



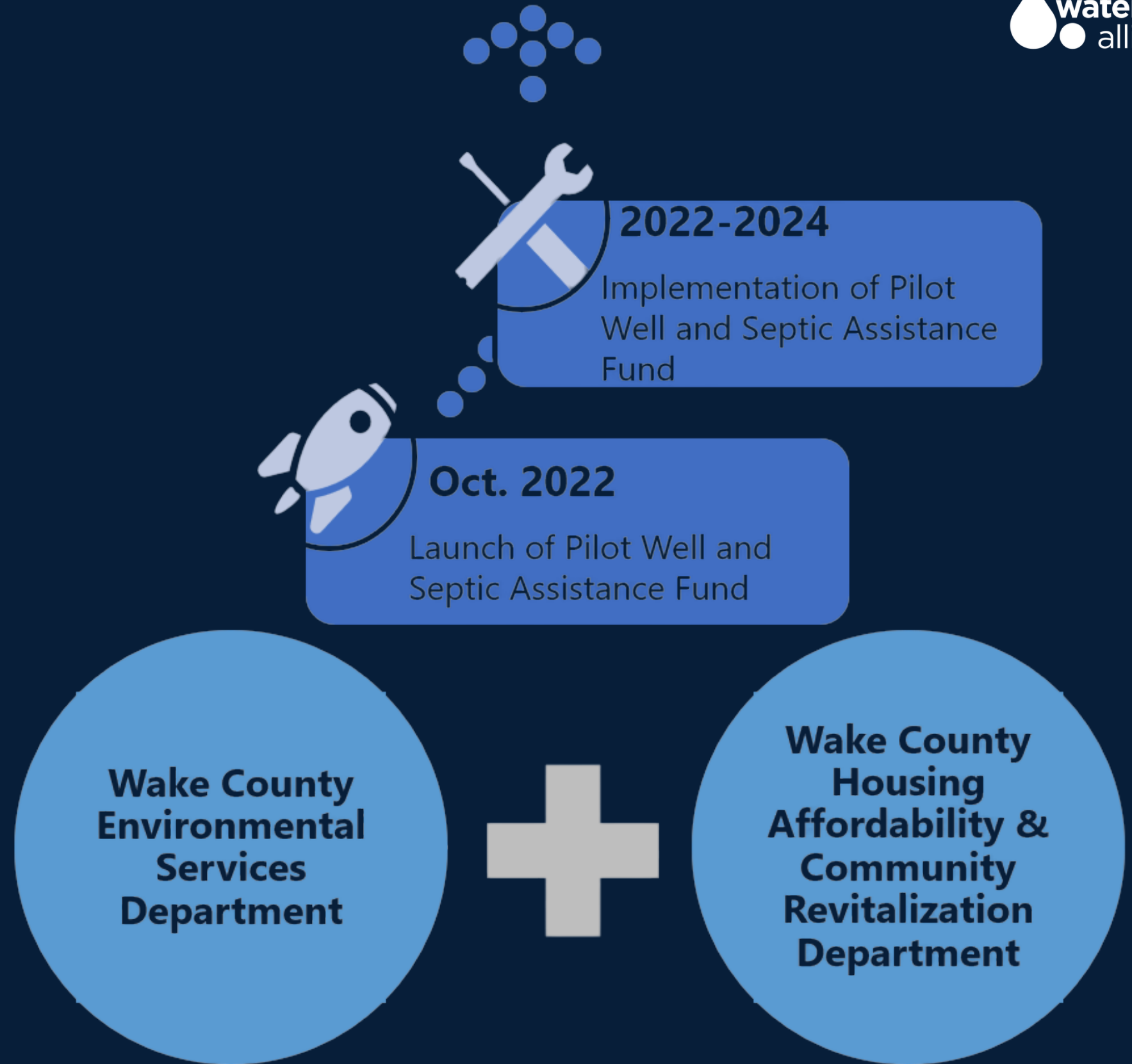
 Wake County, NC

IMPROVED OUTREACH STRATEGY TO HELP MORE HOMEOWNERS REPAIR THEIR WELL & SEPTIC SYSTEMS



OUR APPROACH

WaterNow partnered with Wake County to develop an inclusive outreach strategy promoting a two-year well and septic repair grant program for low-income and elderly community members. To identify common challenges, successful outreach practices, and collaboration opportunities, the project team interviewed the County's departments. The team also spoke with program participants for insights on their experiences on drivers, barriers and opportunities to expand participation. The team synthesized their findings to create an outreach and engagement toolkit describing specific methods to support customer uptake and participation in the program.



IMPACT

Through its research and discussions with the Wake County team and the program's participants, the project team created an outreach and engagement toolkit. This toolkit identifies specific steps the County can take to overcome the roadblocks and barriers customers experience while learning about, applying for, and receiving assistance through the Well and Septic Assistance Program, as well as resources to implement each step. For example, the toolkit suggests that Wake County could use GIS mapping to target areas with a high need for septic system repairs, and summarizing and referencing another initiative in Nags Head, North Carolina, aimed at encouraging proactive septic maintenance practices.



KEY DRIVERS

A comparison of economic indicators with reliance rates on private wells revealed that many Wake County residents in economically challenged areas depend on private drinking water wells and on-site wastewater systems. About 90,000 residents are served by some 40,000 private drinking water wells, and around 240,000 residents use about 90,000 on-site wastewater systems. Despite the health risks posed by well contamination and wastewater system failures, residents are often deterred from addressing these issues due to the high costs involved.

Participants' Suggestions



One year follow-up (check if additional support is needed, connect with other assistance programs)



Support for preventative maintenance (e.g., offering septic system pumping, continuing the free water testing program)

HOW IT WORKS

To develop the outreach strategy, the project team interviewed Wake County staff to understand program implementation, identify common challenges, successful practices, and collaboration opportunities. The team also researched outreach strategies for hard-to-reach customers and interviewed staff from similar programs and utilities to gather best practices. Additionally, the team spoke with pilot program participants for suggestions for improvement and to uncover motivations, obstacles, and preferences regarding outreach content and methods. These conversations were conducted in both English and Spanish, with interviewees receiving a \$25 gift card for their insights.

Ensuring the program is easy to find through a Google search or Facebook

Advertising at other social service programs, offices, & events

Targeted outreach in locations where septic or well issues may be widespread

Encouraging word of mouth

Advertise in local news outlets

HOW IT WORKS (CONTINUED)

To consolidate insights from various work phases, the Team mapped out a participant's experience and the "behind-the-scenes" work, including underlying actors, systems, touchpoints, and policies involved in creating and delivering that experience. The Team also identified challenges and opportunities for customer engagement throughout the process.



WAKE COUNTY IS COMMITTED TO SUPPORTING OUR LOW-INCOME AND ELDERLY COMMUNITY MEMBERS. . . . BY PARTNERING WITH WATERNOW ALLIANCE, WE CAN MAKE SURE THAT PEOPLE ARE AWARE THAT HELP IS AVAILABLE TO COVER THESE COSTLY REPAIRS.

- Tara Waters, Wake County Commissioner



THE PATH FORWARD



By mapping customer engagement opportunities to participants' experiences, Wake County can work toward prioritizing and implementing strategies in four key areas identified in the toolkit:

- (1) expansion of existing partnerships with community organizations;
- (2) targeting outreach to areas with high need and/or eligibility;
- (3) integrating well and septic information into broader messaging, like the County's homeownership and maintenance content; and
- (4) incorporating storytelling into informational content by, for instance, featuring testimonials from past participants in outreach materials.

THE PATH FORWARD (CONTINUED)

Wake County can also pick metrics to measure improved program participation. These metrics can serve as key indicators of community interest and assess whether the program should continue beyond the initial pilot phase. Wake County has already seen strong interest in the program, demonstrating its viability beyond this pilot phase.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- (1) In-person outreach, high-touch support—proactive engagement, personalized assistance, and frequent communication, and sustained, long-term relationships with community stakeholders—are especially powerful in building connections, fostering trust, and supporting program participation.
- (2) Listening directly to customers about their motivations, hesitations, and experiences helps identify participation barriers or incentives that may be less evident.
- (3) Endorsement from past program participants or other trusted community members is one of the strongest ways to address hesitation in program participation.

SOURCES

North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management, North Carolina Counties Bests Trends in the South and Nation (Mar. 18, 2025), <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/blog/2025/03/18/north-carolina-counties-bests-trends-south-and-nation>.

Wake County, Wake County Rehabilitation Grant Program (2022), <https://s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/wakegov.com.if-us-west-1/documents/2022-05/Rehabilitation%20Grant%20brochure.pdf>.

Wake County, Wake County Teams Up with WaterNow Alliance to Support Underserved Communities (Feb. 28, 2024), <https://www.wake.gov/news/wake-county-teams-waternow-alliance-support-underserved-communities>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

WELL & SEPTIC PILOT ASSISTANCE FUND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH MAP

Presentation explaining research findings and “behind-the-scenes” work associated with a program participant’s experience

WELL & SEPTIC PILOT ASSISTANCE FUND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH TOOLKIT

Summarizes outreach strategies other communities use for similar well and septic repair programs

WAKE COUNTY'S WELL & SEPTIC PILOT ASSISTANCE FUND WEB PAGE

RELATED PROJECTS



WELLINGTON, CO

Developing a communication toolkit for the diverse audience of the City's water program



SANTA ROSA, CA

Identifying access gaps and ways to improve Latinx and Spanish-speaking resident access to a municipal water conservation program



WALNUT VALLEY WATER DISTRICT, CA

Developing a communication toolkit on the City's water program to reach Mandarin-speaking and Asian American and Pacific Islander community members

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