

KANSAS

COMMERCE

OFFICE OF RURAL PROSPERITY

RURAL

CHAMPIONS

2023



KANSAS

OFFICE OF RURAL PROSPERITY



Trisha Purdon, Director

107 1/2 N Penn. Suite 2AB
Independence, KS 67301
785-289-3763
ruralkanprosper@ks.gov
KansasCommerce.gov/ORP

In October of 2022 the Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) kicked off a new program, Rural by Choice Champions. This program was developed in collaboration with Kansas Sampler Foundation (KSF) and the Patterson Family Foundation, with the goal of this program to address critical public needs in rural communities and build capacity to move them forward.

There were twelve projects selected for this pilot that worked throughout 2023 on developing and implementing their plan. The award included a grant of \$20,800 for wages to hire the Rural Champion, as well as a project implementation grant of \$25,000. Here you will find a brief explanation of each project that was funded by the grant.

The Rural Champion projects included:

Childcare

- Dodge City/Ford County Development Corp – Support efforts of childcare coalition to grow slots
- Grow Clay County – Work with community to determine options to increase childcare with USD
- Kingman County – Develop a childcare coalition to best grow childcare slots with USD
- Oberlin Unified School District 294 – Work through coalition to add a new center through the USD

Community Development

- Graham County – Establish community development program and supporting committees
- Wallace County – Establish community development program and business support programs

Entrepreneurship

- Junction City Main Street – Promote and grow the Main Street Market and entrepreneurship

Housing

- City of Harper and City of Anthony – Complete the HAT to identify housing needs and resources
- Linn County – Develop committee to complete the HAT to identify housing needs and resources

Placemaking & Recruitment

- Community Foundation for Independence – Development of trails and walking tours
- Lincoln County – Support ‘Make My Move’ campaign and community placemaking projects

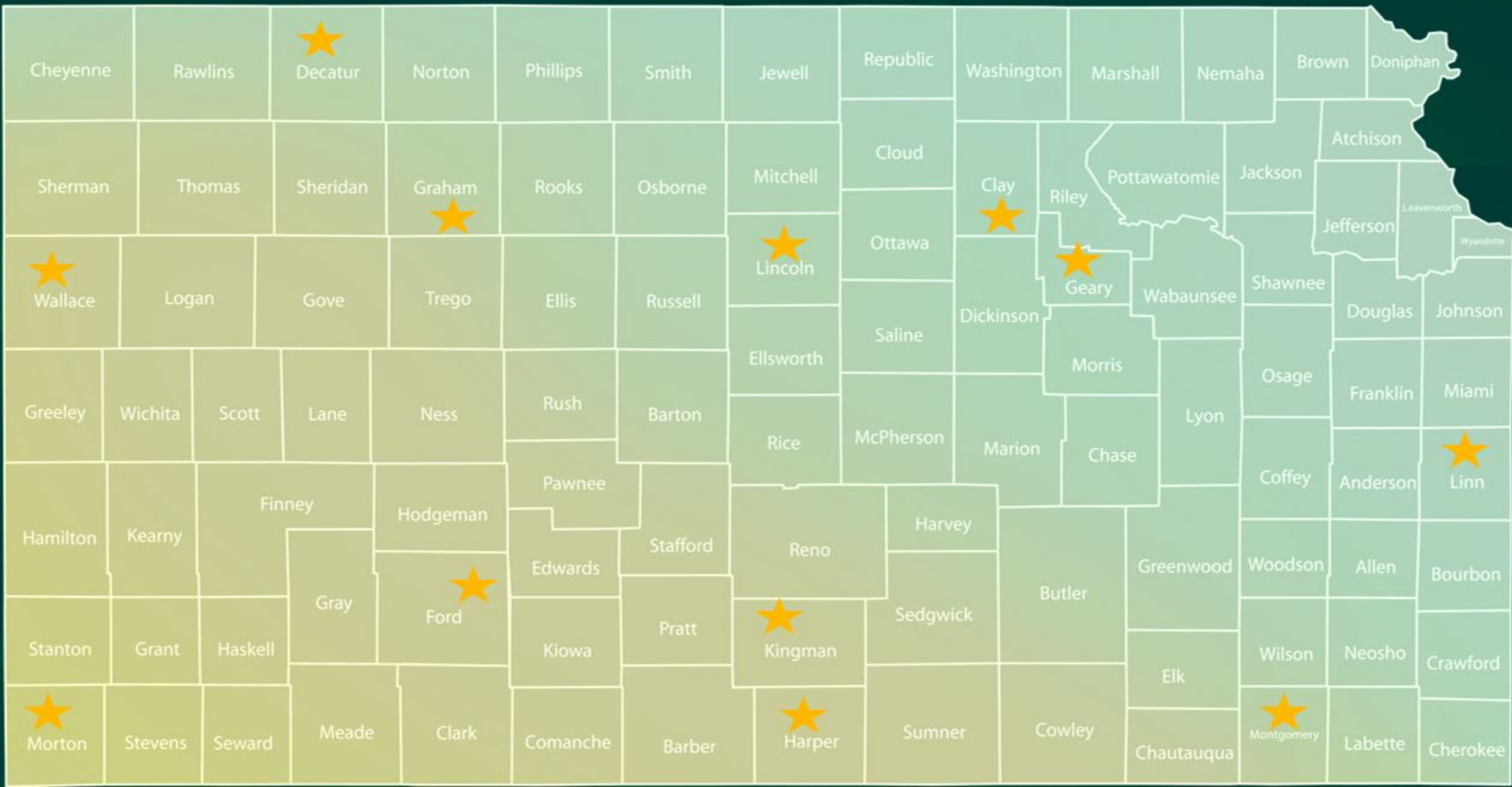
Wellness

- Morton County- Establish safe spaces for access to mental health resources and education

A great amount of learning was accomplished through these projects. We hope you find value in these projects to assist with progress in your communities. To read more about each of these projects and follow along with future rounds, more information can be found [here](#).

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#RuralByChoice Champions





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RURAL CHAMPIONS

RESOURCE PARTNERS

State or Federal resources that were valuable in learning about childcare resources included:

- Kansas Department of Commerce/Office of Rural Prosperity – Rural Champions
- Childcare Aware and the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust
- KDHE for guidance on regulations
- Small Business Development Center
- KU Center for Public Partnership and Research

Local Resources:

- City of Dodge City
- Ford County
- USD 443/Public Schools
- Dodge City Community College
- Community Foundation of Southwest Kansas
- Major employers - Cargill and National Beef



CHILDCARE

Dodge City – Ford County

BACKGROUND

The Dodge City/Ford County Development Corporation, a local non-profit that promotes the growth and development of existing businesses and pursues quality new business growth had recognized childcare as an important economic driver.

Similar to other rural communities, Ford County has an extreme childcare shortage. According to the environmental scan from All in for Kansas Kids, there are 2,064 children under six years of age are in need of childcare within Ford County. The lack of childcare stifles community growth. Businesses struggle to retain and attract new workforce to the community without affordable childcare. The two largest employers operate 24 hours a day in multiple shifts and there are currently no licensed childcare facilities that offer non-traditional hours.

A childcare committee was formed and consisted of local and regional organizations to try to identify opportunities to tackle the childcare shortage. Local businesses and regional partners were engaged to explore a variety of opportunities. Based on the research it was determined that to meet the large shortage, the committee would need to focus on creating two new facilities. Regular committee meetings were held until the start of COVID. Everyone recognized the need, however, no one sought to be the entity to take the lead.

For more information on this project, visit: kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

A childcare committee was reformed to research current needs, identify the opportunities and address the challenges not having quality childcare is compounding in the workforce, while limiting the growth and development of Ford County. An in-depth environmental scan for Ford County conducted by Childcare Aware and the KU Center for Public Partnership and Research provided resources to better understand the landscape of available early childhood care including the needs of families, childcare providers and businesses as well as current gaps and availability of care.

The vision was to increase the number of childcare capacity of new child centers/homes in Dodge City and/or increase capacity of existing childcare centers/homes in Dodge City.

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

- Involving as many stakeholders as possible to tackle this project.
- Partners included: Dodge City/Ford County Development Corporation, Childcare Coalition of Dodge City, Ford County, City of Dodge City, Dodge City Community College, USD 443/Dodge City Public Schools, Russell Child Development Center, Dodge City Area Chamber of Commerce, Childcare Aware of Kansas, Kansas Department of Health and Environment, Kansas Small Business Development Center and the Dodge City YMCA. The committee held meetings with large employers including Cargill and National Beef.
- Receiving input from current childcare providers and maintaining those relationships is necessary and important.

SOLUTIONS

Initial solutions to make progress:

- Because of the vast need, it is important to ensure that there is continuous work on increasing childcare at all levels. There needs to be options available to cater to different family lifestyles.
- Additionally, a solution to make progress was made to develop “How to Become Childcare Provider” Seminars to recruit individuals to become childcare providers. Free educational opportunities were available from experts from KDHE, Child Care Aware, SBDC, and the food program to explain their portion of the licensing process.
- Partnered with the school district, college, county and city to design a childcare facility to fit the needs of the community.

Transitions/Evolutions/Changes/Shifts to the solutions:

- With recruitment of new childcare home providers – it was determined that those who wanted to become an in-home provider faced financial strain because providers needed an egress window or playground equipment and/or start-up funds.
- A language barrier in the Hispanic community was a big hurdle as they didn’t think they had the support to move forward.
- The operational budget was created for a new large facility to accommodate the community’s needs, it was determined to be unfeasible without support from outside sources such as major employers through an annual subsidy.

Implementation grant funds will be used for additional Champion wages to continue support for the project, equipment for permanent use of childcare coalition, renderings & mechanical drawings for future center, and expenses for trainings, seminars and planning sessions.



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RURAL CHAMPIONS



RESOURCE PARTNERS

State or Federal resources that were valuable in learning about childcare resources included:

- Kansas Department of Commerce/Office of Rural Prosperity – Rural Champions
- KDHE for guidance on regulations.
- Childcare Aware and the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust
- Kansas Department of Commerce Community Service Tax Credits

Local Resources:

- Donated \$5,000 towards the project:
 - Patterson Family Foundation
 - Community Foundation
- Paid for plans for new facilities (\$6,200)
 - Grow Clay County
- Grow Clay County helped with grant writing, outreach, surveys, and convening partners and stakeholders
- The city was willing to sponsor the CBDG grant if we needed extra funding
- Many local community members purchase tax credits to help support the project



CHILDCARE

Clay County

BACKGROUND

In June 2021, Clay County Childcare announced their closure due to staffing issues. An additional childcare facility closed later in the year. Lastly, a church associated childcare closed. In all, approximately 50 slots were lost during this short period of time. Three new in-home providers opened giving some relief to the shortage, but many providers did not operate at full capacity. The childcare shortage has been an ongoing issue for several communities throughout Kansas. This issue became prevalent after the COVID-19 pandemic as facilities were forced closed.

Community members had an opportunity to give input at a public forum. The school district’s Citizen Review Committee and a Community Strategic Planning session met several times to identify district and community needs. The lack of adequate childcare was recognized as a top concern in every meeting. Surveys were sent to local providers, parents and businesses to assess needs and challenges which identified the need for more childcare slots especially for infants and the availability of drop-in care. County data from Child Care Aware supported the need for additional childcare slots.

For more information on this project, visit: kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

Starting off with community conversations is the ideal first step to identify and define the problems at hand. It's beneficial to conduct a public forum or listening session with the community to allow for their voices be heard.

The school district's Citizen Review Committee and a Community Strategic Planning session met several times to identify district and community needs. The lack of adequate childcare was recognized as a top concern in every meeting.

Surveys were sent to local providers, parents and businesses to assess needs and challenges which identified the need for more childcare slots especially for infants and the availability of drop-in care. Additionally, the Clay County data sought from Childcare Aware supports the need for additional childcare slots.

Building the committee, workgroup and relationships:

- The Clay County Childcare Taskforce included community stakeholders from USD379, Clay County Medical Center, Clay County officials, Lakeside Learning Tree, and local, private in-home daycare providers.
- As the project progressed USD 379 has taken a lead role in implementing the project to fruition.

SOLUTIONS

Initial solutions to make progress:

- Build a new facility located on the elementary school campus and work to establish a provider substitute pool.
- Establish a provider substitute pool.

Transitions/Evolutions/Changes/Shifts to the solutions:

- When funding for new construction was not secured, other options were considered, and the USD 379 superintendent offered the idea of housing the program in an existing facility within the district. The Middle School became a workable option and funding was available from grants already secured to complete the retrofit and get the program up and running. The school board has been supportive and are in the process of giving their final approval.
- We also identified that most of our in-home providers were not in favor of the substitute pool idea, so we did not pursue that further. However, in our parent survey we identified the need for drop-in availability and the school district has agreed to explore that concept once they get up and running.
- As a result of educating the public about the shortage of providers that take DCF payment two existing providers became eligible to accept those payments.
- Challenging people to think outside the box and think big was an important task in moving the project along. Educating people regarding the need for and importance of quality childcare for the benefit of our families and the growth of our communities was a piece of the initial challenge.

USD 379 will house an area at the middle school that will provide an additional 12-14 childcare slots.

Implementation grants funds will be used for construction/remodel, furnishings, toys/supplies, and design fees for the retrofit.

CHILDCARE

Johnna Fairchild,
Kingman County

RESOURCE PARTNERS

State or Federal resources that were valuable in learning about childcare resources included:

- Kansas Department of Commerce/Office of Rural Prosperity – Rural Champions and SEED Program
- Childcare Aware and the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust
- SEED Grant

Local Resources:

- Kingman County and City of Kingman supplied matching funds for Rural Champion
- City of Kingman committed another \$8,000.00 to USD 331 childcare center project

BACKGROUND

Kingman County Economic Development Advisory Committee (KCEDAC) established childcare as its top priority after housing at their meeting in February 2022. At the time, Childcare Aware of Kansas’ real time data for Kingman County indicates only 32% of childcare needs were being met, leaving parents and guardians of 195 children without childcare.

Feedback was not limited to the lack of childcare alone; the need for childcare outside of traditional business hours and the desire to use childcare as an employee benefit were also mentioned as priorities.

Providers indicated that the startup costs, lack of benefits and low wages were barriers to entering childcare as career option. A lack of substitute providers, utility expenses and insurance costs are an ongoing concern. In addition to the concerns of employers, parents/guardians, and providers, the shortage of adequate childcare has had economic implications to the community. The Bi-Partisan Policy Center estimates the childcare gap has cost an estimated \$4.8 million dollars to Kingman County.



For more information on this project, visit:
kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

Meetings with local governments, childcare providers, school districts, employers and parents/guardians in Kingman County sparked the need for creating a coalition with a dedicated Champion to conduct research, analyze data, meet with stakeholders, write grants, secure funding and manage the childcare project.

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

- The Kingman County Childcare Coalition was started in June of 2022. Community members including parents, teachers, providers and employers were part of the coalition. It was set up through Kingman County Economic Development.
 - The coalition hosted several events over the summer of 2022 to raise awareness about the importance of childcare in Kingman County.
- The coalition is made up of teachers, employers, providers and parents.
- The biggest partner has been with USD 331 Kingman-Norwich.
 - School districts are vital to the successful implementation of additional childcare spots to a community. In rural Kansas, school districts are sometimes the largest employers and have extra space for new centers.
- With funding from the Kansas Office of Rural Prosperity, Kingman County Economic Development hired a Childcare Rural Champion in October of 2022.
 - Kingman County, the City of Kingman, and USD 331 supplied matching funding and office space to support the Rural Champion. Since then, the Rural Champion has led the Childcare Coalition which meets regularly to plan for future childcare resources.

SOLUTIONS

Initial solutions to make progress:

- Provide awareness of the local childcare issues and the data to back that up were the initial priorities. Attendance at community events and shared information on social media to spread awareness.
- Recruit residents to fill out Childcare surveys to collect data.

Transitions/Evolutions/Changes/Shifts to the solutions:

- The school district had been contemplating a center for a long time and with the data supplied, it painted a clear path forward. Because of the heavy representation of providers on our coalition we also had strong information on what types of assistance needed and resources available. Funding has been secured for providers to ease the burdens of providing childcare. To date, no funding has been secured to create a substitute provider program that is a great need in this County and region.
- Provide additional resources and assurances to current providers regarding the impact of the USD 331 center on their business. By supporting current providers, it has shown commitment to the overall childcare system and how they are all needed and play a significant role in the future of childcare in Kingman County.

Implementation grant funds will be used to create a mini-grant fund to help with matches for the Kingman County Improvement Program (KCIP). Funds would be utilized to help our current and/or new in-home providers purchase supplies or equipment.



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RURAL CHAMPIONS

RESOURCE PARTNERS

Rural Champion Project Implementation Grant:

Funds will be used for the acquisition of the property for the childcare facility to increase the number of available slots for quality childcare.

State or Federal resources that were valuable in learning about childcare resources included:

- Kansas Department of Commerce/Office of Rural Prosperity – Rural Champions
- KDHE for guidance on regulations
- Childcare Aware and the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust

Local Resources:

- GROW Decatur County: Seed money
- City of Oberlin & Oberlin Rotary Club
- Dane G Hansen Foundation and Patterson Family Foundation



CHILDCARE

*Rebecca Nedland,
Decatur County - Oberlin USD 294*

BACKGROUND

USD 294 strives to guide their students on their educational journey from Pre-K through high school. With USD 294 sponsoring this childcare project, the children start that journey earlier. The school district Childcare project curriculum can be aligned with the Pre-K program to help young children prepare for success from the moment they are born to the day they enter school. This project would increase the number of childcare slots available in our county.

A coalition was formed after a strategic community presentation in 2022 to assist in addressing the childcare needs in Decatur County. Using data from Child Care Aware of Kansas and a community survey, there were potentially 119 children in need of childcare in the county and only 43 available slots with two of the five current providers near retirement age. This will only compound the serious problem for young, growing families with limited opportunities for quality childcare options.

*For more information on this project, visit:
kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions*

STEPS TO SUCCESS

Having continued Strategic Doing sessions would keep local leaders engaged to strategize what the next steps should be to address the growing problem. After evaluating the options in the community, it was determined that partnering with USD 294 aligns with the overall mission in the district, "Our mission. Their journey! Where kids come first!"

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

- Our community coalition started with a Strategic Doings session hosted by GROW Decatur County, a local foundation. Members included a local bank manager, a retired early childhood educator, a retired childcare provider, school superintendent, city administrator, and mother with daycare experience. Other stakeholders joined the group and included: county commissioner, hospital administrator, church leaders, local childcare providers, and local business owners.
- Oberlin USD 294, Decatur County will be the lead partner and key resource for this childcare project.
- Two local churches for meeting and office space and equipment.
- Decatur Health System provides free first aid and CPR training for childcare staff, a defibrillator machine and training on how to use it.
- Local thrift store has been collecting donations for supplies that can be used in the facility.

SOLUTIONS

Our group decided it would be best to open a community daycare facility to increase the number of childcare slots in our community. It was also identified that increasing the number of home providers can help address the situation, as there is such a great need. It was determined that there would also be support for current and new providers.

- Find or build a facility for a community daycare center.
- With unfortunate development of one idea comes another option to attempt with reuse of an existing facility

Transitions/Evolutions/Changes/Shifts to the solutions:

Available properties suitable for childcare were not available. Considered new construction but the availability of contractors and receiving bids was challenging and nearly impossible.

- A suitable location became available and it currently under contract for purchase for a childcare facility.

Implementation grant funds will be used to build community awareness, \$1,000 of implementation grant funds were used to sponsor and host one of the kids rides at the fair for the week for all five nights that rides are open. Remaining implementation grant funds will be used to support expenses in renovation of the home into the childcare facility.

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RURAL CHAMPIONS

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dan Steffen, Graham County

RESOURCE PARTNERS

Initial funding sources for the GCCD:

- County Commission
- Office of Rural Prosperity Rural Champion grant
- Community Solutions Grant for the "13 Ways to Kill Your Community Book Club" project

Additional grants included:

- Dand G. Hansen Foundation
- Rural Mural Grant, with \$8,000 in local match funds being raised
- NEXTECH grant for writing Workshop
- DGH and Northwest Leads Program for the Leadership Graham County program

Non-financial resources

- Area Chamber of Commerce
- KSBDC
- Pioneer Country Development
- Northwest Kansas Planning and Development Commission
- N.W. Ks. Economic Innovation Center
- USDA Rural Development
- SBA
- SCORE
- Travel & Tourism Division of Commerce
- Kansas Dept. of Agriculture
- Graham County Community Foundation



BACKGROUND

Approximately 12 years ago the former ED program was narrowly focused on wind farm development and not much else. This caused there to be a loss of public and private sector support and funding. The lack of knowledge about available resources had led to stagnation of the community. And a key issue was that Graham County was missing out on a variety of opportunities, programs, information and lacked communication links to the various governmental entities, as well as citizens & businesses in the county.

County officials knew that to have success, there needed to be a re-established community development office. With entrepreneurship at the center for the program development, the work of the champion quickly expanded to establishing eight project committees. Communities come together throughout the county have bought-in and committed to continued long-term program support. This project is essential as the county is in dire need of a "Point of Contact" for community development efforts. The re-establishment will focus on "Entrepreneurship" development for the County, with emphasis on Business Retention/Expansion and creating an entrepreneurial environment for existing business expansion and new startups.

For more information on this project, visit:
kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

The primary goal for this project was the establishment of a countywide development program.

- Success is evident in the commitment of funding from the cities, community foundations and the county for 2024, in order to continue to efforts being made.
- The Rural Champion served as the GCCD Coordinator and found great support for the current program and efforts being made. Now, all communities in the county are involved and impacted through a monthly newsletter, calendar of events bulletin, Facebook page, email blasts, as well as quarterly meetings with each community.
- Involvement of business owners, citizens and public officials was key to progress being made.
- The support for the GCCD and the various projects has been overwhelming, as evidenced by the number of individuals becoming involved in Committees and projects.
- Support of Dane G. Hansen Foundation, the "13 Ways to Kill Your Community Book Club" brought out the interest in the betterment of the Graham County by all the citizens
- Committees were formed to address issues/ideas arising from the Book Club discussions

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

- Involvement consisted of all incorporated and unincorporated cities, the county commission, the county's community foundations, financial institutions, the area chamber of commerce, all civic organizations, as well as healthcare & education (USD #281) and seniors/youth are involved and need to be.
- Looking forward, the new GCCD incorporates broad representation on an Advisory Council. While the GCCD is a County Department and reports to the County Commission, the Advisory Committee meets monthly to provide input, ideas, suggestions, and receive a report on activities of the GCCD.

Gaps/Barriers Identified: Capacity Barriers

- Overcoming lack of assistance from previous ED
- Convincing individuals that community development is something worthy of a salary or a paid position in a rural, conservative space with a low tax base

SOLUTIONS

The first thing the GCCD Coordinator did was establish an office with an "open door" policy, welcoming anyone with questions, ideas etc. The coordinator visited every business in Graham County in person, as well as each Community to introduce the GCCD, himself and to deliver a copy of the book - "13 Ways to Kill Your Community," and inviting each to attend the book club meetings. GCCD also developed an email group list through the contact for communications from the GCCD office.

Challenges have been overcome via communication efforts, through a monthly newsletter - "Grow Graham County" and the Facebook page - "Grow Graham County Kansas," and regular email and phone contact. A GCCD webpage is being developed and the Hill City Area Chamber of Commerce is a great collaboration partner with the GCCD.

The "13 Ways to Kill Your Community" book chapters are referred to on a regular basis and impacts each committee's efforts. From the "13 Ways to Kill Your Community Book Club," eight committees were formed:

- Business Development
- Workforce Development
- Leadership Development
- Youth Development
- Travel & Tourism Development
- Agriculture Development
- Housing Development
- Health & Wellness

The only change for this project is that it has been confirmed that the GCCD is and will continue to be in existence. The project is supported by the county and cities within Graham, both financially and through volunteers supporting efforts, programs and projects.

The implementation grant will be used to support various aspects of the new GCCD goals:

- Gap funding for GCCD through Jan. 2024
- Funding needed to Leadership Graham County program up and running for the first year
- Brochures to market Graham Co. attractions via the NWKTC
- Advertising in the Ultimate Guide to Northwest Kansas distributed by the NWKTC
- Working capital for the Travel & Tourism Committee
- Matching funds as needed for other grant opportunities
- Website development and annual fee for a Graham County Travel & Tourism website
- The Travel & Tourism Committee work in the county to pass a county-wide TGT



OFFICE OF RURAL PROSPERITY

RURAL CHAMPIONS

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Lissa Sexson, Wallace County

Seeing how community development programs have worked in neighboring counties, the Wallace County Foundation invested in seeing what a new program could look like for their communities. This included researching other programs and working throughout the county to identify priorities, as well as solutions and how it could be carried out long-term.

RESOURCE PARTNERS

State Resources:

- KS Dept of Agriculture’s Ag Growth Initiative
- ORP’s Rural Murals Grant
- KS Dept of Commerce’s Housing Assessment Tool

Funding Resources:

- Office of Rural Prosperity
- Wallace County
- Wallace County Visitors Bureau
- Wallace County Community Foundation
- Dane G. Hansen Foundation
- KS Dept of Aging & Disability
- Farm Credit of Western Kansas
- Eastern Colorado Bank
- Midwest Energy
- Helena Chemical
- Weskan Community Improvement Association
- Child Care Aware of Kansas
- Patterson Family Foundation
- Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center

Non-financial resources including donated meeting spaces:

- Sharon Springs Event Center
- Sharon Spring Community Activity Building
- Sharon Spring Public Library conference room

BACKGROUND

The goal for Wallace County’s Rural Champions Grant is to establish and explore community development and the opportunities that can come from that office. For multiple years there has been organized conversation about creating a form of community development, to not only improve our space, but to also start diversifying and growing our economic base.

The goal for Wallace County’s Rural Champions project was to establish and explore community development and the opportunities that could come from that office. The Rural Champion will be the point person to work to create a community development office that would continue to exist beyond the twelve months of this project. The Rural Champion will evaluate topics what structure community development should take in Wallace County and avenues for long-term funding, but also pressing issues such as expanding our agricultural economy, entrepreneurship, increasing available housing and a financially distressed senior care center.

Community Development is needed in Wallace County because of:

- A disconnect of resources and knowledge available to rural places like Wallace
- A lack of a point person as a state and regional contact
- To create a sense of hope and optimism about the state of Wallace and rural Kansas



For more information on this project, visit: kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

The overarching goal and ultimate success of Wallace County's project will be the creation of a community development position and secured sustaining funding for the position beyond the Rural Champions Grant.

At the start of this RC year, there was a Zoom call with Jenny Russell from Republic County for an 'Eco Devo Bootcamp'. Some of the first things that were suggested were things like establishing a neighborhood revitalization plan, enacting vacant property ordinances, starting a land bank and creating revolving loan funds for businesses. These ideas were brought to the county commissioners and city councils. These were big ideas they weren't yet ready for.

After a little time, the idea of incentivizing people to demolish dilapidated properties and sell vacant homes was the appropriate approach to this project rather than punishing property owners for having the properties. Local/regional funds were found to establish a four-part housing program. This is generating some of the needed results, but manifests in a more positive, well-received way than ordinances or tax-abatements in a conservative area with strong property-right views.

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

A conscious effort was made to try to provide programing and opportunities across the county. The mural project placed three murals in each of the three small communities in Wallace County. The music series provided funding and organization for three live concerts in each of the three communities as well.

SOLUTIONS

Examples of research and surveying:

- Completed the Housing Assessment Tool (HAT), community housing survey,
- Hosted a community book club with community discussions- "13 Ways to Kill Your Community"
- Hosted Kansas Department of Agriculture Growth Initiative programming,
- Established housing and a workforce recruitment committees

There was an opportunity to organize funding for a storefront and signage incentive program for local businesses. Funding from the county equaled to \$5,000 and an additional \$10,000 from the Wallace County Foundation. These funds did have a 1:1 matching requirement for the business owners.

Completed the cross-county mural project was a well-received accomplishment. This project culminated in a driving tour to 'unveil' the three finished murals. This project had good timing as an early successes for the Community Development push.

Russell Plaschka was hosted in Wallace with the Kansas Department of Agriculture with a presentation titled "Kansas Ag Growth" early in the project to provide a facilitated community conversation to establish broader goals for community development.

To support communication, branding for the Community Development initiative was created, established a Facebook presence with insightful information and started the first email "newsletter" for Wallace County Community Development.

The implementation grant will be used for various aspects supporting the community development efforts:

- Gap funding for the community development department through January
- Supporting the mini grants developed for storefront & signage incentives available to businesses
- Printing and postage for Every Door Direct Mailer to be sent out to all Wallace County mailboxes to communicate the current incentives available through WCCD
- Registration to upcoming events and membership feeds to regional and state organizations for educational and networking opportunities for WCCD contract position
- Supplies to make basic improvements to community parks-course signage and marketing for the disc golf course



BACKGROUND

Junction City Main Street, located in a heavily rural area, identified an estimated 160–200 home-based businesses operated by the spouses of active-duty soldiers. Previously, there was a Farmer’s Market in an ideal downtown location; however, they had no manager, no marketing and low attendance by the vendors and customers.

Since acceptance into the Kansas Main Street program in March 2022, a revived farmers’ market has been on the radar for Junction City Main Street. Equipped with resources from the Rural Champions program, a new market manager will be able to fully dedicate their time to the Main Street Market project and create a destination in their historic downtown with both a Farmers Market and a Makers Market. The primary goal of establishing the Main Street Market is to create an environment for local entrepreneurs to thrive within our community and to help them grow into a brick-and-mortar business in Junction City.



MARKET & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Autumn McGuffey,
Junction City

RESOURCE PARTNERS

State or Federal resources that were valuable in learning about childcare resources included:

- Kansas Department of Commerce/Office of Rural Prosperity – Rural Champions
- Kansas Department of Commerce/ Main Street Program

Other Financial support from the Marion Heartlands Challenge Kauffman Grant

Non-financial resource partners:

- City of Junction City
- Livewell Geary County Community Farmer’s Market
- Emporia Main Street
- Leavenworth Main Street
- Flint Hills Regional Council
- Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
- Main Street America
- K-State Research and Extension
- Geary County K-State Research and Extension 4-H Director
- Geary Community Healthcare Foundation
- Fort Riley Spouses Club leaders, Soldiers and Volunteers

For more information on this project, visit :
kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

Getting started:

The need to grow the Geary County local food economy were key themes heard throughout the community engagement process. Key objectives were developed through New Venture Advisors LLS. They included supporting local food and farm businesses to increase supply of healthy, locally produced foods, building demand for their products to sell at the markets which will result in successful small businesses and expanded workforce development to foster food system entrepreneurship and a robust employment pipeline.

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

- Identified community stakeholders to lead the process which included Junction City Main Street board members, City officials, community organizations and volunteers with substantial community involvement from the local military community.
- Groups have collaborated from around our area, such as local businesses, farmers, youth groups, several non-profit organizations, schools, and city-wide events such as Freedom Fest and Oktoberfest worked together to support and help promote the Market.
- Positive community relationships with Junction City Parks and Rec for tables and chairs, City Manager and Codes Dept for special event permits and Police Dept for traffic coordination.

SOLUTIONS

Initial solutions to make progress:

- An assessment by a prominent entrepreneurship research professional was conducted identified the need for seed and gap funding; incubators, co-work or maker spaces; mentoring/education to include online marketing, general business management, customer service training
- Assigning specific roles and responsibilities to community leaders with a communication plan that allows for everyone involved to be aware of market needs. Documented plans and resources shared in a Google drive and central location with access to all.

Junction City Main Street has initiated and designed a sequential process to help transition interested entrepreneurs from home-based businesses to the Maker's Market which will serve as an incubator, into maker spaces/workspaces/co-ops/pop-ups, and eventually brick and mortar. Additionally, and in conjunction with the market, Junction City Main Street has launched Junction City Entrepreneur 101 (JCE 101), a class that is held twice a week for six weeks that is designed to teach entrepreneurs the basics of starting their own business and turn their ideas into actions.

Transitions/Evolutions/Changes/Shifts to the solutions:

- Creating weekly themes, advertising through social media, blog posts geared specifically towards each week, and micro-events incorporated into a weekly theme all helped to generate a greater amount of foot traffic.
- Committing time to apply for SNAP meant a larger turn out of patrons who could utilize their SNAP benefits throughout the season at the Market.
- Funding was identified to sustain a Market Manager exclusive of grant funding in the future.

Implementation Grant Funds were used for marketing for the Main Street Market with print and banners, online marketing efforts, and permanent digital signs to direct bypassing traffic to the Market. A portion of the funds will be used to support the market manager through the 2024 session.

HOUSING

Cheryl Adelhardt,
Cities of Harper & Anthony

LOCAL RESOURCE PARTNERS

- Cities provided assistance with their time and specifically with the Rural Champion Grant.
- The local internet business would provide refreshments for meetings
- Local businesses allowed staff to show support by participating in the committee meetings.
- Meeting spaces were provided by local agencies
- Harper County Community Foundation participated and has indicated support including a possible "Match Day"
- Harper County Appraiser's Office offered services using queries to provide statistical information.
- Other local county economic/community directors and other county staff were always helpful



BACKGROUND

In a two-year span, cities of Harper and Anthony joined other local forces to engage on multiple projects together in order to sustain rural Kansas economy in their county. Many economic efforts were made but frequently met with massive roadblocks. The lack of available housing was quickly realized and required work from multi-jurisdictional to solve the issue.

There were several needs that required attention but were proven to be difficult due lack of staff time. There were four major difficulties:

- Identifying the volume of need in each category
- Researching the many options and programs that are available to help address them: RHID, MIH, Landbanks, CDBG and so many more
- Matching the appropriate resource to its corresponding need category
- Developing a calculated and well thought out strategic approach to resolving the housing crisis

For more information on this project, visit:
kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

The Harper County Growth Initiative was to identify problems and then prioritize areas of strength and weakness to direct planning for housing inventory remedies. In short term, success will be difficult to quantify. It is suggested that working with identified local partners and businesses, the success can be measured better in the quality of affordable housing to the current housing inventory.

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

- The community housing committee consisted of 27 members. All schools, hospitals, local businesses and demographic stakeholders participated. The success of the HAT is a result of the diversity and passion of the housing committee.
- It was a collaborative effort amongst the cities to address common issues and unique city attributes. The joint committee worked with the idea that any improvement in one city would benefit the other cities, too. The committee then broke into individual groups and using their specific information, identified their unique strengths and weaknesses and prioritized their findings to bring back to the joint housing committee for sharing and planning.

Gaps/Barriers Identified: Capacity Barriers

- Most counties in southcentral Kansas lacked representation from realtors, builders and contractor fields.
- Social media was invaluable in notifying public of program progress and conducting public surveys. Gaining support and involvement from local newspapers was found to be difficult as well.

SOLUTIONS

Initial solutions to make progress:

- The individual city findings were similar, with a unique idea that a community housing specialist would be advantageous to all the residents, landlords, financial institutions, government entities and employers.
- Education was identified as an important need for both and financial institutions. The state has training videos and webinars, but this information must get to the appropriate group.
- Communities would like to establish incentive programs, land banks and strengthen partnerships with businesses and the Harper County Community Foundation.
- Funds for incentives will be a priority need and with budgets for municipalities being set once a year, rural areas must be creative moving forward.

Transitions/Evolutions/Changes/Shifts to the solutions:

- From the beginning, the project was very motivated to identify problems before solutions. Statistics and public/business owners were instrumental to keep the solutions from being out there before the findings.
- Much of the initial time was spent figuring out where to start and how to learn/research the availability and uses of all the resources and program.
- The findings of the committee depended on having all the options to prioritize after the needs identified by the statistics, public engagement surveys, town halls and the business surveys.

Rural Champion Project Implementation Grant will be used to fund housing incentive grant programs for residential property owners (Demo, Paint, Exterior Rehab, Vacancies) in both Harper and Anthony. Mini grants were identified as a way to offer accelerated progress for improvements and positive impact in the communities while larger developments are pursued. Each city will determine match and guidelines to best fit their communities.

HOUSING

Darcy Wilson, Linn County

LOCAL RESOURCE PARTNERS

- Funding to support this project came from ARPA funds that were allocated as match for MIH grant, and county budgeted funds directly to the project.
- Non-financial resources by the county were utilized to provide employee time dedicated to the project, as well vehicle use and office space.

BACKGROUND

Linn County recently adopted a comprehensive plan, providing a timely opportunity to work on a significant need in their county. Darcy Wilson was the Rural Champion to guide this project.

Linn County, like many small communities across the state, has suffered a lack of quality, affordable housing in recent years. Housing stock throughout the county is aging. The cities have made concerted efforts recently to condemn and remove blighted homes, but there have been very few homes built to replace the torn-down ones. Lack of available homes causes employees having to commute over 60 miles one way to work and creates challenges for employers to recruit to fill open positions.

We knew we needed housing so with the Champions program starting in October and the MIH being released we felt that was the solution. We applied and were not awarded. The county had not addressed the housing issue in years. It was talked about but there had not been an incentive plan in place for over 15 years and a Housing Assessment had not been done to anyone's knowledge.



For more information on this project, visit:
kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

A new Comprehensive Plan was adopted by the Board of County Commissioners on August 29, 2022. While several goals were identified in the plan, the one that consistently rises to the top is improving housing throughout the county. There are seven small cities located in Linn County that have suffered from low quality and affordable housing.

Getting started:

- The vision is to physically see community pride restored through multiple housing efforts including revitalization, demolition, renovation of dilapidated homes, provide new lots to build housing and emphasize community pride in all neighborhoods.

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

- The Housing Committee consists of elected officials, banker, realtor, school district, homeowners, property manager, large business representative, small business representative, and a healthcare worker.
- Local, regional and state relationships were developed with ORP, KDOC, KHRC, SEKRPC.
- Citizens of Linn County participated in a housing survey

SOLUTIONS

Initial solutions to make progress:

- Initial steps included learning and education. Meetings with the cities introduced various resources to be used such as Housing Assessment Tool (HAT), Neighborhood Revitalization (NRP), a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) or Moderate-Income Housing (MIH).
- A housing committee was created with immediate goals of to get an NRP in place for residential and commercial properties; complete the HAT to identify primary goals, participate in the HIAC with key state and federal representatives.

Transitions to the solutions:

- Most challenges were identified along the way. It's important to address issues as they arise and stay flexible in order to handle and balance anything that may come up.
- Completing steps early or getting out of order can make it difficult to follow. It's important to stay organized because there will be a lot of information to gather.
- It's important to stay engaged with the community by following through with each plan. Make sure others see the change throughout the county, so more people will take part next year when a larger budget is granted.

Rural Champion Project Implementation Grant is being used to fund Housing Incentive Programs that have been developed as part of the Rural Champion project.

- The Linn County Economic Development Empty Nester Incentive Program is intended to assist homeowners in the county that wish to move to a more manageable sized rental or home within the county. The goal of this incentive is to increase available housing stock while maximizing the efficiency of the current homes in Linn County.
- The goal of the Linn County Economic Development Paint Linn County Incentive is to upgrade curb appeal of residential properties in Linn County.
- The Linn County Economic Development Vacant Home Sale Incentive Program is intended to encourage the listing and sale of long-term vacant houses in the county, thereby increasing available housing stock.

OFFICE OF RURAL PROSPERITY

RURAL CHAMPIONS

TRAILS & RECREATION

Brittney Holum, Independence

RESOURCES PARTNERS

State Resources:

- Kansas Department of Commerce/Office of Rural Prosperity – Rural Champions

Regional / Local Resources:

- Sunflower Foundation
- Patterson Family Foundation

Additional non-financial resources included:

- City of Independence and Main Street
- Montgomery County
- Labette Health
- Numerous private businesses
- Volunteer time

Key partners to connect with for trails:

- [Kansas Sampler Foundation](#)
- [Sunflower Foundation](#)
- [Kansas Trails Council](#)
 - [Trail Building 101](#)
- [K-State's Trail Talk Tuesday](#)



BACKGROUND

Like many rural Kansas communities, Independence, Kansas is focused on maintaining its population and recruiting businesses and their families to the area. While the town of 8,500 currently boasts a beautiful park and zoo, there is a strong need for additional outdoor recreation venues promoting healthy experiences and overall lifestyle.

Montgomery County/Independence is one of the least healthy counties in Kansas. When the primary local gym closed in 2021, many community members were left without a recreation outlet. Community members utilize the park and zoo, along with many streets for exercise. We set out to enhance areas that are being used and to create new places and experiences for community members.

This program compliments the current project by the City of Independence for a new Central Park Sports Complex (2024) and a trail for hiking and biking that opened in May 2023. While a trail system and overall wellness initiative has been a desire of many community members, it's not had a Champion dedicated to ensuring growth and implementation.

For more information on this project, visit : kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

The vision is to create a healthier and happier community through organized activities and outdoor spaces, primarily trails and to create connections to people and organizations within the community. Success will be measured by the number of trails and programs implemented in our community.

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

This initiative compliments the current project by the City of Independence for a new Central Park Sports Complex (2024) and a trail for hiking and biking that opened in May 2023. While a trail system and overall wellness initiative has been a desire of many community members, it's not had a Champion dedicated to ensuring growth and implementation.

- The Champion started with outreach efforts and connecting community members to this project through numerous speaking engagements and social media posts, connecting and partnering with the City of Independence and Main Street, and including organizations such as Rotary, Lions, Montgomery County, Labette Health and numerous private businesses.
- Engaging community members who have participated in the development in this project in the beginning with the three community members who initiated the grant application.
- At the inception of the Rural Connection project, the Champion conducted meetings throughout the community with stakeholders in various capacities to help steer the initiatives of the program. The outcomes of these meetings led to numerous additional meetings and introductions to new stakeholders and created the overall framework for the project.

SOLUTIONS

Initial solutions to make progress:

- The initial meetings led to the introduction of additional stakeholders and to the prioritization of action items. The most important factor in this project was the introduction to the resource partners throughout the state who are heavily involved with trails.
- Attending "Do-A-Logue" events - trail building workshops sponsored by the Kansas Sampler Foundation, Sunflower Foundation and the Kansas Trails Council to gain valuable information, networking and developing overall trail strategies.
- Progress in this first grant cycle had been significant. The target trail received City Commission approval to begin development on a 1.4-mile trail that connects with another existing trail and construction will commence in November.
- in addition, this project will develop pathway signage for a recently completed trail to help patrons better navigate the two-way loop trail.

Transitions/Evolutions/Changes/Shifts to the solutions:

- The major deviation from the initial scope was the addition of minor capacity building for the supporting organization, the Community Foundation for Independence (CFFI).

Rural Champion Project Implementation Grant is being used to support construction, supplies, signage and marketing for River Trail/Interurban Trails and Industrial Park, as well as develop and assist with safe streets/pathways initiative currently supported by the city.

OFFICE OF RURAL PROSPERITY

RURAL CHAMPIONS

PLACEMAKING & RECRUITMENT

Sara Smith, Lincoln County

RESOURCE PARTNERS

State Resources:

- KDC Office of Rural Prosperity –
 - Rural Champions
 - ROZ Program
- SEED Grant Awarded for all the paint and supplies for Placemaking

Funding Resources:

- For Placemaking
 - Communities matched funds to further projects
- For Recruitment- MakeMyMove
 - Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation
 - Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center, Inc



BACKGROUND

Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation (LCEDF) sought a Rural Champion to spearhead several initiatives around the “Communities of the Future” theme highlighted in the 2021 Kansas “Power Up & Go” report written by the Kansas Sampler Foundation. A Community of the Future is one where new residents are welcomed, existing residents are engaged, the arts are supported, and creative local projects reflect the vibe of a community. The Rural Champion (RC) will not only build our capacity but also renew our collective energy to launch two key initiatives.

1. MakeMyMove-Remote Work Relocation Grant Program – The LCEDF has approved the creation of a program similar to Tulsa Remote or Choose Topeka to offer relocation grants to remote workers who move from out-of-state to Lincoln County. The RC will be the local, friendly face to correspond with potential applicants, provide community information, answer questions, and be a general ‘conciierge’ that helps a mover feel welcome and excited about their move and their future.

2. Placemaking and Beautification Projects – The LCEDF has had several projects stuck in preliminary planning stages for several years, the RC will help push these projects forward to completion. With the help of several funding sources, including a SEED grant from the Kansas Department of Commerce, we will take on downtown beautification projects in every community in the county. By the end of 2023 and early 2024, we want visitors to feel a fresh and unique vibe to Lincoln County.

For more information on this project, visit:
kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

Organized and facilitated by a dedicated Rural Champion, work groups and projects were clearly defined. Community input and involvement are crucial keys to success. Community engagement occurred throughout the initial process of identifying and prioritizing the projects and assigning roles. Community meetings scheduled at least 2 weeks in advance and recruiting all building owners, volunteers and stakeholders to actively participate were best practices to effectively keep the community informed and involved.

The primary objective for this Placemaking outcome is to spruce up downtown to bring in new movers and have everything looking nice in preparation as Lincoln County will be one of the host counties for the 2024 Big Kansas Road Trip the first weekend of May. Set a goal! Lincoln County committed to doing at least 3 buildings in each community with over 25 paint projects.

The primary goal of the recruitment portion of the Rural Champion project is to support success in bringing at least 5 new families in Lincoln County and have spread the word that Kansas is THE place to live.

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

- The Placemaking and Recruitment committee included community stakeholders from the usual groups of Economic Development, the County Commissioners, City Council, Recreational Department, and Pride committee.
- Local volunteers were essential in accomplishing the objectives to such a widespread community effort.
- Local business owners provided resources and donated supplies, equipment, labor.

SOLUTIONS

Initial solutions to make progress:

- Hosting community meetings with all stakeholders and partner in attendance to establish priorities and projects.
- Assigning all interested volunteers with a role to fill that fits their abilities and resources available.
- Update the community on all progress of each project and continually communicate ways that everyone can pitch in and get involved.
- Get the community to fall in love with the projects.

Transitions/Evolutions/Changes/Shifts to the solutions:

- Limited resources involved prioritizing projects to those with the most lasting impact and physical changes could occur.
- Recruiting enough community volunteers to be actively involved in the work. After various attempts at community meetings to spread the word, it took active recruiting and creative ways to bring people into the work.
- Delegating and assigning roles and responsibilities to accomplish work in a timely manner with volunteers.
- Engaging community groups to assist with things like recruiting, marketing, organizing resources.

Implementation grant funds are being used to support The Placemaking Grant Program. Open to any municipality, non-profit or business in Lincoln County, is intended to provide an extra boost to volunteer efforts that will continue revitalizing Lincoln County through "placemaking" projects that will either 1) create new amenities for residents, or 2) enhance local attractions for the coming Big Kansas Road Trip (BKRT) in May 2-5, 2024.



BACKGROUND

Being able to provide safe, confidential, unmanned space for rural community members to access mental health services at all times is essential to fighting the stigma about seeking out help in small towns. By providing different resources such as in-person facilities, tele-health options and hotlines available, community members will have several options to use when seeking out mental health services. The hope for Morton County is to bridge the gap in the wait-time for in-person professionals while also providing other services for those who prefer not to seek help in-person or at an emergency facility.

Morton County is ranked eighth in Kansas for opioid vulnerability. Through local assessments there were several recent suicides identified within Morton County. A result of opioid and suicide crisis is not only a rise in deaths but a cause of homelessness and increased crime rates through the community.



MENTAL HEALTH

Mike Horton,
Morton County

RESOURCE PARTNERS

State Resources:

- Kansas Department of Commerce/Office of Rural Prosperity – Rural Champions

Local Resources:

- The project was supported at the grassroots level with donations from employers, city, and local foundations.
- Local community support through volunteers and manual labor to repair buildings for the facilities.

Additional non-financial resources included:

- Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE)
- K-State Research and Extension Mental Health First Aid Training
- YOGOWYPI (You only get out what you put in) – Bill Cordes (presentations at the school)
- Alex Z. – State Suicide prevention coordinator
- Allyssa – 988 Project coordinator
- Childcare Aware
- 988 resources/ SAMSHA
- DCCCA
- QPR
- Mental Health America
- Rural Minds
- Jason Foundation
- Yellow Ribbon
- A Friend Asks Compass Behavioral Health
- Laura M – Youth Suicide Prevention Coordinator – Attorney General's Office

For more information on this project, visit :
kansascommerce.com/orp/ruralchampions

STEPS TO SUCCESS

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) and Childcare Aware have researched and provide data at the state level on the mental health and substance abuse needs. In order to have a successful solution to this issue, it's important to include other resources and organizations to address this issue.

Building the committee, workgroup and relationships:

- Form a working relationship with the school(s), City Council, County Commissioners, civic organizations, healthcare providers and walk-in clinic as well as any other providers in the area and large employers.
- Invite and include mental health care providers in conversations and meetings as they are an essential part to these facilities and part of solution. Have a large team that involves several areas within the mental health and substance abuse realm is vital to reaching the goal of having resources for such illnesses.
- Involve as many areas of the community as possible in order to reach the different audiences. When the team is large and can provide different backgrounds, it can help spread the word while changing the conversation from the "stigma" mindset to a proactive mindset.

SOLUTIONS

Initial solutions to make progress:

- Hosted public meetings to ask community members for input from their own experiences or knowledge on the subject matter.
- Identified the top priority was suicide prevention followed by lack of childcare.
- The primary goal was to provide support for those who struggle with mental illness but are afraid to seek help due to the stigma and lack of confidentiality in a smaller town by establishing a facility and resources in each of the three townships in Morton County.
- In addition, providing hotlines for those without insurance is an affordable way to receive support.

Transitions/Evolutions/Changes/Shifts to the solutions:

- The beginning of this project started with the forming of community support and creating new partnerships while also mending any old partnerships and keeping in mind to not "overstep" and respect boundaries of providers or organizations that have been doing the work.
- For Morton community, the gap was coming from services not performed by the primary mental health provider. It was necessary to make the County Commissioners aware of the services lacking so they could commit resources and put plans in place to address the underserved population.
- Engaging with youth in the schools was another important shift to the solution. Putting together a mentoring program that focuses on overcoming mental illness and encourages students to ask for help was the ideal solution for destigmatizing in a classroom environment. The school in Morton County had initially turned down the idea but reconsidered after another devastating loss of a student.

Rural Champion Project Implementation Grant:

Funds are being used to establish mental health centers throughout Morton County.

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