

OFFICE OF RURAL PROSPERITY

ANNUAL REPORT

2020



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) advocates for and promotes rural Kansas and focuses on efforts designed to aid rural improvements. Through ongoing conversations with rural stakeholders, ORP identifies key policy priorities and blends administrative action with legislative work to remove barriers for prosperity, recruit subject matter experts to develop solutions, place a premium on listening to Kansans, and highlight successful communities and projects.

In 2020 through ORP's direct investments, legislative support, and partnerships, the state of Kansas continued to make progress on priority areas that rural Kansans identified as the most important to them, even during an unprecedented public health emergency.



TRANSPORTATION The Eisenhower Legacy Transportation Program (IKE) was established. A 10-year transportation program that preserves the existing system and provides flexibility to address current and future opportunities while encouraging transparency and accountability.



BROADBAND When it was passed, IKE also included a significant investment in broadband and new technologies. To administer grant programs and work with stakeholders to increase expansion of broadband throughout the state, the Office of Broadband Development was established by the Governor and administered \$60 million in funding dedicated to broadband by the Strengthening People and Revitalizing Kansas (SPARK) Taskforce.



EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE The Children's Cabinet released findings from their All In For Kansas Kids Needs Assessments and established clear next steps for addressing gaps in childcare, including specific rural-focused tactics.



HOUSING ORP established an interagency housing workgroup to focus on ways to improve quality, affordable, and safe housing across the state. A statewide housing study was identified as a crucial first step to establish the baseline data needed to evaluate current housing needs and resources and provide actionable recommendations for the state and local communities. This will be the first statewide study since 1993.



HEALTHCARE Kansas is one of only 12 states to not expand Medicaid, a critical healthcare resource for rural medical providers and low-income workers and their families. Through the Governor's leadership, access to telehealth, including mental health services, and licensing flexibility was provided to support Kansans' health and the economy.



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORP supports the operations and programs of the Community Development Division within the Department of Commerce. These programs include Office of Broadband Development, Rural Opportunity Zones, Community Service Tax Credit Program (awarded \$4.1 million in 2020), and Community Development Block Grants (awarded \$34 million in 2020).



KANSAS MAIN STREET Through ORP's investment, 25 Kansas Main Street communities were reconnected with tools and resources proven to revitalize downtowns. Additionally, the Affiliate Community Program was launched towards the end of 2020 which will give more communities the opportunities to receive trainings around economic development.



INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS IN KANSAS The International Division within the Kansas Department of Commerce was established to focus solely on the task of recruiting and strengthening international trade for the state. ORP supports the Division's operations and programming as international businesses boost rural economies.



WORKFORCE ORP partnered with Kansas Sampler Foundation to launch the Power Up and Go initiative to identify personal and professional advancement opportunities for young, rural Kansans. ORP also invested in Build Up Kansas, a vocational training program from the Kansas Associated General Contractors.

2020 LISTENING → ACTION TOUR

Building off discussion for the 2019 Listening Tour, ORP asked state agency leaders to join them for a deep dive into ORP priority areas and provide examples of successes and challenges in communities across the state. Seven public meetings and 18 smaller stakeholder meetings focusing on various topics with rural stakeholders were held over a two-month period.

In addition to concerns around the pandemic and COVID-19 protocols, key issues identified by participants were similar to what was heard in 2019. Broadband, early education and childcare, healthcare, housing, and workforce retention and recruitment were the most commonly cited issues. ORP looks forward to continuing to build on its work in each of these key areas while supporting creative efforts to help rural communities make tangible improvements for rural Kansans.

ORP'S PRIORITY AREAS:

Broadband

Infrastructure

Early Education
and Childcare

Housing

Healthcare

Workforce

Community
Development

INTRODUCTION

As one of her first priorities, Governor Laura Kelly established the Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) to advocate for and promote rural Kansas, focus on efforts designed to aid rural improvements, and to ensure that all Kansas voices are heard in the Statehouse.

Lieutenant Governor Lynn Rogers was charged to lead this work and as the listening arm for rural Kansas, ORP hit the road for the 2019 ORP Listening Tour. Over two months the Lieutenant Governor traveled over 4,700 miles to every region of the state and connected with hundreds of Kansans. These discussions with rural Kansans established the foundation and priorities of the Office of Rural Prosperity to help streamline policies and coordinate programs that foster growth and prosperity in these areas.

Once priorities were set, one of the first actions ORP supported was to rebuild and reinvest in community programs that had been neglected and abandoned over the past decade. With rural Kansans impacted by these cuts, there was a clear need to reengage and improve access to community resources. This included supporting restoration of the Community Development Division in the Kansas Department of Commerce, which is designed to realign existing resources, enhance technical assistance provided to local leaders, and expand on successful programs to better focus on the needs of rural communities.

To continue conversations with Kansans about their needs and turn that feedback into tangible action, two ORP staff were hired to expand capacity. Along with the Lieutenant Governor, they work to improve stakeholder relationships and coordinate program collaborations, and also bring rural concerns to legislators and state agencies.

As part of connecting rural communities with practical programs and resources, Governor Kelly challenged state agencies to look at key issues from a rural angle and ensure that those concerns were a priority. To improve coordination between agencies, ORP planned to launch interagency workgroups around key priority areas with subject matter experts and administrators from federal and state agencies. In early March of 2020, ORP held its first





“ When rural succeeds, Kansas succeeds.”

- Lieutenant Governor Lynn Rogers

interagency workgroup focused on rural housing. Within two weeks, COVID-19 hit the state of Kansas, and like the rest of the country, ORP's work shifted.

Along with other state agencies, ORP's focus turned to help with COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. This included making communication with rural communities a priority and ensuring that rural stakeholders and interests were considered during the Strengthening People and Revitalizing Kansas (SPARK) process to allocate CARES Act funding. Since the first case in March, the economic and health repercussions have affected the entire state. This report will include examples of projects and work that specifically focus on rural communities both before and during the pandemic.

While much of the planned outreach was disrupted and reevaluated for the health and safety of communities, one thing was clear: every area that was identified as a need from the 2019 Listening Tour continued to be a priority for rural communities. In fact, the concerns underlying many ORP priorities became even more urgent due to the pandemic.

Despite delays and an altered gathering format, it was important for the Lieutenant Governor and ORP to continue to connect with rural stakeholders. The 2020 ORP Virtual Tour kicked off in August and featured a public meeting focusing on each of the six regions and one statewide meeting. Building

off discussions from the 2019 Listening Tour, the theme of the 2020 tour was Listening → Action. State Agency leaders joined ORP to dive deeper into each priority and provide regional examples across the state.

ORP also convened 18 smaller stakeholder meetings focused on various topics affecting rural Kansas. These discussions were critical for ORP to hear directly from Kansans working on challenges and finding solutions that could help others across the state experiencing similar issues. Details about these meetings, which include discussions on agriculture and commodities, rural water systems, mental health needs, and regional food systems can be found starting on page 41.

With broadband being one of ORP's signature policy priorities, the challenge of reaching rural residents who lack an accessible and reliable internet connection became clearer than ever in 2020. However, the health and safety of every Kansan was the highest priority, so all meetings were held virtually. This report focuses on ORP's work with state partners to address broadband and rural Kansans' other priority areas, highlighting the work, successes, and opportunities to help more Kansans access a high quality of life wherever they choose to live.



BROADBAND AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Two common barriers cited by rural residents during the 2019 ORP Listening Tour were unreliable broadband and insufficient roads and bridges. Rural communities continued to discuss these and other infrastructure concerns with ORP during 2020. In a digital economy, access to the information superhighway is a critical part of connecting communities, as are highways, roads, and bridges. Through a blend of legislative and administrative actions, ORP pushed to address rural infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas of the state.

“ The pandemic has highlighted that broadband is not a luxury but a utility - it is the rural electrification of our generation and a critical piece of any community's infrastructure. We must have broadband throughout Kansas so all can access it for work, education, and healthcare. ”

- Lieutenant Governor Lynn Rogers



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IKE: MODERNIZED TRANSPORTATION

Throughout its work, the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) aims for safer roads, economic growth, and more options and resources for Kansas communities, including

access to education, healthcare, and other public services by way of a modern transportation system. Over the next 10 years, the [Eisenhower Legacy Transportation Plan](#), or “IKE,” will preserve Kansas’ existing infrastructure system while increasing flexibility to address current and future opportunities and enhance transparency and accountability.

IKE has implemented a two-year rolling program approach, allowing Kansas to keep investments from becoming obsolete or diminished by

lack of maintenance and modernization. Additionally, the program will leverage investments by matching local funds, inviting input on practical improvements, and using project phasing to stretch dollars further. Together, with the help of the Kelly administration, Kansas Legislature, and stakeholders, KDOT is working to improve programs in IKE, incorporate new programs, and make programs more dynamic to provide greater access and flexibility to Kansas communities.

Local Bridges

The renewed local bridge improvement program under the Bureau of Local Projects is now in its second year after being brought back by the Kelly administration. With 20% of the state’s 19,000 bridges now rated in “poor” condition, this program helps repair and replace bridges that are insufficient for today’s weight requirements. This is important to residents and ag producers by ensuring bridges are safe to transport school busses, tractors, grain trucks, and livestock.

Short-Line Rail

IKE’s short-line rail program is another good example of how investments important to rural industries such as agriculture help all residents. In this case, short-line rail not only helps ag producers reduce costs to transport their grain, it also relieves traffic on rural roads and highways, improving



*Photo provided by
Kansas Tourism*

safety, increasing efficiency, and reducing wear and tear. In its first year, 13 projects were awarded grants totaling \$5 million, with a 30% matching requirement. Across all of its rail projects, KDOT is partnering to deliver \$102 million in 36 counties.

Cost Share

Cost Share encourages local partners to think of creative solutions to challenges in their communities and work with KDOT to make improvements. Cost Share provides funding for construction projects that improve safety, leverage state funds, and help rural and urban areas throughout the state. In its first

year, Cost Share was able to empower communities large and small to take plans off the shelf and make investments earlier than they could have without the state's partnership, resulting in \$59 million of investment in 46 local projects.

FALL 2019 AND SPRING 2020 COST SHARE AWARDEES



Preservation+

This new program adds funding to preservation projects where safety improvements and broadband connectivity can be enhanced. Building on recent federal approval of KDOT's "dig once" policy, this program will help to ensure Kansas maintains high-quality broadband along the state's freight corridors by working with local partners to update

the state's connectivity and highway infrastructure simultaneously.

In addition to these opportunities, KDOT will work on solutions for multi-modal transportation, public transit, aviation, innovative technologies, bike and pedestrian paths, and more.



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BROADBAND AND CONNECTIVITY

If there was ever any doubt about the need for accessible and reliable internet connections for rural residents, the pandemic has proven that high-speed internet access is a necessity. Communities without adequate access are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to accessing healthcare, improving distance learning, and enhancing quality of life. The Kelly administration is committed to ensuring broadband is no longer seen as a luxury but essential to the future of Kansas.

Broadband has been discussed for 20 years in Kansas by various administrations, but the state of Kansas had never invested in broadband infrastructure until Governor Kelly included an initial investment of \$85 million for a broadband grant program in the 10-year IKE transportation plan. With a 50% match requirement, this funding represents \$170 million in broadband investment in state, local, and private dollars on top of \$50 million dedicated to broadband infrastructure by the SPARK Taskforce.

By identifying long-term funding and requiring a local match, Governor Kelly affirmed the consensus of the legislative broadband task force and listened to rural Kansans who brought the issue forward during the Office of Rural Prosperity's 2019 Listening Tour. Together with the Kansas Legislature, the Kelly administration has made broadband a priority for the state of Kansas, even before the pandemic highlighted its critical role in ensuring access to telehealth, distance learning, and remote work.

The Kelly administration also affirmed the legislature's recommendation to have the Office of Broadband Development in the Kansas Department of Commerce administer the grant program. Recognizing the need for continued engagement, Governor Kelly issued an executive order establishing the lead office for broadband to work with stakeholders, consumers, policymakers, and other state agencies to support expansion of broadband throughout the state.

Interagency and public support is especially important as the state strives to serve Kansas residents more effectively. Whether it's collaborating on a school project, renewing a driver's license, or talking to a doctor out in the field, broadband is essential for so many services that individuals, businesses, and local governments use daily.



EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE

Quality, affordable childcare is a pressing need across the state and country- but particularly in rural communities where there are unique challenges in the delivery of childcare services. Disparities that occur in rural Kansas surrounding childcare and early education have been a barrier to further business growth and a higher quality of life across the state. In addition to on-the-ground feedback from local practitioners, ORP relies on the expertise and work of the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund and partnering agencies.



“ The prosperity of our rural communities, and our state, depends on the well-being of our youngest Kansans. Investing in early childhood programs yields improved health, education, and economic outcomes. When young children have their basic needs met, we prepare the future of our state for success. ”

- Melissa Rooker, Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund

UNDERSTANDING THE NEED

In 2019, the Children’s Cabinet conducted a comprehensive statewide needs assessment, to identify key gaps in childcare and the impact they have on communities and businesses. The [All In For Kansas Kids Needs Assessment](#) included input from more than 6,100 Kansans in all 105 counties and builds on thousands of data points to support its findings.



CENTRAL MESSAGES

The experiences of families with young children in Kansas are shaped by where they live, both across the regions of the state and within their communities.

- Geography impacts the availability and accessibility of early care and education services and supports, creating isolation and navigation barriers.
- Poverty rates also vary by where people live — they’re highest in densely settled rural and lowest in frontier counties. Additionally, services are impacted when 70% of board-certified psychiatrists are located in one of only five urban counties.

Young children are growing up in families where basic needs are not being met.

- 27% of families in Kansas are low income despite 70% reporting that all parents are employed.
- Different parts of the state face various challenges. For example, Southeast Kansas counties rank lowest in many health outcomes while children in Western Kansas are more likely to be uninsured.
- Nearly one in five children under the age of 5 live in poverty – with significant disparity among ethnic and racial groups.

KEY FINDINGS

ACCESSIBILITY



AVAILABILITY



NAVIGATION



COLLABORATION



WORKFORCE



FACILITIES



SYSTEM ALIGNMENT



BRIGHT SPOTS



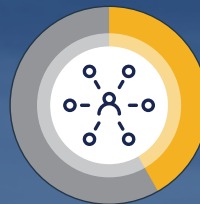
RURAL KANSAS FACES UNIQUE CHALLENGES



ACCESSIBILITY - 92% of childcare providers do not offer non-traditional hours (second and third shift and weekends), a concern expressed by rural working Kansans and childcare providers to ORP and the Children's Cabinet.



WORKFORCE - 98% of rural counties are unable to meet the needs of parents with children ages birth to 6, including before and after school programs, as rural childcare providers struggle to make the profession financially viable and retain staff.



AVAILABILITY - 44% of Kansans live in a childcare desert, a statistic that particularly impacts rural (45%), low-income (63%), and Hispanic and Latino populations (60%).

ADDRESSING THE NEED

The Children's Cabinet used the findings from the needs assessment to complete their [All In For Kansas Kids Strategic Plan](#). While every goal is designed to address a statewide need, rural areas have unique challenges that demand community-specific solutions. These rural-focused tactics include:

- **State-Level Coordination:** Identify and support telehealth opportunities in a variety of healthcare and early childcare and education settings to increase access to specialty services in rural areas.
- **Capacity and Access:** Encourage partnerships for a cooperative model for childcare services that meet the unique needs of rural and family childcare.

To make progress on many of the goals outlined in the strategic plan, Kansas was awarded a three-year, \$8.9 million grant. In the first year, \$2.1 million will go toward the [Pre-School Development Grant Birth Through Five](#) initiative. This program will support a broad range of community partners as they address the unique needs of their families and providers, including a specific category focused on rural communities.



COVID-19 RESPONSE

In the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Children's Cabinet used its existing communications infrastructure to engage in dialogue, provide resources, and deliver up-to-date news and information to providers and families. Additionally, the Children's Cabinet partnered with the Kansas Department for Children and Families, The Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and the Kansas Department of Education to use existing funding to provide grants to childcare providers. Over \$90,000 was distributed to 180 childcare providers in April 2020.

In collaboration with state agencies and early childhood leaders across the state, the Children's Cabinet received support and funding from the SPARK Task Force to carry out three initiatives:

1. WORKFORCE HEALTH FUNDS for COVID-19 related medical expenses for individuals providing early childcare, education, and other essential work during the pandemic.

2. CHILD CARE HEALTH CONSULTANTS (CCHC) AND CHILD CARE FACILITY GRANTS for all KDHE-licensed facilities. These grants enable consultants to advise on actions or modifications needed to meet CDC health and safety recommendations for infectious disease control and provide resources to make targeted improvements when feasible.

3. TECHNOLOGY FOR FAMILIES FUND allows families to stay connected to home-visiting programs with devices and connectivity supports for virtual home visits.

Additionally, the Children's Cabinet administered a \$40 million [Remote Learning Grant Initiative](#) designed to provide secure settings where children can receive quality supervision and learning supports when schools are in hybrid or remote learning modes.



Governor Kelly designated the Children's Cabinet to lead the Early Childhood Advisory Council and established a Kansas Early Childhood Recommendations Panel to provide vision and guidance on early childhood programs and services. Through collaboration and technical expertise, the Panel is a critical component of the governance structure supporting early childhood initiatives in Kansas.

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HOUSING

During the 2019 ORP Listening Tour, rural communities overwhelmingly identified access to safe, affordable, quality housing as a barrier to community growth. ORP partnered with the Kansas Housing Resources Corporation (KHRC) to lead the charge to address these concerns.

“ Home has never been more important. Our homes have always provided safety and shelter, but in the midst of the COVID pandemic, home has also become our virtual workplace, classroom, marketplace, and gathering space. ”

- Ryan Vincent, Kansas Housing Resources Corporation

ORP HOUSING WORK GROUP

In early 2020, ORP established an interagency team of leaders committed to finding collaborative solutions to the state's affordable housing shortage. The Housing Work Group was challenged to focus on public/private partnerships, expand moderate-income housing, encourage redevelopment of historic property, and coordinate state funds to maximize impact. A comprehensive statewide housing study was identified as a crucial first step in reaching these goals, as the study will establish the baseline data needed to evaluate current housing needs and resources and identify benchmarks for growth and development. The study is expected to be completed by the Spring of 2022 and will be the first statewide housing study completed since 1993.

HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

KHRC's housing development programs, including Low Income Housing Tax Credits, HOME Rental Development, and the National Housing Trust Fund, provide incentives to developers who create affordable housing opportunities for communities in need.

Local communities report that a lack of qualified developers in their region is one of the biggest barriers to expanding housing in rural areas, where profit margins are often low and overhead expenses high. KHRC has implemented several initiatives in the past year to encourage development in these underserved areas. Examples include revising the Qualified Allocation Plan, which governs how tax credits and housing resources are allocated across the state, to prioritize underserved communities. KHRC has also increased communication with development partners to ensure that programs and processes are transparent and expectations are clear.

KHRC Programs Across the State

THE EMERGENCY SOLUTIONS GRANT (ESG) program works with a network of service providers to offer assistance to those who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless, including survivors of domestic violence.

THE COMMUNITY SERVICES BLOCK GRANT (CSBG) program aims to reduce poverty, revitalize low-income communities, and empower low-income families and individuals to become fully self-sufficient.

TENANT BASED RENTAL ASSISTANCE (TBRA) helps income-eligible households with rent and security and/or utility deposit payments. Assistance is distributed via a statewide network of grantees.

KHRC'S FIRST TIME HOMEBUYER PROGRAM helps income-eligible households purchase their first home by providing down payment assistance.

THE WEATHERIZATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM helps income-eligible households improve their home's energy efficiency and reduce utility bills.



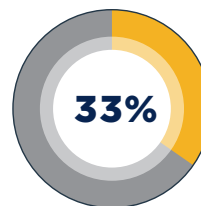
MODERATE INCOME HOUSING

Kansas' sole state-financed housing development program, [Moderate Income Housing \(MIH\)](#), serves the needs of rural households that don't qualify for federal housing assistance, yet often can't afford market-rate housing. MIH grants and/or loans are awarded to cities and counties to spur development of multifamily rental units and single-family, for-purchase homes in communities with populations of fewer than 60,000 people.

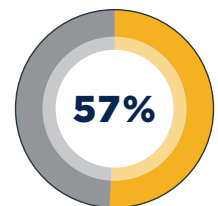
Since the program's establishment in 2012, the Kansas Legislature has allocated \$2 million annually to the initiative. KHRC, which administers the program at no cost to the state, has supplemented \$500,000 in additional funding. The MIH program has achieved a leverage factor of almost \$6 for every \$1 of state resources spent.

MIH groundbreaking Lindsborg, KS

From 2012-2020, KHRC received **164 applications** from communities requesting more than **\$48.5 million** in MIH funding. The program has **awarded more than \$16.7 million to 58 communities**. In 2020 alone, the program saw a 33% increase in applications and a 57% increase in requests, demonstrating the ongoing and growing need for this crucial assistance.



INCREASE IN MIH
APPLICATIONS IN 2020



INCREASE IN MIH
REQUESTS IN 2020

COVID RESPONSE

KHRC responded to heightened needs during the pandemic by scaling up ESG and CSBG operations. Supplemental ESG funding supported the operation of domestic violence and emergency housing shelters, financed crucial shelter renovations and improvements, and provided rapid rehousing and homeless prevention services. Supplemental CSBG funding supported rental and utility assistance, internet access, home winterization services, food assistance, and more for Kansans in need.

In response to the crisis over looming evictions, KHRC received \$20 million from the SPARK Taskforce to establish the [Kansas Eviction Prevention Program \(KEPP\)](#). While moratoriums provided tenants with temporary protection from eviction, KEPP assisted tenants by paying down accrued rent and landlords with monthly income and money to manage maintenance and upkeep.



Kansas Housing Resources Corporation is a self-supporting, nonprofit public corporation that administers housing and community programs across Kansas. Its mission is simple: help Kansans access the safe, affordable housing they need and the dignity they deserve.

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HEALTHCARE

ORP is committed to making sure everyone has access to the quality healthcare all Kansans deserve. In 2019, Lieutenant Governor Rogers toured rural hospitals and met with Kansans from every part of the state to discuss growing concerns over recent hospital closures and the health and economic impacts of reduced healthcare access. Residents and providers reiterated the need for Medicaid Expansion during the 2020 Tour while discussing other rural healthcare needs such as telehealth, mental health, and COVID-19 response efforts.

“ Our healthcare professionals' tireless work throughout the pandemic has been critical to Kansas' COVID-19 recovery efforts. Our rural hospitals deserve - and need - the support and resources to do their job, and Medicaid Expansion not only helps providers financially and keeps hospitals open, it also gives essential workers a safety net and provides coverage for caregivers serving our most vulnerable neighbors. ”

MEDICAID EXPANSION

Kansas is one of only 12 states that has not expanded Medicaid. Expanding Medicaid would provide care to almost 165,000 Kansans, providing a boost to the state and local economy, and improving services and reducing healthcare-related financial pressures for Kansans. By the end of 2020, it is estimated that failure to expand Medicaid has cost over \$4.5 billion in federal funding that could have reimbursed Kansas medical providers and hospitals for serving low-income patients.

The most recent Kansas Speaks survey conducted by the Docking Institute for Public Affairs at Fort Hays State University continued to show broad support for Medicaid expansion in Kansas, with 63.5% of respondents expressing support for the measure and 71.8% acknowledging that it would help rural hospitals stay in business. ORP found this to be true during discussions with hospitals and other rural medical providers during the 2019 and 2020 Tours. In some cases, failure to expand Medicaid has prevented medical providers from expanding services that would not only serve low-income workers and others who qualify for Medicaid, but the whole community.

WORKFORCE

Even before the pandemic, rural Kansas experienced a workforce shortage, especially in high-demand fields like healthcare. Discussions with local leaders during the 2020 Tour indicated renewed concern about Kansas' ability to recruit and retain healthcare professionals when in competition with surrounding states that have expanded Medicaid. Kansas doctors and medical professionals will continue to provide services to uninsured patients, but it will be harder to meet community needs if Kansas health systems are unable to pay as much as their nearby competitors.

With an older population in many rural communities, the need for healthcare workers throughout the state is critical to ensure that Kansans living in long-term care settings can remain close to their families. Those living in poverty are more susceptible to chronic illness that requires more medical care, without which it can be harder to work. Without healthcare workers or adequate insurance coverage for caregivers and low-income support staff, seniors and Kansans with disabilities may find it impossible to remain in their homes.



Lieutenant Governor Rogers met with Colby Mayor Gary Adrian and other Colby and Thomas County leaders to discuss strategies to encourage mask wearing and other COVID mitigation strategies.

TELEHEALTH

As rural Kansas healthcare providers have had to overcome workforce challenges and other obstacles, many have reported benefiting from increased telehealth options over the past year. During the pandemic, Governor Kelly has increased access to telehealth for patients and providers through multiple executive orders allowing doctors to prescribe medication and do routine checkups via telemedicine. These orders have also allowed licensed out-of-state providers to perform more telehealth services for Kansas patients in order to enable social distancing at healthcare facilities.

Recognizing that additional telehealth services only helps those with an internet connection, Governor Kelly supported emergency funding to enhance broadband access through the SPARK Taskforce. With Kansas families needing access to telehealth and distance learning in unprecedented ways, grant funding was also provided to unserved and underserved communities to help low-income families who cannot afford high-speed internet.

RURAL EMERGENCY HOSPITALS

While expanding Medicaid would place Kansas providers and patients on an even playing field with surrounding states, advances in medical technology, changes in federal regulations, and shifting rural demographics requires a new look at healthcare delivery models. Recent changes in federal Medicare and Medicaid regulations present a new opportunity through an alternative funding model that is more customized to local needs. This model of funding would allow hospitals with underutilized inpatient hospital beds to become “rural emergency hospitals,” maintaining their emergency departments while boosting needed local primary care and specialty healthcare services, such as dental care. While this model would not cover uncompensated care for uninsured Kansans who would qualify under Medicaid Expansion, it would encourage more regional coordination, targeted local services, and make better use of a limited workforce.

Governor Laura Kelly visiting Plastikon Industries where she announced that Kansas had surpassed \$2 billion in capital investment in 2020 – in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic and global recession.



MENTAL HEALTH

Concerns regarding access to mental health services throughout the state's rural areas have only become more amplified. The need for social distancing has also caused many to experience increased isolation. ORP discussed this issue in-depth with mental health professionals and community leaders from Northwest Kansas and across the state during the tour. While many Kansans have certainly faced challenges in accessing essential mental health services during the pandemic, ORP was encouraged to hear stories of local providers and patients making use of expanded telehealth services, reducing commutes and actually increasing patient visits in some areas.

COVID-19 AND RURAL KANSAS

Rural Kansas has not been immune to the effects of COVID-19. It has strained capacity at healthcare facilities across the state and increased stress on rural healthcare workers, long-term care workers, emergency response and public health officials, and many others. Governor Kelly and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment have worked tirelessly to support local officials and healthcare workers by targeting resources and promoting behaviors that are proven to limit infections and reduce community spread. Continued cooperation will be critical to increasing testing, distributing vaccines, and supporting hospitals.



KDHE's mission is to protect and improve the health and environment of all Kansans. In addition to KDHE, other state entities including the Kansas Department of Aging and Disability Services, the Governor's Behavioral Health Services Planning Council, and the Governor's Grants Program focus on other aspects of health services including mental health, substance use, and domestic violence prevention.

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Recognizing the vital role of community development within the rural revitalization arsenal, Governor Kelly has worked to reestablish the Community Development Division in the Kansas Department of Commerce (KDC). To maximize impact for rural communities, ORP directly supports the Community Development Division's operations and programs.

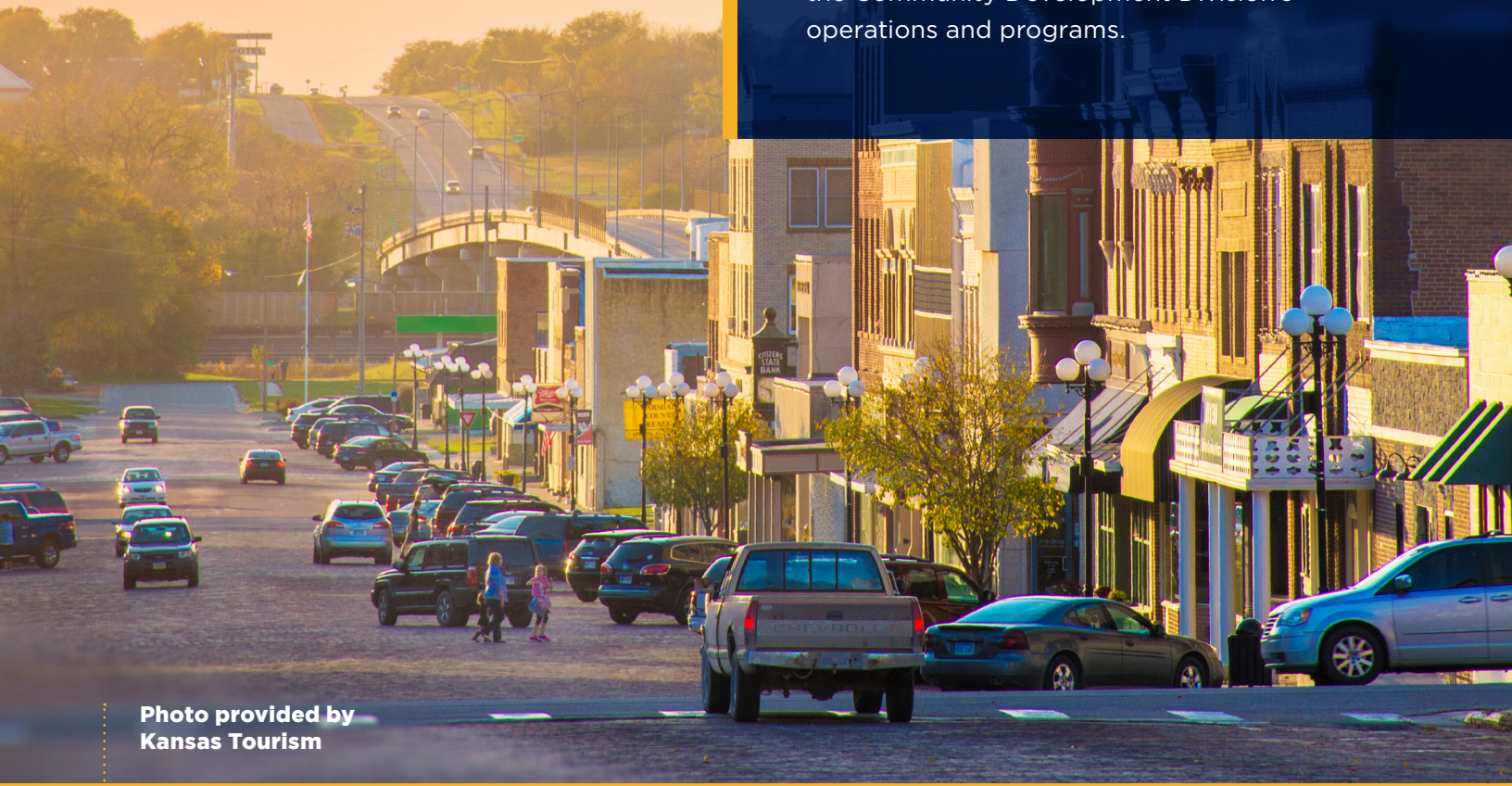


Photo provided by
Kansas Tourism

“ We’re committed to a multifaceted approach of proven programs that are helping communities across Kansas connect with the tools they need to move forward. Our team is innovative and visionary in partnering with communities of all sizes and locations to encourage positive growth and ongoing prosperity statewide. ”

- Kayla Savage, Kansas Department of Commerce

COMMUNITY SERVICE TAX CREDIT PROGRAM

Through discussions with rural Kansans, ORP learned that one of the major obstacles facing rural development is difficulty funding projects locally. One of the state's main tools in addressing this issue is the Community Service Tax Credit Program (CSP).

CSP is a tool that enhances private fundraising efforts, providing a 70% tax credit to qualified donors in rural communities of less than 15,000 in population, and 50% in larger communities. Tax credits are allocated each year and awarded on a competitive application basis to nonprofit organizations to improve their ability to undertake major capital fundraising drives.

In 2020, 25 organizations were awarded a total of \$4.1 million in CSP tax credits to support education, healthcare, and housing projects across the state. For the first time, the decision was made in 2020 to distribute \$1 million in awards for childcare and early childhood development projects, specifically for services to those under the age of 5.



Community Development Division staff provide local partners with technical assistance and resources for communities to invest in their infrastructure, housing, community facilities, downtowns, and non-profit organizations. These are key assets for investment that enhance Kansans' quality of life regardless of proximity to an urban center.

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community-development/](https://kansascommerce.gov/community-development/)

Artist rendering of the Grow & Learn Childcare Center in Leoti, Kansas *Rendering provided by Kraybill Associates*

Wichita County Economic Development was one of 25 organizations to receive CSP credits. The funding will go towards the construction of a 3,565 square-foot building that will house four classrooms; providing care and early learning for 35 children, ages 5 and under. The project is expected to be completed and operational by Fall 2021.



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT PROGRAM

During the ORP tours, Kansans cited infrastructure issues as a significant barrier to growth and prosperity. The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program exists to provide vital assistance to Kansas communities. CDBG allows KDC to distribute federal funds to eligible Kansas cities and counties for specific projects ranging from water system upgrades to street repairs and many other possible improvements. To receive funds, projects must meet at least one of the federally mandated criteria: benefits low to moderate income individuals, removes or prevents slum or blight conditions, or eliminates an urgent need created by a disaster when local funds are unavailable.

ORP has been dedicated to ensuring this tool is used efficiently and with maximal impact for rural communities. In 2020, two rounds of CDBG funding were awarded to communities in Kansas. In February, \$17 million was awarded to 39 Kansas communities. These funds assisted with rural projects including new firefighting equipment, street repairs, water system improvements, and more.

When COVID-19 became the central issue for many Kansas communities, community funding became an even more urgent need. In two rounds, one in June and one in July, CARES Act CDBG-CV funds totaling more than \$16.9 million helped 122 Kansas cities and counties respond to the pandemic and its economic effects. Focused on helping businesses stay open and keeping Kansans employed, these funds also could be used for food programs serving seniors and school-aged children. The grants were awarded to cities and counties, allowing Kansans closest to their neighbors to decide where funds were needed most.

Nearly \$34 million was awarded in 2020 in Community Development Block Grants for various rural community development initiatives. These funds have proven critical for local development projects, as CDBG continues to be a vital resource for rural Kansas growth and development.

Abilene Nutrition received funds from the CDBG-CV program through the City of Abilene. These funds were essential for small businesses during the pandemic and helped more than 122 communities.



OFFICE OF BROADBAND DEVELOPMENT

In October 2020, by signing Executive Order 20-67, Governor Kelly established the Office of Broadband Development within KDC creating the first state office dedicated to improving high-speed internet access for communities across the state. This is the most focused effort by the state of Kansas to enable high-quality internet access in all parts of the state. Working together with public, private, and non-profit partners, the Office of Broadband Development will not only facilitate broadband access through state grants, it will also work with local communities, state agencies, and others to build a strategic approach to comprehensive broadband access in Kansas.

Within the first few months of its creation, the Office of Broadband Development launched the new Broadband Acceleration grant program. The program provides up to \$1 million of funding for broadband infrastructure projects that target unserved areas, economically distressed communities, and areas of compelling need. Applicants are required to provide a 50% match and engage community leaders and stakeholders in developing projects that are strategic, scalable, and bridge critical access gaps to address quality of life considerations and economic viability for Kansas citizens and communities.

In addition to the long-term state funding for a broadband grant program, Governor Kelly announced the distribution of nearly \$50 million in Connectivity Emergency Response Grant (CERG) funds through the SPARK Taskforce to increase broadband access in communities across Kansas.

A total of 67 projects were awarded funds for broadband infrastructure improvements, a majority being rural. For more information about the projects and to see the interactive map, visit: www.kansascommerce.gov/broadband-map/

ROZ 2.0

Rural Opportunity Zones, or ROZ, was a tax incentive established in 2012 with the stated purpose of reversing rural population decline in a set number of Kansas counties meeting certain population loss thresholds. In order to make the program more widely utilized across the state, ORP supports efforts to increase the program's flexibility by allowing local communities to use it to help potential homebuyers put down roots. This is consistently one of the biggest obstacles ORP and its partners encounter when discussing the challenges that rural communities face in attracting new workers. The new program, ROZ 2.0, would also have a 5-year community "Rural Capacity Building" program that communities could opt into for assistance with marketing, placemaking, and long-term housing needs.





KANSAS MAIN STREET

The Kelly administration knows that a downtown often serves as the heart of a rural community no matter the size. Throughout Kansas, downtowns represent the historic fabric and character of their respective communities. These commercial districts have long histories of ups and downs, successes and failures — and through it all, the majority have survived and are working to stay healthy and viable in the 21st century. Downtowns remain the very foundation on which communities grow and thrive.

In many communities, the Kansas Main Street program was the driving force for downtown revitalization efforts. Beginning in 1985, the program had a successful 27-year history serving Kansas communities before being suspended in 2012. Before the discontinuation, hundreds of Kansans in dozens of communities were empowered to revitalize their downtown districts to make them stronger and more vibrant. More than \$600 million in reinvestment took place and more than 3,800 small businesses were started or expanded, creating over 8,600 new jobs. In 2012 alone, 25 designated communities established 194 new businesses and business expansions, which led to 568 new jobs and \$18 million in reinvestment.

The impact of the program was clear, and the Kelly administration saw the resurrection of the program as an essential part of the state's commitment to rural prosperity. By reinvesting in this program through ORP, 25 Kansas Main Street communities were reconnected, providing them access to tools and resources with a proven record of breathing new life into communities and historic commercial districts. Almost all of these programs have done remarkably well during the eight-year absence of a state program, but there's still a significant need for state-level and national resources and coordination. Many local directors and organizational volunteers have come on board in these local programs since 2012 with little or no training or guidance in how to apply the Main Street Four-Point Approach in their communities. One of the main objectives of the state office is to help rebuild these 25 programs to represent models for success both locally and statewide.

Beginning in 2020, the state provided on-site and virtual assistance to the 25 designated communities and helped them build back their local programs. This included an in-person training session on retail promotions to more than 70 participants in March, as well as an organizational training in July. Additional virtual trainings on historic preservation and economic vitality occurred in the fall. Virtual year-end evaluations were conducted in each of the communities to help them successfully move to the next level in 2021.

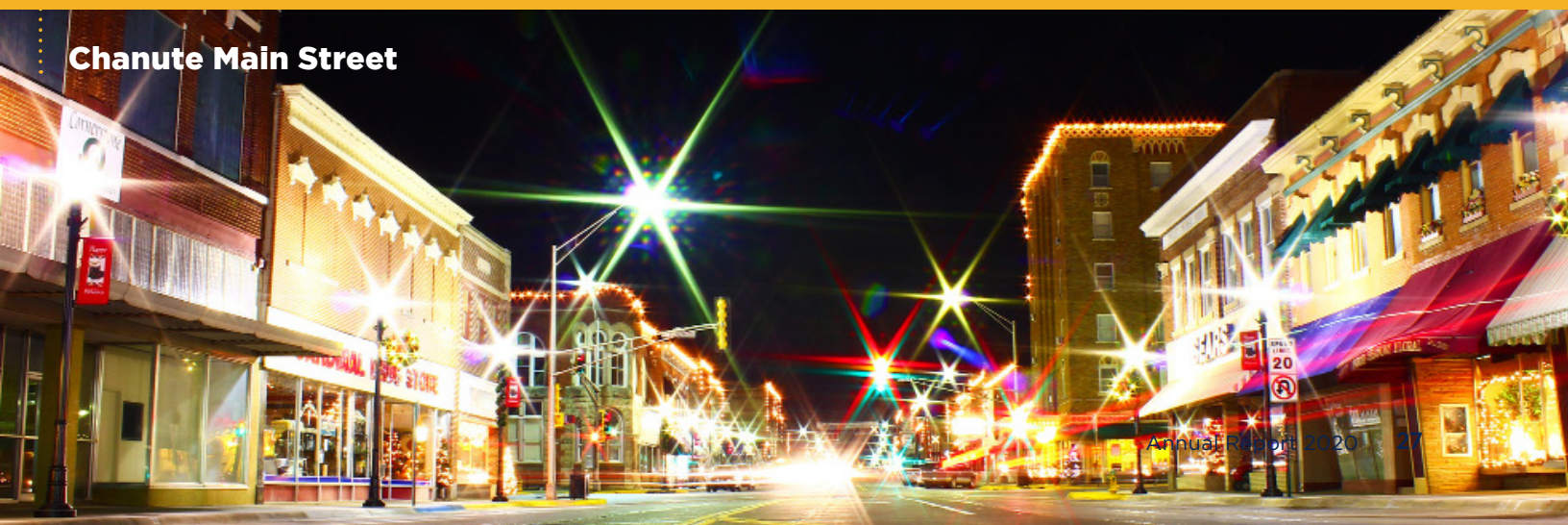
Belleville Main Street



Holton Main Street

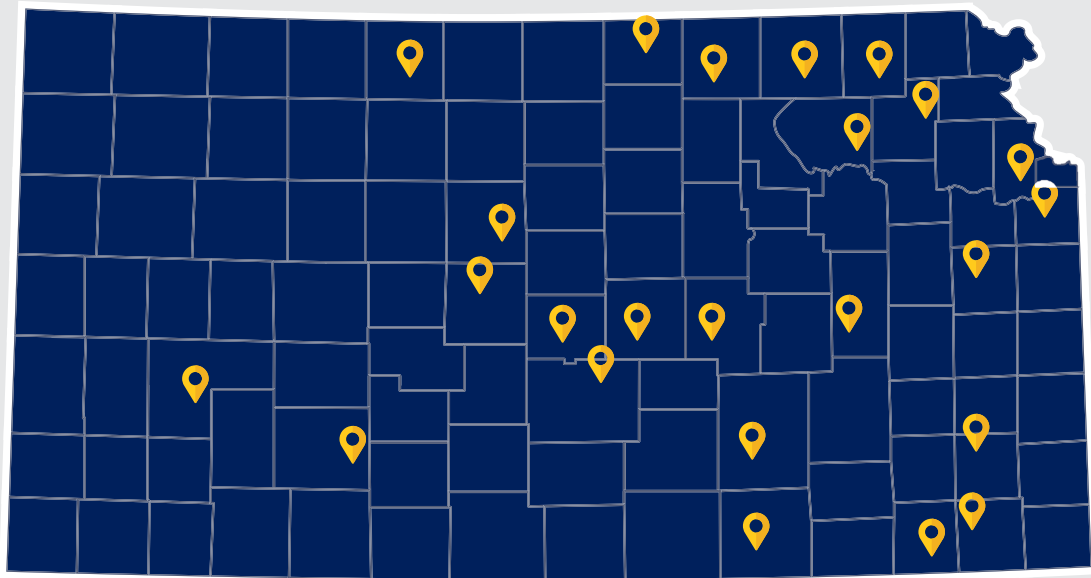


Chanute Main Street



2020 MAIN STREET COMMUNITIES

Augusta	El Dorado	Hutchinson	Ottawa	Russell
Belleville	Emporia	Independence	Overland Park	Seneca
Chanute	Garden City	Leavenworth	Parsons	Sterling
Coffeyville	Holton	Marysville	Peabody	Wamego
Dodge City	Hoisington	McPherson	Phillipsburg	Winfield



kdc_kansasmainstreet@ks.gov
kansascommerce.gov/main-street

While engaging with and ensuring the success of new and existing communities, Kansas Main Street is also starting the Affiliate Community Program to encourage Main Street-style efforts and opportunities in more communities. This program will allow communities an opportunity to participate in Main Street quarterly trainings and technical assistance for a low, reasonable fee while educating them on the benefits and advantages of becoming a full-fledged Kansas Main Street community, including enhanced program support and technical assistance.

Since the inception of the National Main Street program in the 1970s, nearly 2,000 communities in more than 40 states have proven that the Main Street Approach is one of the most effective economic development tools available. Kansas Main Street has a long history of success for rural communities, and Governor Kelly and ORP want to make sure this state program helps communities achieve prosperity for years to come.

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS IN KANSAS

Another major shift in Kansas' economic development was signaled by Governor Kelly with her decision to establish a dedicated [International Division](#) within the Kansas Department of Commerce. This division focuses solely on the task of recruiting and strengthening international trade for the state. For many years, KDC had a more limited investment in international trade, and this new division has already proven to be a major advantage for KDC and the state.

In addition to bringing new companies to Kansas, the Division also helps Kansas companies expand their exporting capabilities. Through webinars and company-specific counseling, they provide financial support to help businesses exhibit at international trade shows, participate in Governor-led trade missions and more.

One longstanding program managed by the Division is the Kansas International Trade Show Assistance Program (KITSAP). This program provides support for Kansas companies looking to enter new foreign markets or introduce new products to overseas buyers at international trade shows. Participating companies have come from a variety of rural areas across the state including Atchison, Sabetha, and Ulysses. There are 47 cities in Kansas with at least

one company that has taken advantage of KITSAP funding.

The Governor's Exporter of the Year Award is another major program managed by the Division. In addition to recognizing companies around the state that demonstrate excellence in exporting, this award highlights the ways these companies serve as role models by helping other companies in their community learn about the many benefits of export sales. Winners have come from 13 different cities in Kansas and represent the best of the best in the state, exporting a variety of products and services ranging from medical devices to agriculture systems and tools.

ORP supports the International Division's operations and programming as international relationships and businesses boost rural economies. An emphasis on participating in a global market means more new jobs among Kansas manufacturing, distribution, and beyond. Without question, international development is a strong part of enhancing rural development.

Creekstone Farms was named winner of the 2020 Governor's Exporter of the Year Award, the top export business award presented by the state. Creekstone sends premium beef to 68 foreign markets, with exports as an essential element of its overall business success and sustainability.

Your
2020 Governor's
Exporter of the Year



PREMIUM BLACK ANGUS BEEF™
ALL-NATURAL PORK

Congratulations!



WORKFORCE

One issue that affects healthcare, childcare, infrastructure, and community development is the need for an adequate local workforce. In several parts of the state with sustained low unemployment rates, ag producers, business owners, and childcare providers simply need a bigger labor pool. In other regions, certain skilled professionals are more in demand than others.

Significant strides are needed to increase the size of the rural workforce and give rural Kansans the tools, training, and resources they need to build up their communities. Rural Kansans have made clear to ORP the importance of being able to live and work in a place of one's choosing without having to sacrifice quality of life. Through collaboration and investments, several initiatives were implemented in 2020.

KANSASWORKS

Kansans looking for work to explore new career opportunities can take advantage of the services provided by Kansas Department of Commerce through **KANSASWORKS**, which has offices and dedicated staff across the state. Historically KDC has hosted Statewide Job Fairs as part of its work connecting Kansas workers and employers. As a result of COVID-19, these events had to be reinvented from their traditional in-person format. The decision was made to move to an online environment with the introduction of a series of Statewide Virtual Job Fairs. Each virtual job fair hosted more than 1,000 Kansas job seekers and more than 100 employers hiring in Kansas. Plans already are in place for additional **KANSASWORKS** virtual job fairs in January, February, and March of 2021.

While Kansas Workforce Centers are strong resources for helping Kansans find meaningful employment, ORP also knows there are many rural communities without a close Workforce Center. With that in mind, earlier this year **KANSASWORKS** launched a second Mobile Workforce Center. The state-of-the-art mobile unit features several computers with internet connectivity, as well as trained staff able to help answer job seekers' questions.

The KANSASWORKS Mobile Workforce Center was unveiled late January 2020.



BUILD UP KANSAS

For the 2020-2021 school year, ORP supported the work of the Associated General Contractors (AGC) to encourage vocational training and career opportunities through the Build Up Kansas initiative. The program provides AGC's vocational training materials in Kansas high schools, community colleges, and vo-tech centers. It also targets 17- to 22- year old Kansans and their parents to inform them of the many professional opportunities available in the construction industry.

Many of AGC's training partners are located in rural Kansas, and participants have an opportunity to enter the construction industry with starting wages ranging from \$13 to \$20 an hour. After gaining valuable experience in the field and additional training, many will earn wages of \$25 to \$50 an hour or more.



POWER UP AND GO

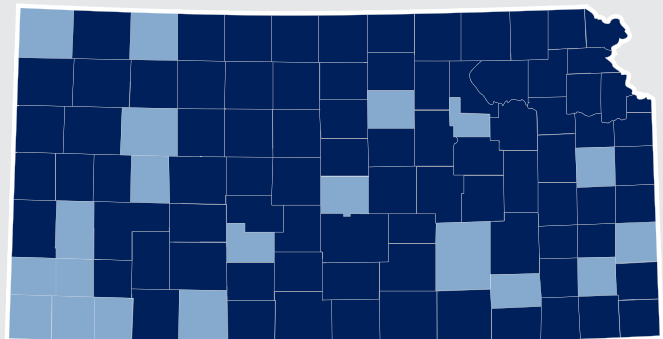
The Kansas [Power Up and Go](#) project is another exciting rural Kansas jobs initiative. Power Up and Go identifies personal and professional advancement opportunities for young, rural Kansans. In partnership with ORP, the Kansas Sampler Foundation is interviewing Kansans age 21 to 39 who want to live and work in rural communities in every county statewide (along with young professionals who may live in urban areas but still identify as rural Kansans). This is the most wide-ranging effort to date in Kansas to understand challenges that young rural professionals face, whether they stayed in their hometown, moved away and came back, want to return, or moved to a rural community for the first time.

Early findings indicate young professionals of all ages in Kansas face similar challenges – broadband

availability and access to affordable and acceptable housing, among other issues. These challenges are compounded by the lack of childcare resources and student loan debt, which significantly influence where these Kansans can live and work.

At the conclusion of the project in 2021, ORP and its partners will use information gathered to consider new programs and policies and how to invest in rural communities to attract and retain young people. The Kansas Sampler Foundation plans to use the information to initiate grassroots projects that continue to engage and empower these younger Kansans.

KANSAS POWER UP & GO SURVEY RESPONSES



As of December 1st Kansas Sampler has received responses from residents representing 85 counties.

2020 ORP VIRTUAL TOUR

Despite delays caused by COVID-19, it was important for ORP to continue to connect to rural stakeholders. The 2020 ORP Virtual Tour kicked off in August and featured a public meeting in each of the six main regions and one statewide meeting. Building off discussions from the Listening Tour the year prior, the theme of the 2020 tour was Listening → Action. ORP asked state agency leaders to join Lieutenant Governor Rogers for a deep dive into rural Kansas priorities and provide examples of successes and challenges in communities throughout the state.

In addition to seven public meetings with a regional and statewide focus, ORP and Lieutenant Governor Rogers also engaged with rural Kansas leaders through 18 smaller stakeholder meetings focused on various topics affecting their communities. Due to travel restrictions around COVID-19, all meetings were conducted virtually via Zoom but ORP was still able to hold meaningful dialogues with Kansans from every corner of the state.

After taking an in-depth look at ORP's priorities and some of the ways the state has made progress in these areas, Lieutenant Governor Rogers also stressed the importance of the 2020 Census at every meeting. With the Census calendar shortened at the federal level, Governor Kelly wanted to make sure all Kansans were counted, ensuring equal representation in the Statehouse and Congress and fair resource allocations for rural and urban Kansans alike.

During the public meetings, Q&A was facilitated by two regional stakeholders after each presenter and participants were given the opportunity to provide written feedback both before and after the event. ORP also promoted the Children's Cabinet's Our Tomorrows Story Bank throughout the tour, capturing experiences and perspectives of Kansans. A snapshot of the data and story bank starts on page 56. These stories, along with data collected from registrations, surveys, and discussions with Kansans will be used by ORP, the Kelly administration, and partners to advance priorities focused on rural communities.

MEETING PRESENTERS

Melissa Rooker
Executive Director
Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund

Ryan Vincent
Executive Director
Kansas Housing Resources Corporation

Kayla Savage
Community Development Division Director
Kansas Department of Commerce

STAFF

Lynn Rogers
Lieutenant Governor

Jillian Fisher
Deputy Executive Director
Office of Rural Prosperity

Joshua McGinn
Policy Analyst
Office of Rural Prosperity

Lucas Peterson
Special Assistant to the Lieutenant Governor

OVER 25 SECTORS REPRESENTED, INCLUDING:



Non-Profit



Agriculture



Government



Housing



Business



Marketing



Public Services



Healthcare



Economic
Development



Education
& Childcare



Law
Enforcement



Financial
Services

171

cities across Kansas represented

558

people registered

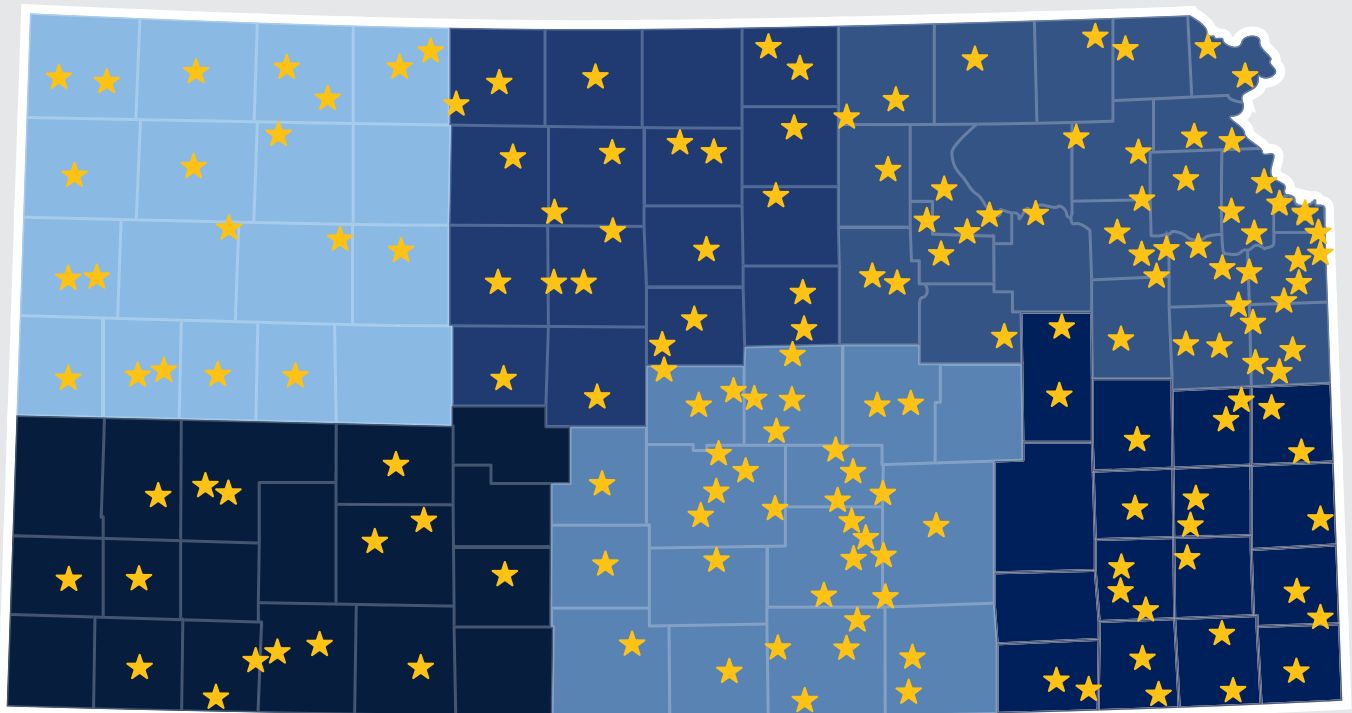
226

registrants also participated
in 2019 tour

6000+

people reached via
Facebook or YouTube

REGISTERED CITIES ACROSS ALL REGIONS OF KANSAS:



NORTH CENTRAL

AUGUST 6, 2020

Lovewell State Park
Kansas Tourism

Key Issues



Broadband and reliable internet access was the most-cited issue among registrants.



Education was a high priority for many registrants who expressed concern over rural schools and educational facilities. Most emphasized K-12 education, but challenges related to retaining young professionals and recent college grads was also a concern.



Healthcare concerns expressed included funding for rural health facilities, mental health, long-term care and disability services.



Many registrants were concerned with access to affordable housing, updated housing measures, and resources available for improved housing.

FACILITATORS

Erika Nelson

Lucas | Russell County
Artist/Resource Director
S.P. Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden

Kelly Larson

Lincoln | Lincoln County
Executive Director
Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation

Additional Issues Identified:

- Main Street
- Childcare and Early Education
- Agriculture
- Economic Development
- Rural Food Accessibility
- Transload Facilities
- Rural Job Incentives and Retention
- Water Access and Conservation
- Community Development
- Small Business Support
- COVID-19 Recovery
- Grant Funding
- Unemployment
- Infrastructure

NORTHWEST

AUGUST 12, 2020

Monument Rocks

Kansas Tourism

Key Issues



Broadband and reliable internet access was the most-cited issue among registrants, especially for areas with no fiber/access at all.



Education and childcare was a top priority for registrants, especially with concerns about COVID-19 protocols at schools and childcare-related challenges so parents could return to work.



Many registrants were concerned about evictions and affordable housing.



Healthcare access and affordability for small businesses and individuals who lost benefits since the beginning of the pandemic was a concern expressed by many.



Workforce, especially challenges related to recruitment efforts, unemployment, remote work, and small business retention was another priority for registrants.

FACILITATORS

Lissa Sexson

Weskan | Wallace County

Co-Director

Wallace County Visitors Bureau

Tara Vance

Norton | Norton County

Executive Director

Norton County Community Foundation

Additional Issues Identified:

- COVID-19 Protocols and Testing
- Social Services
- Unemployment
- Low Population
- Community Development
- Agriculture
- Telecommunications
- Affordable Healthcare
- Small Businesses
- Economic Growth and Development
- Equality
- Beautification Efforts
- Infrastructure
- Food Access
- Transportation
- Mental Health Services

STATEWIDE

AUGUST 22, 2020

Flint Hills
Kansas Tourism

Key Issues



Healthcare concerns were the most cited issues among registrants. They ranged from funding for rural health facilities and mental health to long-term care and disability services.



Broadband and reliable internet access, specifically in rural and frontier areas, was consistently cited among registrants.



Many registrants were concerned with access to affordable housing, updated housing measures, and resources available for improving houses.



Concerns with rural schools and educational facilities were often cited among registrants, with most emphasizing K-12 education, and challenges retaining young professionals and recent college graduates.

SPECIAL GUESTS:

Laura Kelly

48th Governor of the State of Kansas

Rich Felts

President, Kansas Farm Bureau

Additional Issues Identified:

- Childcare and Early Education
- Unemployment
- Small Business Relief
- Higher Education Incentives
- Economic Recovery
- Agriculture
- Rural Resources
- Community Development
- Environment Protection
- Diversity
- Senior Services
- Infrastructure
- Tech Innovations
- Workforce
- Food Insecurity
- Water and Soil Conservation
- E-Commerce

SOUTHWEST

AUGUST 25, 2020

Cimarron National Grassland

Kansas Tourism

Key Issues



Most registrants were concerned with issues such as access to affordable housing, updated housing measures, and resource availability for improved housing.



The need for safe childcare options that help people return to work – both centers and in-home care – was commonly mentioned.



Registrants expressed concern over business closures, professional retention, and unemployment.



Water was brought up in regard to both conservation measures and providing clean drinking water to all residents.

FACILITATORS

Catherine Moyer

Ulysses | Grant County

CEO, Pioneer Communications

Lea Ann Seiler

Hanston | Hodgeman County

Economic Development Director

Hodgeman County

Additional Issues Identified:

- Healthcare
- Education
- Infrastructure
- Broadband
- Political Division
- Social Services
- Economy
- Agriculture
- Oil/Gas
- Community Development
- Taxes
- Food Insecurity
- Unemployment
- Poverty
- Transportation
- Green Tech
- Medicaid Expansion

SOUTH CENTRAL

SEPTEMBER 2, 2020

Gypsum Hills
Kansas Tourism

Key Issues



Workforce was a frequently cited topic with many registrants discussing concerns about access to childcare for working parents and local businesses trying to find skilled workers to fill jobs.



Responding to COVID-19, with specific concerns regarding PPE, access to testing, and the long-term impacts of the coronavirus were all concerns.



Broadband and reliable internet access was consistently cited as a serious problem.



Many registrants were concerned with access to affordable housing, updated housing measures, and resources available for improving houses.

FACILITATORS

Andrea Springer

Hutchinson | Reno

Co-owner

Wool Market and DIY School

Sarah Werner

Winfield | Cowley County

CEO

Winfield Area Chamber of Commerce

Additional Issues Identified:

- Schools and Education
- Childcare
- Agriculture
- Economic Development
- Infrastructure and Road Quality
- Rural Job Incentives and Retention
- Water Access
- Community Development
- Small Business Support
- COVID-19 Recovery
- Grant Funding
- Medicaid Expansion
- Mental Health
- Sales Tax Relief
- Wind Energy
- Criminal Justice Reform

SOUTHEAST

SEPTEMBER 9, 2020

Bourbon Falls
Kansas Tourism

Key Issues



Many registrants were concerned with rural schools and educational facilities. Most emphasized K-12 education, but participants also noted the challenges of retaining young professionals and recent college graduates.



Healthcare concerns were the most cited issues among registrants. They ranged from funding for rural health facilities and mental health to long-term care and disability services. Registrants also coupled these concerns with access to healthy food and exercise.



Broadband and reliable internet access was the most cited issue among registrants.



Most registrants were concerned with access to affordable housing.

FACILITATORS

Samantha Kudrick

Coffeyville | Montgomery County
Tourism Director
Visit Coffeyville

Liz Simpson

Columbus | Cherokee County
Community Development Professional
Crossland Construction Company

Additional Issues Identified:

- Childcare
- Agriculture
- Economic Development
- Rural Food Accessibility and Initiatives
- Infrastructure and Road Quality
- Rural Job Incentives and Retention
- Water Access and Waste Management
- Community Development
- Small Business Support
- COVID-19 Recovery
- Grant Funding
- Unemployment and Workforce Training
- Medicaid Expansion
- Mental Health Funding
- Taxes
- Public Transportation

NORTHEAST

SEPTEMBER 16, 2020

Konza Prairie
Kansas Tourism

Key Issues



Education and childcare was the most common issue cited. Registrants were mainly concerned with children being left home unsupervised for online classes as parents returned to work.



Many cited housing issues, particularly access to affordable housing amid high unemployment rates.



Broadband and reliable internet access was consistently cited as a serious problem.



In addition to general unemployment, more job opportunities for young people and those convicted of crimes were noted workforce issues.

FACILITATORS

Leah B. Johnson

Troy | Doniphan County
Economic Development Director
Doniphan County

Kylee Luckereth

Seneca | Nemaha County
Executive Director, Seneca Area Chamber and Downtown Impact

Additional Issues Identified:

- Small Business Retention
- Healthcare
- Community Spaces and Recreation
- Food System Development
- Environment
- Transportation and Infrastructure
- Community Development Improvements
- Economic Growth
- Rural Sustainability
- Agriculture
- Water Supply
- Political Polarization
- Land Conservation
- COVID-19 Testing
- E-Commerce

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KANSAS RURAL CENTER TOWNHALL

The Kansas Rural Center (KRC) invited Lieutenant Governor Rogers and ORP to participate in their 2020 virtual townhall series. Focusing on Rural Revitalization, Lieutenant Governor Rogers joined a panel moderated by rural advocate Sarah Green that included Andi Dale from Dale Family Farms in Protection, Kansas, Kendal Carswell from Fort Hays State University, Matt O'Malley from Live Well Crawford County, and Ben Whiteside from Butler Rural Electric Cooperative. In addition to discussing issues ranging from food deserts

to broadband access, the Lieutenant Governor and other panelists shared their optimism that rural residents and those who would like to be rural often bring an entrepreneurial spirit to the challenges they face. By focusing on improving access to good paying jobs, building a sense of community belonging, and ensuring a high quality of life where everyone can raise a family, rural Kansas communities can unite around common goals and cultivate new leaders to carry their efforts forward.

HOUSING IMPACTS ON WORKFORCE

Communities throughout Kansas have expressed the need for quality, affordable, and accessible housing. In North Central Kansas, economic development foundations are particularly concerned about how housing and rental options impact a community's ability to recruit and retain a thriving workforce. The Kansas Sampler Foundation led a discussion with ORP and representatives from Lincoln, Republic, Ellsworth, and Cloud counties to discuss communities' challenges and possible solutions.

Participants noted that since COVID, they have seen an increase in young people trying to return home to enjoy small-town life but are hindered due to the lack of housing options. While this was a problem well before the pandemic, the lack of quality housing and rental options has been exacerbated. More people are willing to consider moving back to or remaining in rural areas with increased remote work options. Available homes in rural communities often need renovations, but cost and time for renovations make it more difficult for employers to attract and recruit employees. As discussed throughout

this report, recruiting and retaining workforce in rural areas is reliant on other priorities such as adequate housing, broadband, childcare, and other aspects that lead to a high quality of life.

Local communities are looking into possible solutions that include helping residents improve their spaces, renovate, and make additions. Participants from Lincoln County expressed that the distance between houses and nearby towns is a major problem. Area real estate agents, sellers, and buyers collaborated to showcase available housing options in surrounding communities. Republic County Economic Development is working closely with the Dane G. Hansen Foundation to help assess demand for housing while promoting a homeownership program funded by the foundation that offers low-interest housing payment loans. Additionally, Kansas Housing Resources Corporation is working with ORP to continue to expand statewide programs and resources and provide local communities with data and strategies to address their local housing needs.

EXPANDING HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES

As part of the Kansas Housing Resources Corporation’s Virtual Housing Conference, Lieutenant Governor Rogers shared ORP’s priorities and work to expand affordable, quality housing across the state. The session explored potential strategies to preserve and develop housing opportunities, bring growth and prosperity to rural communities, and serve

the state’s most vulnerable citizens. With Kansas not having a comprehensive statewide housing study since 1993, ORP is excited to work with KHRC and other key agencies and stakeholders to ensure a comprehensive study provides effective data, recommendations, and strategies to respond to housing needs across the state.

ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH IN NORTHWEST KANSAS

In recent years, attention has been drawn to data that show an increase in suicide rates among Kansas farmers, especially in Northwest Kansas (NWKS). One group involved in this effort, LiveWell Northwest Kansas, coordinated a series of regional mental health forums to begin addressing critical needs with healthcare providers, schools, regional non-profit organizations, and regional mental healthcare providers. These forums identified potential areas for growth in the region including building awareness for adverse childhood experiences, training residents in compassionate listening and the role of family trauma, identifying initiatives to address social isolation, and creating awareness around mental health issues impacting NWKS.

ORP met with key stakeholders who coordinated the forums, as well as other stakeholders across Kansas including health foundations, education advocates, and the Commissioner of Behavioral Health Services for the State of Kansas. Key issues discussed included the recommendations of the 2018-2019 Mental Health Taskforce, which the Kansas Department of Disability and Aging Services is working to implement with the legislature,

the Governor, and stakeholders to make the behavioral health system more seamless and accessible. Recommendations include expanding Medicaid, restoring and increasing outpatient services, improving drug and substance abuse services, increasing inpatient psychiatric facilities, improving regional infrastructure, and increasing short-term psychiatric care to relieve pressure on long-term care facilities.

While COVID-19 has caused delays or complicated efforts to implement necessary programs to address mental and behavioral health, rural communities have benefited from increased accessibility to telehealth services. Patients, providers, and hospitals all agreed that the distance to care is a major obstacle regardless of the public health crisis and access to telehealth will remain a priority. This is especially true for farmers, who are sometimes unable to adjust their schedules to planting and harvesting conditions. By increasing accessibility through remote services, they will be more likely to talk to someone — even if it means simply pulling over their tractor to have that important conversation.

MEDICAID EXPANSION AND RURAL HEALTHCARE

With so many Kansans losing employer-based health insurance during the pandemic through no fault of their own, the need to expand Medicaid in Kansas became more apparent than ever. ORP met with healthcare providers and administrators in Southeast and South Central Kansas, two regions that are struggling with hospital shutdowns and loss of revenue.

Like most of the state, providers described how they voluntarily delayed elective procedures at the beginning of the pandemic to save PPE and protect patient safety. This caused healthcare providers to lose revenue at the same time many of their patients were losing their job-based healthcare benefits. While providers eventually resumed most services, their revenues and volumes have remained unpredictable.

Providers have also turned to telehealth and curbside treatments to reduce potential risk and reach more patients, but strain on hospital resources continued throughout the year. Participants shared how they have helped their communities by responding to outbreaks at meatpacking facilities and offering mobile services. But with community advocates reporting repeat unemployment claims, increased demand for food assistance, and unmet transportation needs, Southeast Kansas has felt the pinch of not having expanded healthcare access potentially more than any region of the state.

In Neosho County alone, 400 uninsured people could access preventative healthcare if Medicaid was expanded. This is especially true for residents with chronic health conditions. As one provider said: “If they drop off insurance, they just won’t go.” In addition to helping patients access the care they need, providers also addressed how Medicaid expansion would help them provide services in smaller towns that currently lack a healthcare provider. Other community health leaders shared how they would work to address food deserts and transportation barriers and offer telemonitoring services if they had more resources through Medicaid expansion. For now, however, uncompensated care has stretched their healthcare systems thin.

Kansas healthcare providers have endured these challenges for many years, with one health system CEO saying they have had to “reinvent” themselves to continue serving their communities. Though Kansas healthcare providers are very resilient, the state will be unique in the region after Missouri and Oklahoma voters chose to expand Medicaid in 2020, joining Colorado, Nebraska, and 36 other states. With increased healthcare access and less unreimbursed care, Kansas providers face the possibility of more difficulty recruiting health professionals and providing services compared with their peers just across the border. As the same CEO warned, “There’s a limit to how many times we can reinvent ourselves before it impacts quality or safety.”





Photo provided by Kansas Hospital Association



KDOT Cost Share project improves access to hospital in Greeley County.



Kansas ICU nurse recognized for her service.

Podiatry Clinic Staff at William Newton Hospital in Winfield, Kansas.



Neighbors show appreciation for Lindsborg Community Hospital.



HEALTH AND ECONOMIC DISPARITIES IN SOUTHWEST KANSAS

In discussions with stakeholders on issues important to their communities, Southwest Kansans raised concerns about economic and health disparities encountered by Hispanic and Latino communities. As with a majority of the issues addressed during the 2020 ORP tour, these concerns are not new but were exacerbated because of COVID-19. In a session facilitated by Ernestor De La Rosa, Assistant City Manager for Dodge City, and David Jordan, President of the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, ORP heard from a wide range of experts and advocates for the Hispanic and Latino community and local healthcare and workforce representatives. Aude Negrete, Executive Director of the Kansas Hispanic & Latino American Affairs Commission, helped connect ORP to the participants and will be instrumental in working on solutions and next steps.

Since the middle of April, a handful of rural communities have had some of the highest percentages of COVID-19 transmission in the state. Many of these communities are home to the state's largest meatpacking plants, which are major economic drivers in their region. De La Rosa

shared that Dodge City was working to improve the situation with the implementation of safety measures and access to increased testing. He also said nonprofits and advocates were stepping up to help with basic needs for those who were sick or laid off. Dodge City's population is 60% to 70% Hispanic with a large refugee community, and at the time of this conversation, requests for assistance were on the rise.

A representative from the Local United Food and Commercial Workers Union shared that there still was a lot of work to do to address worker health and safety. Hesitancy in adopting COVID-19 protocols and practices has led to conditions that impact businesses, families, and workers. Hearing these concerns not only in Southwest Kansas but throughout the state, the Kelly administration has continued working to improve access to testing and increase adoption of COVID-19 mitigation practices. Together with increased vaccine distribution as Kansas receives its allotment from the federal government, these measures will be essential in order to create safer work environments for Kansans.

CHILDCARE AND EARLY EDUCATION

As one of ORP’s key priority areas, it was important to Lieutenant Governor Rogers to discuss the challenges that parents, childcare centers, and in-home providers were experiencing due to COVID. ORP worked with early childhood advocate and state representative Monica Murnan to bring together childcare professionals, parents, and educators from Southeast and South Central Kansas to hear their success stories and ongoing challenges. Despite childcare providers working to support so many other essential workers and industries during the pandemic, many faced significant economic fallout.

Providers shared stories of parents pulling their children without notice in early March with spots not being filled until late summer. This caused some centers and providers to shut their doors entirely. Those who survived the initial closures of the pandemic were faced with figuring out how to rearrange their spaces in order to meet recommended safety protocols. Additionally, scarcity of cleaning supplies and toiletries paired with difficulty finding protein and dairy products made it difficult to fulfill food program requirements.

Several providers shared of increased behavioral challenges as children exhibited signs of increased stress — a serious issue they continued to see throughout the public health crisis as families experienced job losses and other strains. Amy Boyd, Director of New Generation Childcare

in Bourbon County, reports that parents “are totally worn down. I’m not a counselor, and I have parents come into my office that just want to talk.” New Generation Childcare is licensed for up to 84 children, but at one point during the pandemic, the center’s attendance dropped to 14. Through all the challenges, Boyd exemplifies the dedication of so many early childhood providers and educators, saying, “We’ve been here for 30 years and we don’t plan to close our doors.”

Even before the pandemic, Martin Burke, Superintendent of West Elk Schools, shared that his community was focused on creating a center for children birth to five years because quality options were not available. “My wife has two master’s degrees and when we were early in our career, one of the catalysts that propelled her into being a stay-at-home mom was to ensure our children had quality and affordable childcare,” Burke said. With schools closing in March, Burke reported that without other options, parents either had to take leave from their jobs, ask for help from relatives, or seek care from unlicensed providers.

As discussed in the Childcare priorities section, the Children’s Cabinet has actively provided relief to centers, providers, and parents since the height of the pandemic. For many, more support is needed to meet demand for increased quality childcare options across the state, especially in rural Kansas.



AGRICULTURE'S VOICE IN STATEWIDE INITIATIVES

Lieutenant Governor Rogers shared ORP's priorities and information about the 2020 Virtual Tour during the Kansas Department of Agriculture's 2020 Kansas Summit on Agricultural Growth. Through their annual summit and stakeholder meetings, the Kansas Department of Agriculture (KDA) engages farmers, ranchers, agribusiness owners, and other industry professionals across Kansas agriculture.

In its daily work, KDA's programs range anywhere from marketing Kansas products to managing water rights and inspecting dairy processors. KDA staff also work to protect natural resources, promote public health and safety, protect animal health, and provide consumer protection, among other public and industry-focused services.

As an advocate for one of Kansas's largest industries, KDA recognizes that the well-being of farmers and ranchers extends beyond traditional measures of ag production to include other factors including mental health. Part of this effort included creating the [KansasAgStress.org](https://www.kansasagstress.org) website in 2020. In collaboration with statewide partners, this website serves as a central location

of resources for Kansans in agriculture who may be struggling with stress from economic, social, and other pressures in the industry.

Not only did KDA's food, animal, and other safety programs alter their work in 2020 to better serve the department's stakeholders during COVID-19, the Division of Animal Health coordinated the state's response to the largest outbreak of vesicular stomatitis in the state's history, a virus that can affect horses, livestock, and swine and cause influenza-like symptoms in humans.

With the support of Governor Kelly during the SPARK Taskforce process, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Commerce worked together to deliver the Securing Local Foods grant program. Not only did these grants help Kansas food producers respond to the huge increase in demand for local food during the pandemic, it will continue to provide value to Kansas producers and consumers through increased greenhouse space, cold storage, and refrigeration trucks for years to come.

RURAL WATER SYSTEM INNOVATION

In a conversation facilitated by the Kansas Water Office (KWO), ORP met with stakeholders from across the state to discuss water issues. Topics included water conservation efforts in Northwest Kansas, sustainability and water quality issues in South Central Kansas, and water-related educational and career opportunities for students.

Advancing farm technology and developing young leaders is part of the work of Professor Weston McCrary at Northwest Kansas Technical College. Through new practices and technologies, many of these young ag producers learn how they can enhance their farming operation while reducing input costs and conserving the Ogallala aquifer. In many cases, such technologies are reliant on increased broadband access, making the case for expanding broadband even stronger.

Near Cheney in South Central Kansas, farmers and other community leaders have engaged with General Mills in a principle-based approach for public-private watershed management systems. Some of the principles include encouraging innovation regarding soil covering, livestock integration, and understanding the agricultural and community context surrounding a water

resource. General Mills estimates a \$5 social return on every dollar invested not even counting the positive impact on communities and soil health.

Not far from Cheney, leaders in Pretty Prairie have worked a long time to adequately address their need for a more sustainable municipal water source. Again, a principle-based framework was determined as the best approach to improve water quality long-term while reducing runoff through strategies including maintaining living roots and crop diversity.

In Maize, suburban Wichita-area teacher Amy Hammett has focused on providing her students marketable skills in the growing field of data science while also studying water issues impacting the surrounding community. With this valuable work, Wichita has been able to more effectively plan its short-term water resource management, providing more predictability for a resource it shares with surrounding communities and farms. The educator also hopes better economic impact data will enhance policymakers' understanding in areas related to reservoir sedimentation and water runoff.



THE CASE FOR BROADBAND

With the pandemic continuing to necessitate increased use of virtual platforms, ORP wanted to bring together a group of rural leaders from across the state who have experience with broadband connectivity — either providing it for their consumers or requiring it for their own work.

To lead this conversation, ORP reached out to Catherine Moyer of Pioneer Communications in Ulysses. Moyer, like many local internet service providers, knew exactly what parts of her service area would need increased access, and Pioneer started to build out additional infrastructure soon after a pandemic was declared.

While much of Southwest Kansas does have impressive internet service, not all Kansans in the region have access. Kearny County Hospital CEO David Hofmeister and IT Director Tony Salcido described that while the internet connection was strong at the hospital, it still was difficult to serve all of their patients when some lacked internet access and compatible technology at home.

Not far from Kearny County, Minneola Healthcare CEO Debbie Bruner reported similar issues delivering telemedicine to people's homes, as well as problems uploading and downloading large images. Bruner's problems illustrate a larger issue that has been identified by the pandemic — the necessity of having not only high download speeds, but also improved upload speeds or symmetrical service.

On the other side of the state, Emergency Management official Wes Lanter described how adequate services are needed throughout

his county to provide effective emergency response, especially during a pandemic. In Wabaunsee County, Randy Wild reported that despite being located within commuting distance of Manhattan and Topeka, his community only gained broadband access within the past two years. As a result of strong community engagement, Maple Hill was able to work with WTC of Kansas to achieve access at over 99% of its homes. Not only did this happen in time to offset problems related to the pandemic, it also should continue to enhance the town's marketability for years to come.

Jackie Mundt, a Young Farmer and Rancher with Kansas Farm Bureau who works for the local Kanza Cooperative Association, described some of the practical effects of not having adequate internet access on the farm — not only the inconvenience, but more importantly, the lost opportunities. Many new tractors, center pivots, and other farm machinery and equipment include precision ag technology that can reduce input costs, save water and energy, and increase yields. But much of the new technology doesn't work if a farmer can't easily upload and download data where the crops are located.

To accommodate precision ag, telemedicine, emergency response, and other essential services, the Kelly Administration will continue to push for broadband access for all Kansans to connect communities in the state and ensure that all Kansans have the tools they need to succeed and participate in the modern economy.



RURAL & REMOTE: CONNECTING KANSANS

Remote work and telework options are critical to recruit and retain a workforce in rural areas. The effects of COVID-19 elevated this discussion as Kansans look to stay safe while still being productive. Rural and Remote Founder and Director Kade Wilcox and Regional Coordinator Gretchin Staples met with ORP to discuss their work in connecting people in rural communities with remote jobs to create pathways back home and opportunities for those who want to stay in their communities.

Staples and Wilcox said that prior to COVID-19, misconceptions among employers and employees about remote work was their biggest challenge. The pandemic forced employers to try working remotely for the first time in many cases. Many saw that a business or organization can operate

effectively while working remotely. “It showed a level of interest to do it right, and do it well,” Wilcox said. Rural & Remote is optimistic that more businesses will encourage more remote working options now that they’ve seen success. While there are several factors required to see improvement, remote work opportunities demand the attention of economic development and local leaders.

With funding from the NWKS Economic Innovation Center and the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, Rural & Remote is able to support individuals and communities in 26 counties in Northwest Kansas with remote work skill development, computer science training, and remote work job placement.

KANSAS ANIMATOR NETWORK

The Kansas Animator Network (KAN) develops cohorts of people from local communities across Kansas to foster networking and collaboration. KAN helps facilitate local asset-based community development as a way to cultivate the capacity of local individuals to increase their own communities’ prosperity and initiate effective community action.

KAN met with ORP to discuss key takeaways from meetings held during the pandemic and related work taking place in participants’ communities. The group cited its efforts to find hidden gems throughout rural Kansas and challenge residents

to connect with people they don’t know — especially if they are of a different background or demographic.

Sharing best practices and empowering communities to share stories was cited as another effective way to help other counties identify their problems and integrate solutions taking place elsewhere in their own communities. One participant noted it’s not about leaders finding the best program, but instead having the skills to find untapped resources and empower residents to speak out and engage in the process.

TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure is important throughout the state, but it is particularly vital in rural areas where accessing healthcare, transporting grain and cattle, or safely commuting to a job or school in the next county is critical for the local economy and quality of life. ORP joined the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) and other stakeholders in a discussion around its efforts to improve communication, work in partnership with local communities to address their infrastructure needs, and effectively deliver the new 10-year Eisenhower Legacy Transportation Program, or “IKE.”

Even before IKE was passed, KDOT worked to implement a “dig once” policy in an effort to better serve communities and work with providers. “Dig once” refers to an approach that allows internet service providers to update the local broadband infrastructure when a highway project is coming through an area. By having more of this work done simultaneously, it not only updates a local network, it also provides cost savings that can be reinvested in the community. From Garden City to the Flint Hills, providers shared how this kind of approach has helped improve access and promote efficiency.

Detailed earlier in the infrastructure section of the report, two local officials described the Cost

Share program as a “game changer.” As one official explained, “We’re a mid-sized city trying to do a lot with a few people and a few dollars.” The program’s flexibility allows communities large and small to move forward on projects that were just beyond the community’s reach without the state’s partnership.

Along with traditional highway projects, Cost Share enabled KDOT to partner with local communities wanting to increase biking and pedestrian opportunities. Not only have communities seen outdoor recreation increase during the pandemic but they see it as a way to connect more people to the local economy, such as out-of-state college students.

An issue that was raised in multiple breakout sessions this year was improved rail access. Rail is particularly important for ag communities that need to transport large quantities of grain. One local co-op operator described how a bridge fire increased costs \$600,000 one year with trucks able to haul significantly fewer bushels than rail cars. With the first year of IKE’s short-line rail projects announced in October, KDOT is hopeful this program will not only decrease costs for Kansas businesses, but also reduce traffic and improve safety on highways.



COMMODITIES AND COMMUNITIES

Low commodity prices over many years and the negative impact on farm communities continues to be an issue brought to ORP's attention. While different programs have mitigated some of the pressure on commodity producers and ag vendors, Kansas farmers and communities must continue to consider new ways to improve long-term economic profitability and local resiliency.

With the help of the Kansas Department of Agriculture (KDA), ORP met with over 30 local leaders and stakeholders from throughout Southwest Kansas to discuss this topic. The group of stakeholders was diverse, with each participant having a unique connection to the Kansas agricultural economy.

Many farmers reported the trend of reducing inputs such as fertilizers, water, and herbicides in order to save money short-term. In some cases this is putting a downward pressure on the local economy more generally. As one seed and fertilizer saleswoman put it, "people are not spending as much on other things because they're scraping their wallets to water their crops." According to another producer involved in the corn industry, "If farmers are making a profit, it's

because they've had tremendous crops." Based on the feedback from farmers across the region, yields have varied greatly from one county to the next.

As part of the discussion on low commodity prices and high input prices, many of the participants discussed the need for highways and rail to get products to market more cost effectively. Since most Kansas grain is exported and prices are highly dependent on the global market, which is subject to many complex forces, several participants expressed interest in cultivating local efforts to finish products here in the state. By developing local dairy processing, milling, and biofuel capacity, communities have the potential to add not only a local market for Kansas producers, but add value for Kansas consumers as well.

One farm family shared their story of transitioning a farming operation that was mainly commodity-based to one that specialized in direct marketing of grass-fed beef, pork, and poultry. Even before the pandemic caused a significant increase in consumer demand for local food products, this family farm reported feeling better "insulated" as a result of having more of their production under their control from start to finish.



REGIONAL FOOD OPPORTUNITIES

After seeing the huge increase in demand for local food products during the pandemic, ORP wanted to have a conversation with one Kansan who helped make it happen — Rick McNary. As a longtime leader in rural Kansas through his writing and work to improve food access, McNary responded to the growth in demand for local foods by creating the Shop Kansas Farms Facebook page, which has helped local Kansas ag producers and their communities by facilitating hundreds of thousands of connections and sales of local Kansas products.

In addition to McNary, ORP heard from several other young leaders in rural Kansas who are pursuing the opportunity to expand their businesses and help local food producers in

Kansas sell their products. McNary has also worked with the Kansas Rural Center, an organization focused on helping local farmers and ranchers build a healthy local food and farm system and Kansas Farm Bureau, a membership organization working to inspire young farmers and ranchers and facilitate leadership opportunities.

Since this conversation, Shop Kansas Farms has launched a new website with a business directory that helps consumers locate and connect with more than 400 local food producers. At shopkansasfarms.com, McNary and others are hoping to continue to develop additional resources for Kansans interested in exploring the growing opportunities for local food producers and consumers in the state.

KANSAS TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

While indigenous people reside in all parts of Kansas, many of the largest communities of native people are in the Northeast region of the state. This region's four federally recognized tribes have an important role in regional and local economic development, local economies, and workforce while contributing to local education systems and maintaining their diverse native cultures.

ORP reached out to all of the tribal leaders of Kansas to hear their perspective on their communities' specific issues and appreciated the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation for bringing together a group of leaders to share some of the challenges their community has experienced during the pandemic.

With the nation's economic activity reduced due to the pandemic, tribal leaders sought to keep services available by allowing telework options

as much as possible. Due to schools transitioning to online learning, the community worked to apply for a grant to facilitate homeschooling, and the local after-school program helped distribute food to local families. Recognizing its importance to working parents, the local childcare center was able to adapt and add safety measures to continue serving families with children.

As it is statewide, accessing broadband is an issue for many tribal communities in Kansas. Tribal leadership reported exploring options with local providers to bring access to their community. The nation is also working to sustain local water resources and continues to advocate with local, state, and federal government officials for equitable distribution of funds and recognition of the economic impact that native people contribute to their community.

MANUFACTURING AND RECRUITMENT

ORP met with a few local manufacturers in McPherson County to learn how their business had changed since Lieutenant Governor Rogers' 2019 ORP Listening Tour visit last year and how COVID-19 affected their operations. Recruiting and maintaining a quality workforce were cited as the biggest barriers to continued growth for area manufacturers last year. Quality-of-life issues in local communities were identified as a key recruiting barrier for many employees. Potential hires wanted to live in communities that were welcoming, provided events and activities, and were positioned for growth.

Throughout COVID-19 but especially at the onset of the pandemic, employers shared that it remained difficult to find and recruit skilled workers, reliably predict sale volume, and nimbly adapt to unstable supply chains. In many cases, production was impacted by absenteeism that was not due to high infection rates, but fear and secondary effects of the pandemic. In response, local manufacturers invested time and resources to develop new safety and testing protocols to keep workers safe and maintain efficiency. Over the summer, participants reported that production had rebounded in most areas, with the sale of some products "skyrocketing."

TOURISM AND RECREATION IN 2020

The year 2020 was unprecedented for the tourism and travel industry. While the way Kansans travel, vacation, and spend money was limited in many ways, there were also opportunities.

Destination marketing organizations such as convention and visitors' bureaus have had to deal with challenging budgets as hotels, restaurants and hospitality centers have been some of the hardest hit businesses in the country. A North Central Economic Development Director shared that federal and state programs created to help such as the Payroll Protection Program (PPP), small business loans and other grants through the SPARK Taskforce, and assistance through the Kansas Department of Commerce Community Development Block Grants have been extensive, but gaps remained with an overall shortage of funding. For instance, within 48 hours of Governor Kelly announcing the establishment of the Hospitality Industry Relief Emergency (HIRE) Fund, all \$5 million allocated for the loan program had been awarded.

Simply put, most small-town businesses cannot survive on local traffic alone. The owner of the famous Brookville Hotel in Abilene announced the business' closure due to COVID-19. In an interview, Brookville Hotel operators acknowledged PPP assistance helped them stay afloat while the popular dining room was closed, but once they reopened, the traffic they counted on from tour groups and families celebrating large events did not materialize.

On the other hand, there still is a great opportunity for tourism in Kansas, especially in rural communities as travelers are looking for destinations closer to home where they can socially distance. Campsites, state parks, and other outdoor recreation has seen an increase as families search for safe alternatives for recreation and leisure.



Our Tomorrows Story Bank

2020

The Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund, in partnership with the University of Kansas, is leading efforts to build an **Our Tomorrows Story Bank**. This collection of personal stories from Kansans about their experiences today is intended to inform how we all can help shape a brighter tomorrow. While these stories, and the anonymous collection and dissemination of them, are meant to be brief, straightforward, and as real-time as possible, the resulting “story bank” is rich and deep with data to be analyzed and explored.

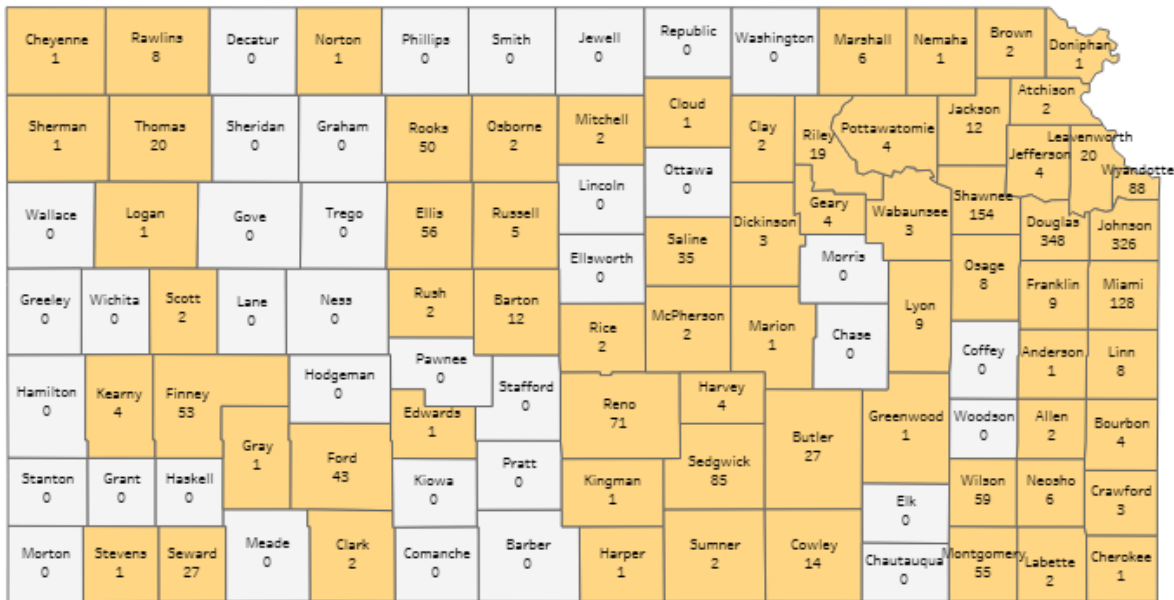
Data in this report was collected between March 27 and November 22, 2020

Story Bank Snapshot

Total stories shared by Kansans: 1,994

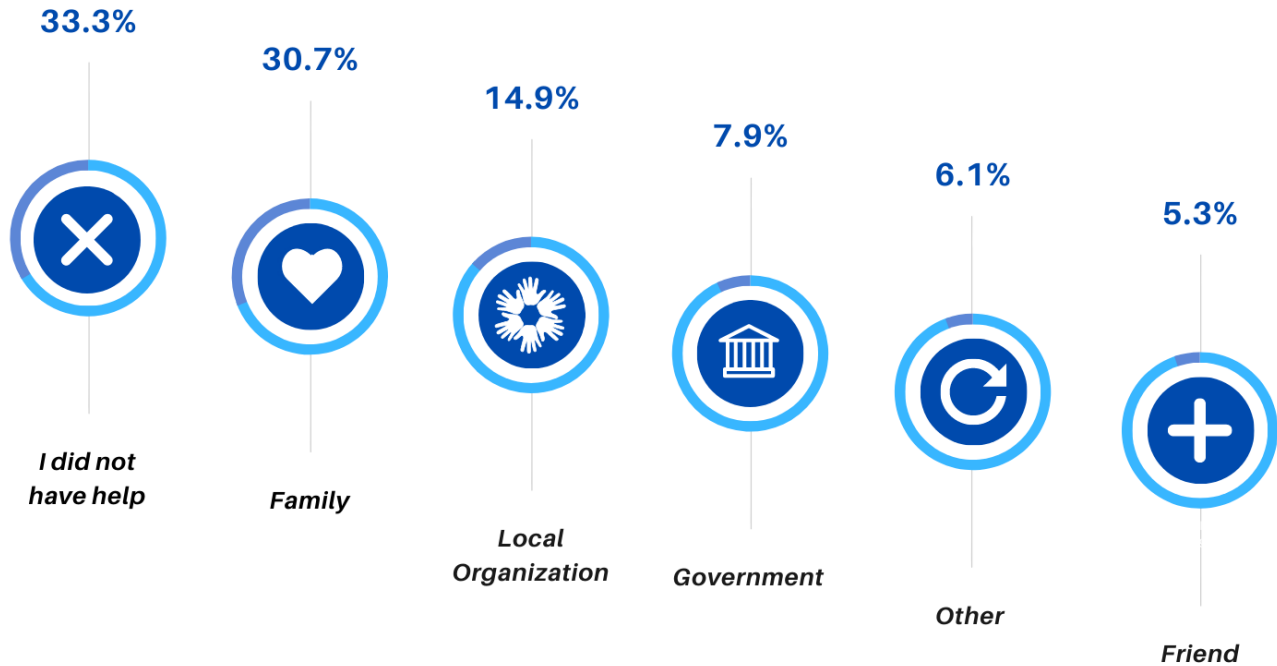
Total stories shared by those who indicated they live in a “very remote or rural area”: 114 (5.7%)

Story counts by Kansas county:



Basic Needs

Who was most helpful in meeting basic needs in the experience you shared?



*Percent of total stories collected from remote or rural voices
Total n=114, collected between 3/27/20 and 11/22/20*

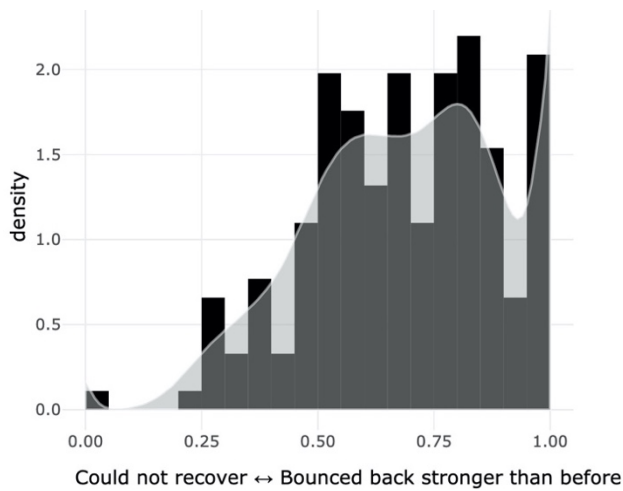
The **Basic Needs multiple choice question** helps understand real experiences in terms of who is helping families meet their basic needs.

- 7.9% of remote and rural voices shared that the **government** helped meet basic needs, as compared to 5.7% of the total Story Bank.
- 33.3% of remote and rural voices reported that they did not have any help with meeting their basic needs, significantly higher than those in the total Story Bank that indicated the same (21%).
- A review of the stories from those indicating they did not have help, respondents often reported struggling with family separation and health or healthcare issues. These respondents were also more likely to be Hispanic and more likely to be aged 44 years or younger. However, there was a pretty even distribution of these stories among all annual income brackets, suggesting that a lack of help is a struggle for families across a range of income and employment situations in rural Kansas.

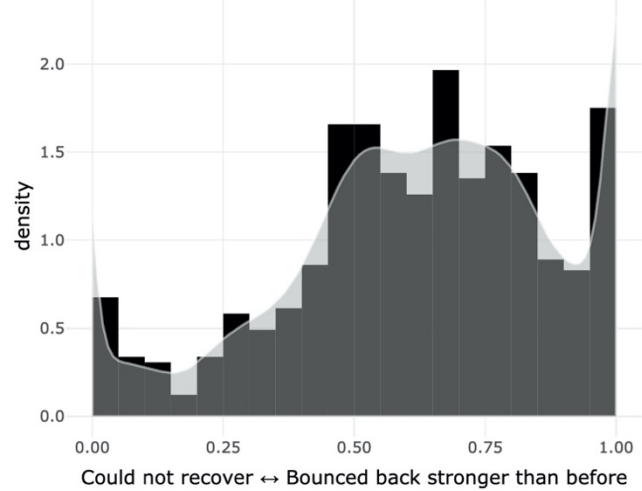
Resilience

In the face of hardship, do families report being unable to recover or bouncing back stronger?

Rural Voices Responses



Overall Story Responses



The **Resilience scale** is a measure of how experiences impact children and families, and how well they are able to overcome hardships in the stories they shared. The response patterns from rural voices (bar chart on the left) indicate that rural families experience a higher rate of resilience than the overall experiences from the full story bank (bar chart on the right). This pattern is echoed in the stories themselves, with themes of **community help and pride**, perceptions of **low rates of COVID-19** in rural communities, and a **recognition of family strength**.

Rural Voices from the Our Tomorrows Story Bank

Overall, remote and rural Kansas voices reported disruptors such as a **lack of access to technology and internet** or **unemployment and financial issues** in the experiences they shared. However, remote and rural voices also reported that they felt secure because they **had other people supporting them** and that **family was most often responsible** for getting what they needed. The following stories are examples of those shared by remote and rural Kansans from the Our Tomorrows Story Bank; titles are chosen by the respondent, and observer edits are in [] to protect confidentiality.

Remote Learning with a Special Needs Child

Because of COVID-19 our children are using the remote learning option at their schools. It's been a complex and rapidly changing situation with many changes to schedules and types of technology and systems being used. What has helped us tremendously is the technology provided by the school, an iPad for each child, already loaded with the needed applications. Also a big help to us during this time is that my employer has provided an internet access point, to help with our limited rural bandwidth. This supplements our own internet service and prevents my work from interfering with their connection and vice versa. This technology being provided to us at no cost has been a tremendous help to us during this time, and while it's still a struggle, we are incredibly grateful for this and I don't believe we could thrive as well as we are without it.

Distance learning

We are just surviving using distance learning. My daughter is 12 years old and has down syndrome. Distance learning has not been productive. She acquires skills best with in person learning. The lack of in person learning is increasing the gap for her and others who do not have the cognitive ability to navigate computer systems or learn on their own. She needs someone to teach her and I do not have the training nor the time. So every day the gap gets bigger as her peers have the benefit of online skills acquisition and even though it is offered to her it is not beneficial to her. She thrives in a classroom learning from and with her peers. I am angry that the governor made a decision for the whole state. Yet our state has different areas with very different risks. What works or is best for the cities is not what works or is best for rural areas. Yet she treated us all as the same. Please allow people and local communities to decide what is best for themselves and do not dictate to us.

Worried

A large part of my job is recruitment and although I am currently employed I am very concerned about the future of my job. I have 3 children to care for and since I live in a rural community there is not an abundance of jobs to choose from.

Food

We have started buying farm animals, pig, chickens, and gardening as our source of food due to the shortage of food available at the store.

How the uninfected are affected

My community is relatively untouched by the virus 1 person in a community of 5000. But my business as one of our few licensed daycares has been devastated. I am down to 3 part time children and one who pays full time rates and does not attend. Before this hit I was set up to come back from having a year and a half with infants to a full enrollment. To compensate the state will payment 250 a month, with a total of 1500(the sustainability grant), not much for what I am losing. One of my part time families has refused to pay full rates and is paying half rates. The other is state paid and the state is refusing to pay full rates, they pay less than half. My last family who does not attend, work from home and have older kids who help. She would not be able to prove hours as hers have been cut, and fluctuate so much that the family would not even qualify for any assistance though her job is deemed essential. This is not how to keep providers licensed.

Gratitude for My Home on the Prairie

During the challenging times in which we live, I have never been more grateful to live in the Midwest in a small town with neighbors I know. The wide-open spaces, fresh air, and familiar faces have made this unusual time very bearable. In a small town, you know you can rely on fellow citizens for the basics like toilet paper and also the complex like effectively orchestrating the delivery of K-12 education online. My family has always made it known that we love our small town life, but we appreciate that this unique circumstance has made us realize that we are thriving in this environment while many others are struggling. Times are tough for farmers and many small businesses; but we believe things are better here in our small town than they are in a crowded urban area. We wouldn't want to be anywhere else.





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