal or degradation of federal datasets has stalled climate adaptation and equity projects, forcing local organizations to divert scarce capacity toward reconstructing data rather than advancing impact.
- 3. Administrative and hyper-local data are increasingly essential.** As survey participation declines and federal releases lag, local administrative data is revealing critical service gaps—but requires investment in privacy, linkage, and analytic capacity.
- 4. Representation, trust, and lived experience shape data quality.** Without community governance and contextual interpretation, data can misrepresent or reinforce inequities rather than illuminate solutions.
- 5. Collaboration and standards enable scale without erasure.** Open-source tools, shared standards, and peer networks allow local data to be connected across systems while preserving regional nuance.

Together, these opportunities suggest that field building in the South requires investment not only in tools and products, but in the networks, norms, and shared infrastructure that enable data ecosystems to function over time.

## Implications for Funders

- Shift funding from short-term data products to **long-term infrastructure support**, including maintenance, staffing, and governance.
- Invest in **Southern-led intermediaries and collaboratives** rather than importing national models wholesale.
- Support **data preservation and rapid-response capacity** to protect communities from future data loss.
- Embed **trust, ethics, and community voice** as core components of data investments.

Strategic, sustained investment in Southern data infrastructure will not only improve data quality—it will strengthen the region’s capacity to respond to crises, allocate resources equitably, and drive policy change grounded in lived experience.

## About the Panelists



**Heather Blonsky**  
Head of Data, Metopio

Heather Blonsky is Vice President of Data at Metopio, working closely with public health professionals to provide the community context needed for a clear understanding of community social needs and health status. Heather's career has focused on issues of health access, neighborhood resourcing, and the data and analysis needed to design actionable interventions to improve health outcomes.



**Lamar Gardere**  
Executive Director, The Data Center

Executive Director of The Data Center, guiding its mission to democratize actionable data and promote a culture of data-driven decision-making in New Orleans. He previously served as Chief Information Officer for the City of New Orleans, where he led open data policy development and expanded IT services to improve transparency and efficiency. With a background in research and business operations, Lamar brings deep expertise in technology, data analysis, and strategic



**Lori Thomas**  
Executive Director,  
Charlotte Urban Institute & Regional Data Trust

Dr. Lori Thomas is the executive director of the Charlotte Urban Institute and Charlotte Regional Data Trust – an integrated data system operated by the Institute. She is also an associate professor of social work at UNC Charlotte. Thomas oversees and leads the work of community-engaged researchers and graduate students, and facilitates use of linked administrative data by faculty researchers and community organizations. A Tennessee native, Thomas holds a doctorate in social work from Virginia Commonwealth University.

# SOUTHERN DATA INFRASTRUCTURE: KEY LEARNINGS FROM THE FIELD

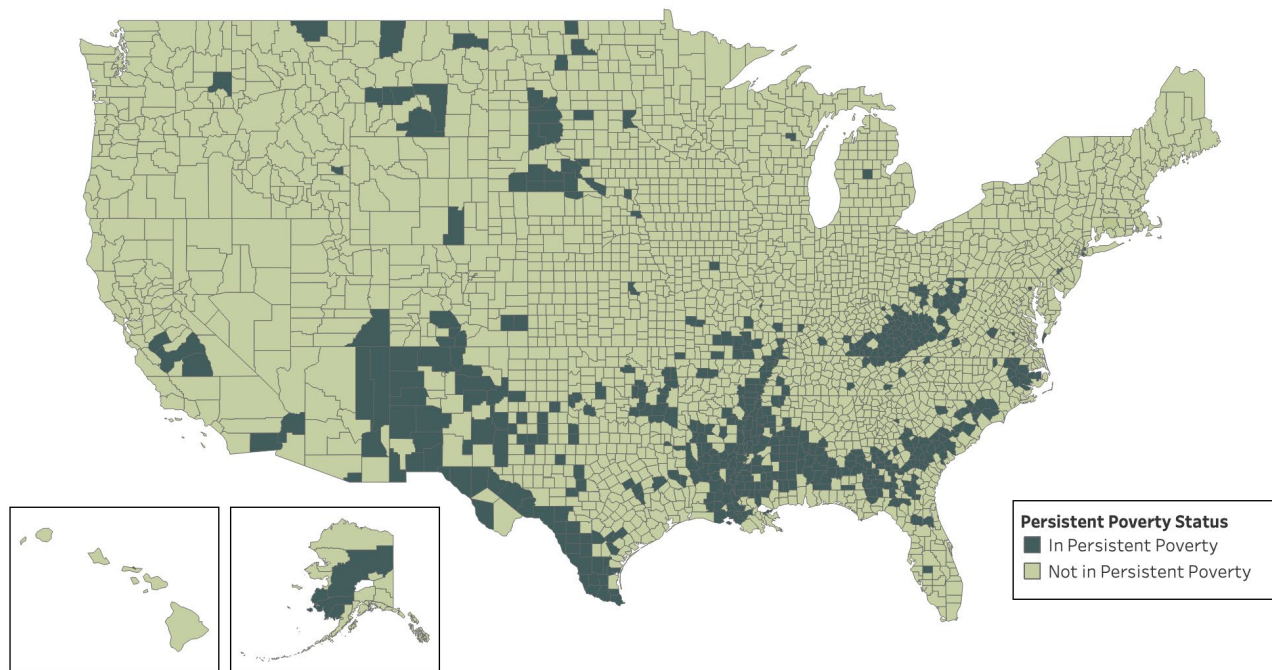
## Purpose

This learning brief synthesizes insights from a practitioner-led webinar on the state of Southern data infrastructure. It elevates local data leaders' experiences to inform philanthropic strategy, technical assistance, and collaboration models that strengthen data quality, accessibility, and trust across the South.

## Context: Why the South Requires Targeted Data Investment

Southern communities face compounding economic, health, climate, and rural challenges that make access to high-quality, timely data especially critical. The South is home to a disproportionate share of the nation's persistent poverty (see figure 1), higher rates of chronic disease (see figures 2 and 3), greater exposure to climate and environmental risk, and a larger rural population than any other region.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, many Southern states have historically lower levels of public investment in data systems and analytic capacity, which increases the reliance on federal datasets and tools that are now becoming less reliable, less accessible, or altogether unavailable.

**Figure 1: Counties in Persistent Poverty in the US**



Source: U.S. Economic Development Administration. (2023). *EDA\_FY23\_PPCs.xlsx*. U.S. Department of Commerce.

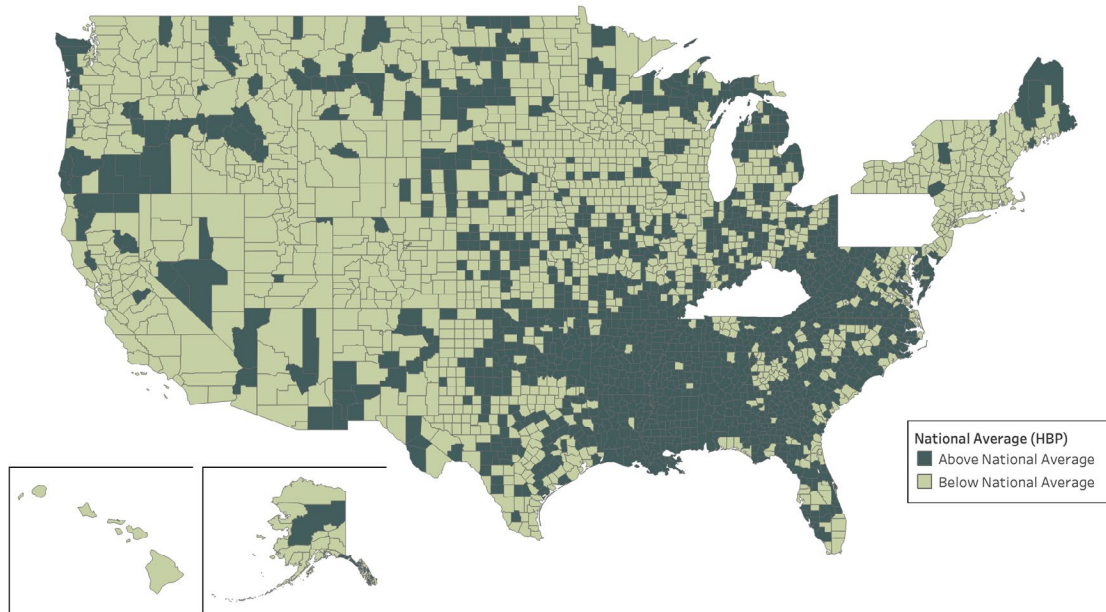
[https://www.eda.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/EDA\\_FY23\\_PPCs.xlsx](https://www.eda.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/EDA_FY23_PPCs.xlsx)

Note: According to a Congressional requirement, a county (or a county-level equivalent) is experiencing Persistent Poverty if their most recent poverty rate estimate, within the margin of error, equates to 20 percent, while also evidencing poverty rates of at least 20 percent in the 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses (i.e., 20 percent or greater poverty over the last 30 years)\*.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). Rural America: A Story Map [ArcGIS StoryMaps collection]. MTGIS Portal. U.S. Department of Commerce. <https://mtgis-portal.geo.census.gov/arcgis/apps/storymaps/collections/189aa1dbd64c4c81b3b4a2b71124f6c6?item=1>

Through SEAP and LPHI's engagement in multiple Robert Wood Johnson Foundation data cohorts,<sup>2</sup> a clear pattern emerged: while federal systems are pulling back, other regions of the country are moving quickly to coordinate state and local data ecosystems.

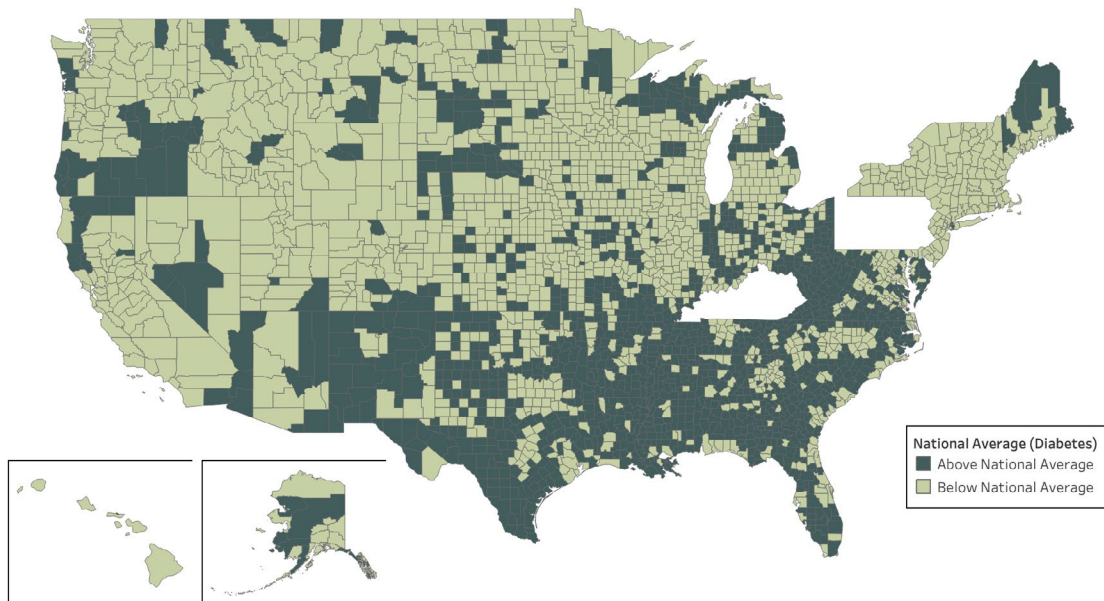
**Figure 2: Crude Prevalence of High Blood Pressure Among Adults (2023)**



Source: PLACES. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessed 02/05/2026. <https://www.cdc.gov/places>

Note: Estimates are not available for areas in white. For more information visit <https://www.cdc.gov/places>. "Above National Average" is defined as greater than or equal to high blood pressure crude prevalence of 38.7%.

**Figure 3: Crude Prevalence of Diabetes Among Adults (2023)**



Source: PLACES. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessed 02/05/2026. <https://www.cdc.gov/places>

Note: Estimates are not available for areas in white. For more information visit <https://www.cdc.gov/places>. "Above National Average" is defined as greater than or equal to diabetes crude prevalence of 13.6%.

<sup>2</sup> Cohorts included the Southern Community Data Collaborative, which built connections across organizations and initiated critical conversations about the future of community data in the South, and the Rapid Response Cohort hosted by the Foundation to address emerging threats to data access and to support efforts to preserve essential datasets during a period of federal retrenchment.

Across the Northeast and West Coast, states and major cities have launched formal collaborations to strengthen public health and community data infrastructure. Examples include the Northeast Public Health Collaborative, the Western Coast Health Alliance led by governors, and the Governors’ Public Health Alliance of state data officers. These efforts are aligning state and local governments around shared data priorities, including vaccine distribution, infectious disease surveillance, emergency preparedness, and cross-jurisdictional data sharing. Notably, only one Southern state, North Carolina, is currently represented in the multi-state Governors’ Public Health Alliance.

No comparable, governor-led or state-coordinated data collaborative exists across the South. As a result, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, think tanks, and university research centers have played—and will continue to play—a vital role in preventing the region from falling further behind. As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, Medicaid redetermination, and recent climate and disaster responses, these organizations often step in to generate, preserve, and translate data when public systems fall short.

## Key Learning Themes

### 1. Local Organizations Are De Facto Data Infrastructure

Across the South, local and regional data organizations are increasingly serving as the connective tissue between raw data and real-world decision-making. Panelists described how their organizations routinely translate complex datasets into accessible insights for local governments, community organizations, and advocates—often filling gaps left by state and federal systems. In Southeast Louisiana, for example, The Data Center has played a central role in producing population counts, labor market analysis, and neighborhood-level indicators that directly inform public investment and policy decisions. These organizations are not simply disseminating data; they are curating, contextualizing, and safeguarding it in environments where trust, capacity, and continuity are fragile.

**Key Takeaway:** Local intermediaries provide trusted, place-based data that informs funding, policy, and service delivery—often stepping in where state or federal systems fall short.

**Implication:** Treat local data organizations as infrastructure. Prioritize multi-year, flexible support for maintenance, staffing, and governance rather than one-off products.

**“The value we bring is translating data into something local leaders can actually use to make decisions.”**

**– Lamar Gardere, The Data Center**

## 2. Data Loss and Instability Create Real-World Harm

Participants emphasized that data loss is not an abstract or technical inconvenience. It has immediate consequences for communities. When federal datasets and tools are removed or deprioritized, local organizations must either pause projects or divert scarce staff time toward reconstructing information from multiple sources. Heather Blonsky described how the removal of climate and equity datasets disrupted coastal adaptation efforts in Louisiana, delaying planning and decision-making at a moment of heightened climate risk. Others noted that even when data technically “still exists,” the labor required to verify, clean, and recombine it creates significant strain for organizations already operating with limited resources.

**Key Takeaway:** The removal or degradation of federal tools stalled projects and diverted scarce staff time toward reconstruction rather than impact.

**Implication:** Invest in data preservation, redundancy, and rapid-response capacity so communities are not left rebuilding critical datasets alone.

**“When the Climate and Economic Justice data went away, some coastal adaptation projects just stopped. Recreating that data from scratch is a bear.”**  
— Heather Blonsky, Metopio

## 3. Administrative & Hyper-Local Data Are Increasingly Essential

As federal survey participation declines and national datasets become less reliable or timely, panelists described a growing reliance on administrative and hyper-local data to understand what is actually happening in Southern communities. Lori Thomas shared how linking administrative data revealed that more than a third of students living in emergency shelters were not connected to McKinney-Vento services—an insight that directly led to staffing and service changes. These examples underscore how local data systems can surface hidden gaps in service delivery that would otherwise remain invisible, while also raising the need for careful attention to privacy, governance, and technical capacity.

**Key Takeaway:** As survey participation declines and federal releases lag, administrative data and local surveys are filling critical gaps while introducing privacy and capacity challenges.

**Implication:** Support secure data linkage, privacy-preserving practices, and staff capacity to responsibly analyze administrative data.

**“We learned that 38 percent of students in emergency shelters weren’t connected to McKinney-Vento services. That finding alone justified adding a dedicated social worker.”**  
— Lori Thomas, Charlotte Urban Institute

#### 4. Representation, Trust, and Lived Experience Must Shape Data Systems

Participants repeatedly returned to the idea that data does not speak for itself—particularly in communities that have been historically over-surveyed, under-resourced, or misrepresented. Lori Thomas described the formation of a community data advisory committee to help address underrepresentation of marginalized populations in datasets and to ensure that findings are interpreted with appropriate context. Without lived experience informing data collection and analysis, participants warned, even well-intentioned data work can reinforce harmful narratives or misdirect resources. Trust, they emphasized, is both a prerequisite for high-quality data and an outcome of inclusive data governance.

**Key Takeaway:** Participants underscored the risks of over-representing marginalized communities without context and the importance of community governance in data work.

**Implication:** Fund participatory governance models, qualitative methods, and community advisory structures alongside quantitative analysis.

**“Without lived experience at the table, you can very easily misinterpret what the data is telling you—and reinforce the very inequities you’re trying to address.”**  
— Lori Thomas, UNC Charlotte Urban Institute

#### 5. Collaboration and Standards Enable Scale Without Erasure

While local context is essential, participants also emphasized that isolation is not a viable long-term strategy. Collaboration—across organizations, jurisdictions, and sectors—was cited as critical to improving data quality and usability. Examples included participation in national networks, use of open-source tools, and adherence to shared documentation and data standards. These approaches allow local data to be connected across systems and regions without losing meaning or nuance. Participants noted that standards and collaboration reduce duplication, improve credibility, and make it possible for local insights to inform regional and national conversations.

**Key Takeaway:** Open-source tools, shared standards, and peer networks improve interoperability and credibility while preserving local nuance.

**Implication:** Philanthropy can catalyze collaboration by underwriting convenings, shared standards, and open-source infrastructure.

**“Standards and documentation are what allow local data to be connected across systems without losing its meaning.”**  
— Heather Blonsky, Metopio

## Cross-Cutting Tensions Identified

Across the discussion, participants underscored that strengthening data infrastructure in the South requires navigating a set of persistent tradeoffs rather than identifying simple technical fixes. Efforts to standardize data systems and metrics are essential for interoperability and scale, yet overly rigid approaches risk flattening local nuance and obscuring the lived realities of Southern communities. Similarly, expanding access to data—particularly administrative and hyper-local datasets—introduces heightened responsibilities around privacy, consent, and ethical stewardship that many under-resourced organizations must manage without sufficient support.

Participants also highlighted the tension between the urgency of responding to crises and policy windows and the time required to produce rigorous, defensible analysis, noting that speed often comes at the expense of sustainability. These challenges are compounded by project-based funding models that prioritize short-term outputs over the long-term investments needed to maintain data systems, relationships, and governance. Together, these tensions point to a clear role for funders in balancing flexibility with accountability and in supporting the institutional capacity, coordination, and stewardship that allow data infrastructure to endure.

### Core Tensions

- Local nuance vs. standardization
- Accessibility vs. privacy protection
- Speed of response vs. methodological rigor
- Project-based funding vs. long-term sustainability

**“We're building on a problem that is not unique to the South, but the less centralized services makes understanding them, their impact, and their ineffectiveness really difficult.”**

**- Lori Thomas, UNC Charlotte Urban Institute**

### Strategic Takeaways for Funders

1. **Shift from products to systems:** Fund maintenance, documentation, and governance.
2. **Invest locally, lead regionally:** Support Southern-led intermediaries and collaboratives.
3. **Protect data continuity:** Back preservation and rapid-response capacity.
4. **Center trust:** Embed community voice and ethical data practices.

## Opportunities for Field Building

The discussion surfaced several field-building opportunities that could significantly strengthen Southern data infrastructure if pursued in a coordinated way. Participants emphasized the potential of regional Southern data collaboratives to reduce duplication, align standards, and amplify local expertise while respecting state and community variation. Shared data archiving and preservation initiatives emerged as a critical safeguard against future data loss, particularly as federal systems retrench and political uncertainty threatens continuity. Participants also pointed to the value of sustained peer learning among local data practitioners, noting that informal knowledge exchange often fills gaps left by limited technical assistance and fragmented funding. Finally, the group highlighted the importance of collective advocacy to protect census operations and federal data quality, recognizing that local efforts alone cannot offset national policy decisions that weaken foundational datasets. Together, these opportunities suggest that field building in the South requires investment not only in tools and products, but in the networks, norms, and shared infrastructure that enable data ecosystems to function over time.

### Core opportunities

- Regional Southern data collaboratives
- Shared data archiving and preservation initiatives
- Peer learning for local data practitioners
- Advocacy to protect census and federal data quality

## METHODS NOTE

Insights were synthesized from a moderated panel discussion and practitioner dialogue. Quotes are lightly edited for clarity and attributed by role to prioritize candid field perspectives.

**“In the South, we have a lot of people who are under-resourced, who don't quite have all that they need, don't have enough time or money to do the things that they need to in life, and so don't always get a chance to respond to surveys at the same level, right? Which means that the amount of data that we have in the South to help solve problems isn't always at the same quality level that we have elsewhere in the country.”**

**— Lamar Gardere, The Data Center**

## ABOUT THE CO-HOSTS

### **Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP)**

SEAP partners with policy thinkers and doers to amplify their efforts and bridge gaps in policy infrastructure. Our goal is to advance policies that improve economic security, access to healthcare, and environmental justice for all Southerners.

Visit our website to learn more.



### **Louisiana Public Health Institute (LPHI)**

The Louisiana Public Health Institute is a statewide nonprofit organization that is guided by its mission to lead and partner with communities to ensure everyone has fair and just opportunities to be healthy and well. LPHI works to address both immediate public health needs and to create environments for long-term public health improvements.

