



— *Kansas* —

FOOD FIRST

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KANSAS STATE
UNIVERSITY

Center for Engagement and
Community Development





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2018 NATIONAL RURAL GROCERY SUMMIT
Providing Healthy Food Access
to Rural America



They are
places where
people gather,
socialize,
and catch up
on the local
happenings.”



K-STATE'S RURAL GROCERY INITIATIVE

DAVID PROCTER

Ten years ago, Kansas State University faculty, community development extension specialists, healthy food stakeholders and several grocery owners applied for and received a small U.S. Department of Agriculture grant to assist rural Kansas grocery stores. K-State's Rural Grocery Initiative, or RGI, was launched.

We had come to understand the incredible importance of grocery stores in rural communities. These small businesses are one of the primary economic drivers in rural towns, annually adding nearly a million dollars to local economies; employing, on average, 17 full- and part-time workers; and providing these towns significant tax dollars. Not only do these businesses add to the local economy, they are also providing rural citizens healthy food.

Nearly 5 million rural citizens across the United States are living in what are known as food deserts: areas of the country where significant poverty exists and where people live more than 10 miles from a grocery store. Research from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics shows that rural

grocery stores offer healthier foods, at lower cost, than convenience stores, and that these stores are often distribution points for locally grown foods. Finally, these businesses are community hubs; they are places where people gather, socialize and catch up on the local happenings.

Working in towns of 2,500 or fewer people, we established our RGI goals: identifying the challenges facing rural grocery stores; developing responses to those challenges; identifying sustainable grocery business models; building virtual and face-to-face information networks for rural grocers; and strengthening rural access to healthy foods.

In our efforts to address these goals, RGI has created a database of nearly 200 Kansas rural grocery stores, surveyed owners to better understand the challenges they face, built the informational website, ruralgrocery.org, and developed a rural grocery business toolkit. We have facilitated numerous community conversations called FEAST, or Food Education Agriculture Solutions Together, events where citizens come together to chart their path to strengthen the local food systems and

grocery stores. We also have hosted five national rural grocery summits where hundreds of owners and food access stakeholders have come from states all across the U.S. to discuss the latest research and best practices regarding rural grocery operations.

Since 2007, K-State's Rural Grocery Initiative has been bringing attention to and assisting grocery stores in rural communities. Along the way, we have worked with some incredible communities, local leaders and grocery owners. The stories featured in our Food First magazine provide a glimpse of this important work and these amazing people.

FOOD ACCESS INITIATIVES

STRENGTHENING NUTRITION EDUCATION

In Kansas, nearly 1 in 5 rural grocery stores in communities with populations under 2,500 people have gone out of business between 2008 and 2016 (Center for Engagement and Community Development, Rural Grocery Closures, 2016). Rural communities struggle to sustain core economic, nutritional and civic needs as they battle many demographic forces of decline.

We know a central piece of sustaining many rural areas is the small-town, independently owned grocery store. These stores are a vital piece of the local food system, providing a supply of fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy, breads, grains and meats. They are a cornerstone business functioning as an important part of the economic engine that drives the rural regions of our state. Yet these grocery stores often struggle to stay in business.

Kansas State University's Center for Engagement and Community Development, or CECD, was awarded a prestigious \$500,000 Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, or AFRI, research grant through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, or NIFA, to evaluate the significance of locally owned rural grocery stores in communities with no more than 2,500 residents. NIFA grants support research, education and extension activities in the six farm bill priority areas.

In partnership with the University of Minnesota, the AFRI research project with the CECD aims to address economic and nutritional challenges faced by rural communities through two means: (1) the introduction of a nutritional quality index system into rural grocery stores coupled with (2) K-State Extension nutrition education programming. The research element measures the joint impact these interventions have on healthful food purchases and grocery food sales with rural residents. The extension component is designed to deliver education modules that target making healthy food choices in small food retail outlets. Three rural grocery stores included in the study are from communities with populations of 690 to 1,200. Results from the two-year study will inform rural grocery store business strategies and consumers as they consider making healthy food choices.

Studies have found significant health issues where rural regions have limited access to healthy food. Poor access to supermarkets and healthy food have negative impacts on the overall health of many rural residents. The AFRI goal for the CECD is for rural communities to sustain these small, locally owned businesses, to promote healthful food access, and to strengthen local economies across the food system. The CECD is proud to collaborate with the University of Minnesota and K-State Research and Extension to address the vital role locally owned neighborhood grocery stores play in the health and wellness of rural citizens.



FOOD ACCESS INITIATIVES

SNAP MATCHING INCENTIVE PROGRAMS:

MORE THAN A HILL OF BEANS

It came to Kansas as the Beans 'n Greens program. Introduced to the Kansas City metro area in 2009, Beans 'n Greens provided a dollar-for-dollar SNAP match to 17 farmers markets in the K.C. metro area.

SNAP, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, offers nutrition assistance to low-income individuals and families. SNAP matching incentive programs contribute to the health and vitality of communities, increasing healthy food access and boosting local economies by promoting locally grown produce.

The Beans 'n Greens program found its roots in innovative programs like New York's NYC Health Bucks and Philadelphia's Philly Food Bucks programs and would soon spread to two farmers markets in Lawrence, Kansas, as the Market Match program.

Growing in popularity and fueled by a \$5.8 million U.S. Department of Agriculture grant, Lawrence's Market Match program partnered with the Mid-America Regional Council, the Fair Food Network, Price Chopper and other regional partners like Kansas State University's Center for Engagement and Community Development, or CECD, to pilot Double Up Food Bucks, or DUFB.

The USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive, or FINI, program allows Kansas and Missouri regional organizations to collaborate for broader impact for area families and farmers. Building on the power of partnerships, the expansion of DUFB complements the CECD and Kansas Health Foundation's collaboration to increase healthy food access across the entire state through the Healthy Food Access Initiative.

Through this initiative, the CECD proposes to build the infrastructure for a statewide technical assistance collaborative and learning laboratory, addressing three healthy food access challenges: (1) strengthening retail food outlet business practices and expanding healthy food options; (2) expanding the number of authorized WIC — or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children — retailers across the state, and (3) increasing the reach of DUFB. The success of programs like DUFB demonstrates the growing demand and support for healthy food options in communities, and CECD's partnerships continue to build on that momentum. Cool beans.

FOOD ACCESS INITIATIVES

KANSAS VOICES PROMOTING HEALTHIER CHOICES

Having access to healthy, quality foods is a priority for our communities. It is critical to health and well-being. It serves as an anchor for memorable family get-togethers and community-based events.

Buying local food helps farmers and ranchers as well as the town's local tax base. Food systems are deeply embedded in Kansas heritage. As the "nation's breadbasket," Kansas is a leader in agricultural production. Kansas is also well-known for its beef production.

However, nearly 15 percent of all Kansans experience food insecurity¹ and over 80 percent of Kansas households report purchasing inexpensive, unhealthy food because they cannot afford healthier options.²

The Kansas Health Foundation, or KHF, has made it a priority to improve the health of all Kansans by striving to create a culture that

allows citizens to make healthy choices where they live, work and play.³ The KHF focuses on five key impact areas: access to care, physical activity, tobacco use, healthy food access and civic engagement.⁴

With a shared understanding of the link between healthy food access and civic engagement, Kansas State University's Center for Engagement and Community Development, or CECD, collaborated with KHF on the Healthy Food Access Initiative to begin a large-scale dialogue with Kansas citizens about their food access issues.

Engaging the voices of local residents is key to addressing the unique food system challenges that each community faces. From June 2016 to December 2016, the CECD convened a series of focus groups across the state of Kansas. Participants included rural grocers, beneficiaries of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program

for Women, Infants and Children and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and food system stakeholders. In total, 15 focus groups were conducted in seven cities with more than 150 Kansans in attendance. The input provided by these citizens and other Healthy Food Access Initiative partners will directly inform the development of the state's first healthy food access technical assistance collaborative and learning laboratory.

¹ USDA ERS. (2016). *Key statistics and graphics*. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx#map>

² Kansas Food Bank. (2014). *Hunger statistics*. Retrieved from <http://www.kansasfoodbank.org/hunger-statistics/>

³ Kansas Health Foundation. (n.d.). *Our mission*. Retrieved from <http://kansashealth.org/about-us/>

⁴ Kansas Health Foundation. (n.d.). *Our work*. Retrieved from <http://kansashealth.org/>



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**Having access to healthy,
quality foods is a priority for
our communities."**

FOOD ACCESS INITIATIVES

FOUNDATIONS' COMMITMENT TO HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES

What might be the biggest step toward healthy food access for everyone in the county, regardless of income? This question often launches FEAST community-engaged conversations hosted by the Center for Engagement and Community Development. FEAST, an Oregon Food Bank model of deliberative dialogue, stands for Food Education and Agriculture Solutions Together. Purposeful community dialogue around the food system is a growing phenomenon across the state and it has taken the collective input of Kansas foundations to ensure the work continues. The Kansas Health Foundation and Sunflower Foundation are working to ensure communities have access to the technical resources needed to provide healthier lifestyles for their citizens.

The Kansas Health Foundation has supported this work with the Kansas Healthy Food Access Initiative, in which researchers spent the past year traveling the state garnering the input of community stakeholders. The results of these trips seeking community input

opened a gateway of opportunity to improve the lives of Kansans on the healthy food front. This forwarding-moving information is guiding the design of a Healthy Food Access Technical Learning Collaborative at Kansas State University.

The Sunflower Foundation is taking lead with the HERO — Healthy Eating: Rural Opportunities — community grants. Individual community leadership teams working to identify unique specific projects that increase healthy food access is the focus of the HERO project. As the Sunflower Foundation launches the exploratory phase of funding, stakeholders are working to identify the most effective means to becoming healthier communities and working to implement projects in their next round of funding.

It is often said it takes a village to raise a child. In the case of building healthier food access communities for all, the village is collaborating with great state foundations to ensure the work continues.



Kansas Health Foundation



Sunflower Foundation
HEALTH CARE FOR KANSANS





FOOD ACCESS INITIATIVES

FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

As the health of Kansans continues its unfortunate decline, according to national rankings, cities and towns are working hard to figure out how to reverse that trend. A number of communities are building unique partnerships between food businesses, farmers and ranchers, health professionals, local government, and anti-hunger organizations to come together to build healthier, thriving communities.

These partnerships, commonly known as food and farm councils, are popping up all over the state. The types of projects they work on are as unique as the communities they represent. They have set goals to increase the number of young farmers, ensure healthy foods are available at the vending machines and concession stands at public parks, and even increase the amount of local foods sold in grocery stores.

The Western Prairie Food Farm and Community Alliance is one of the newest councils in Kansas, representing the eight farthest northwest counties in the state. As a sparsely populated region, the alliance recognizes that its residents and businesses

often cross county lines to buy or sell food, so its approach should do the same. Before alliance members set priorities, they will learn more about the needs of everyone in the region. They will collect feedback from a wide swath of residents by hosting informal listening sessions in each of the eight counties. They will pair that with data such as the total number of acres of fruits and vegetable grown in the region and the proportion of adults who are overweight or obese to determine the highest priority areas for action.

This is a true collaborative effort. The alliance is supported by the Western Prairie Resource Conservation and Development Council, staffed by one of the local health departments, and formed with participation from dozens of organizations and numerous residents from across the region.

Councils like the Western Prairie Food Farm and Community Alliance are on the leading edge of food system innovation. They support efforts that benefit everyone, not just one type of business or one part of the community. Members are leaders who

work outside of their comfort zones to learn about governmental and private-sector opportunities to improve not only economic impact and community resilience, but also health.

For more information on how to start or engage in a food and farm council in your community, contact Missty Lechner, advocacy project director for the American Heart Association, at missty.lechner@heart.org.



EMPOWERING RURAL KANSAS: SUNFLOWER FOUNDATION INTRODUCES PROJECT HERO

The history of Kansas is rooted in agriculture but, ironically, our state today can claim another label besides America's Breadbasket. We also have countless rural towns that fit the U.S. Department of Agriculture's definition of a food desert — meaning thousands of Kansans do not have ready access to healthy, affordable food options. In many parts of the state, residents must drive more than an hour just to buy groceries that include fresh fruits and vegetables. Many towns have expressed the desire to change this, and the Sunflower Foundation believes in the power of rural creativity and resourcefulness to develop locally-driven strategies to address food access needs.

As a first step, Sunflower has partnered with eight Kansas communities, counties or regions in a pilot called Project HERO, or Healthy Eating: Rural Opportunities. Each HERO team represents a diverse set of stakeholders — health coalitions, food and farm councils, store owners, producers, economic development — united by the shared goal of improving access to nutritious foods. This first phase includes planning grants intended to help each community obtain the resources, consultation and technical assistance needed to explore and develop solutions with local preferences, circumstances and long-term sustainability in mind. In some areas, there

is an expressed need to collect assessment data for food plans, solicit widespread input from residents, and strengthen the coalition infrastructure for future work. Other towns have already identified a distinct need, whether it be overcoming the recent loss of a grocery store, helping an existing store increase sales via healthy food marketing, or reviewing potential revenue streams for a new store. Finally, some communities are thinking outside the walls of a grocery store and studying alternative ways of getting healthy, fresh foods to populations that need it most.

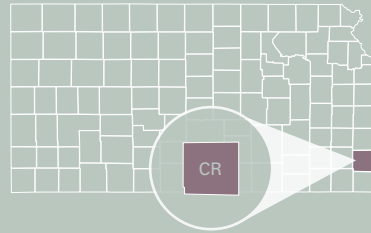
Whatever the approach, Sunflower is pleased to partner with the HERO teams as well as the team at the Rural Grocery Initiative at Kansas State University. We know we will learn much from the field as the HERO teams build upon early steps and work toward the opportunity of implementation grants. We know these pilot projects alone won't solve the extraordinarily complex issues inherent within the larger food systems, but they represent a starting point. As a foundation, the Sunflower mission is to "serve as a catalyst for improving the health of Kansans." We look forward to supporting these sparks of ingenuity, coupled with collaboration and Kansas common sense, as rural communities come together to enhance healthy food access in their own backyards.



**...serve as a
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Kansans.”**



HEALTHY EATING: RURAL OPPORTUNITIES



Crawford County

CRAWFORD COUNTY

BRAD STROUD

The Crawford County Live Well initiative is striving to improve the health of Crawford County, Kansas, citizens through active living, healthy eating and tobacco cessation. Brad Stroud, director of Live Well Crawford County, says, "There are 10 incorporated communities in our county. Out of those 10 communities, seven do not have access to a grocery store."

Live Well Crawford County is taking steps to combat this issue. As one of the participants in the Sunflower Foundation's Project HERO pilot program, Crawford County is developing the concept of micromarkets to better serve the county with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Through a separate grant, Live Well Crawford County also has purchased a high tunnel, which allows growers to extend their season by providing cover from unpredictable frosts that can happen on the fringe of the season. The high tunnel has been placed on the campus of the Career and Technical Education Center of Crawford County in Pittsburg, Kansas. Stroud sees great opportunities for collaboration between the center and Live Well Crawford County. In fact, the center is working to establish

an agriculture option, which would allow students to work in the high tunnel. Stroud envisions students being a part of the whole cycle. "They plant the seeds, they grow it, they pick it and they sell it," he says.

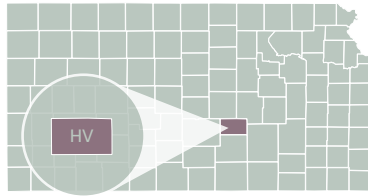
This all connects into the micromarket concept by training new regional growers through the agriculture program, who then grow and sell their produce to the micromarkets. In addition to generating new producers for Crawford County, Stroud says it's important to teach people to grow produce in their own backyards.

"The poverty level in our county is very high," he says. "A lot of people don't even have vehicles. If somebody knows how to grow produce, they can essentially lessen their burden with the cost of food."

With its micromarket project, Live Well Crawford County is building capacity within the county to support an active and healthy community. "We're trying to spark an interest in growing," Stroud says. "Even if someone doesn't make a business of it, they can grow some of their own food and eat healthier because of it. That's really what we're trying to accomplish."

HERO GRANT RECIPIENTS

HEALTHY EATING: RURAL OPPORTUNITIES



Harvey County

HARVEY COUNTY

LISA BARTEL, JENNIFER ROSE

In August 2015, the County Commission in Harvey County, Kansas, approved the establishment of the Harvey County Food and Farm Council. In the last decade, food and farm councils have been popping up all over the country at state, city and local levels, and Kansas is no exception. According to the Kansas Alliance for Wellness, 42 counties across Kansas are involved in existing or emerging food and farm councils as of February 2017. These councils, sometimes referred to as food policy councils, aim “to identify and propose innovative solutions to improve local or state food systems, spurring local economic development and making food systems more environmentally sustainable and socially just.” (Harper et al, 2009).¹

The goal of the Harvey County Food and Farm Council is to gather information on the county’s existing food system to connect local growers with local consumers. Lisa Bartel, Harvey County healthy living coordinator, describes this as when a local restaurant wants to offer local products: “It takes a lot of phone calls, but we want to make it easier.”

Much of 2016 was spent working on establishing the organization of the Harvey County Food and Farm Council

and determining its framework.

The representatives on the council demonstrate a diverse cross section of the county community, including farmers, restaurant and grocery store owners, faith-based and community organizations, senior citizens, low-income populations and public health professionals.

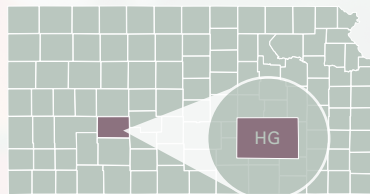
When the call for applications to participate in the Project HERO pilot program sponsored by the Sunflower Foundation came out, Bartel says the timing was right. A Project HERO grant is funding the coordination of a FEAST — Food Education Agriculture Solutions Together — event to provide space for community members to envision ways to build a healthy local food system.

Currently, there is a lot of excitement about potential projects for the Harvey County Food and Farm Council. Bartel says, “Everyone wants to do everything right now. We have a passionate group of people here.”

Bartel looks forward to the FEAST event providing direction on projects for the council to prioritize.

¹ <https://foodfirst.org/publication/food-policy-councils-lessons-learned/>

HEALTHY EATING: RURAL OPPORTUNITIES



Jetmore, KS Hodgeman County

JETMORE, HODGEMAN COUNTY

LEA ANN SEILER

If something didn't change, Mark Wellbrock, owner of the Jetmore Food Center in Jetmore, Kansas, envisioned an end to his grocery store. Lea Ann Seiler, economic development director for Hodgeman County, Kansas, knew that in a small town, the grocery store does a lot more than just sell groceries. So, they got busy considering the existing challenges facing the grocery store and the local community members.

Based on preliminary results from a community survey, Wellbrock has begun rearranging the store to expand his offerings and create space for a deli. Perhaps most importantly, the store has started working with a new distributor that offers more competitive pricing, which allows the store to compete with big box stores in nearby Dodge City.

Jetmore is one of eight Kansas communities recently selected to participate in the Sunflower Foundation's Project HERO pilot program. Grant funding from the program will allow the Jetmore Food Center to make adjustments in the store to set it on the path to long-term sustainability.

Within the year, the store hopes to offer two new programs. The "Shop to

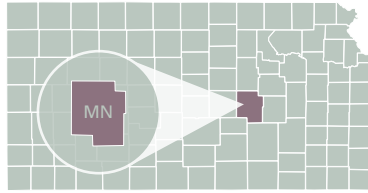
Cook Retailer Program" will provide an online platform as well as physical kiosk for customers to find recipes, filtered by dietary restrictions and allergies, then print a grocery list based on items available at the store.¹ The second program will be online grocery shopping, with customers getting the option of picking up their groceries at the store or having them delivered. "Click and Collect" options, as they are known, are becoming more common nationwide with nearly one-third of shoppers taking part in a "Click and Collect" program during the 2015 holiday season. (Reagan, 2015)

"The benefit for Jetmore Food Center is that the store is smaller and more nimble, like many small businesses, and can make that switch faster and easier than some of the bigger ones can," Seiler says.

As Jetmore looks to its future, the community's overarching goal is to make grocery shopping at Jetmore Food Center as easy as possible so that there is no reason to go somewhere else.

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/13/like-it-or-not-click-and-collect-is-here-to-stay.html>

HEALTHY EATING: RURAL OPPORTUNITIES



Peabody, KS Marion County

PEABODY, MARION COUNTY

BRENT MILES, NM PATTON, BECKY NICKEL

“This all came about because we were in the process of losing our grocery store,” recounts Brent Miles, a Peabody, Kansas, native and business owner. Peabody community members didn’t want to see their grocery store close, so they joined together to encourage business development and recruitment in their town.

Saving the grocery store was the first step toward establishing healthy food options in Peabody, which is in Marion County. As one of the eight participants in the Project HERO pilot program through the Sunflower Foundation, Peabody will be hosting a FEAST — Food Education Agriculture Solutions Together — event.

“We’re looking at about probably 50 to 60 people at the FEAST event, with a broad spectrum of citizens attending, Miles says. “We’ll have some roundtable brainstorming discussions.”

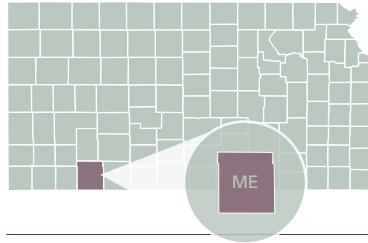
NM Patton, retired school teacher for USD 398 and board member of the Peabody

Community Foundation, has been involved in this project since the grocery store was on the verge of going out of business. He is excited about getting people engaged. He said he’s not really sure what will come out of the FEAST, but that it may be “something so exciting that I can’t even think of it.”

“We kind of have all the pieces to the food puzzle,” says Becky Nickel, Project HERO coordinator for Peabody. “We have some beef operations, we have some poultry operations; certainly, we grow a diversity of crops. It will be interesting to see how we can be better resources for ourselves.”

“One exciting thing to see is the young people coming back to the community,” Patton says. In fact, one of Peabody’s young community members is retrofitting old school buses and turning them into chicken houses for his laying hens. Innovative projects like this give hope for the future of Peabody and the ideas that will emerge from the FEAST event.

HEALTHY EATING: RURAL OPPORTUNITIES



Plains, KS
Meade County

PLAINS, MEADE COUNTY

JEANNE ROBERTS

The city of Plains, Kansas, hasn't had a grocery store since 2001. For the past 10 years, community members have made a concerted effort to open a new one — and their hard work is finally starting to pay off. In March 2017, the community learned it had been approved for a loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Add the loan to the \$450,000 the community has raised over the years, and a groundbreaking for a new grocery store is set for summer 2017 with hopes of it being open by January 2018.

"We just feel like if we don't try right now to get the store back up and running, that Plains eventually is going to die," says Jeanne Roberts, director of the Community Enhancement Foundation of Plains.

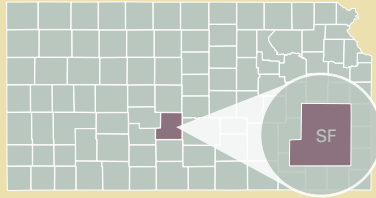
In anticipation of the opening of the grocery store, Plains was selected for the Sunflower Foundation's Project HERO pilot program. Plains is developing programming focused on healthy eating opportunities at the grocery store.

"We know that just by getting a grocery store back in town does not mean that residents are going to automatically eat healthy," Roberts says. To that end, Plains is conducting surveys related to potential healthy eating programming opportunities and plans to install a kiosk that can distribute recipes based on weekly sale items at the grocery store.

A commercial kitchen is included in the design of the store that will offer cooking classes. With the significant Hispanic and German-Mennonite populations in Plains, Roberts thinks the classes may offer a unique opportunity to learn from each other's cultures. The kitchen will also house the "Dish It" program, a prepared meal service where the store provides recipes and raw ingredients that community members can take home to prepare.

"We're trying to make it more than a grocery store," Roberts says. "We're trying to offer as many services as we can and still make it work — at least we're gonna try."

HEALTHY EATING: RURAL OPPORTUNITIES



St. John, KS Stafford County

ST. JOHN, STAFFORD COUNTY

CAROLYN DUNN

Ever since the Dillon's in St. John closed its doors in February 2016, this south-central Kansas community has been without a grocery store.

Unfortunately, this is not new to Kansas. Between 2008 and 2016, 45 rural grocery stores closed their doors in the state (Rissler, 2015), leaving communities without options for local fresh, healthy food. When Dillon's left St. John, it forced its 1,400 residents to drive 25 miles to Great Bend or Pratt for groceries. While St. John has a Dollar General store and a small grocer in nearby Stafford, a 2016 survey of residents' shopping preferences found that residents tend to drive to Dillon's and Walmart stores in other communities for lower prices and broader selection.

Carolyn Dunn, executive director for Stafford County Economic Development, is convinced that while the loss of the grocery store in St. John is a food security challenge, it also is an economic development opportunity.

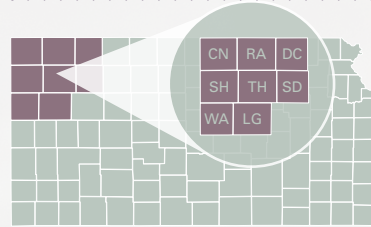
"Our grocery problem is not a food problem," Dunn says. "Our grocery problem is a population problem. If we want to address the underlying challenge, we need to think on how to grow the town."

Rural towns in Kansas have experienced continual declines in population over the past 70 years (Rissler, 2015), and Stafford County is no exception.

For St. John, the grocery store outlook is about to change. As a participant in the Sunflower Foundation's Project HERO pilot program, the community is receiving funds for technical assistance with a strategic plan to identify potential grocery operators and create a road map for local-level incentives. The funding will also create a layout for the future St. John grocery store to maximize its economic potential and longevity. Dunn says that the county is doing its due diligence to ensure that St. John finds an experienced grocery store operator who is attracted to the community and who will be around for a while.

In 2016, Stafford County worked with an analyst to determine whether more opportunity for success could be found in reoccupying the former Dillon's store location in St. John or by building a grocery store at a new location. Based on the analysis, the city is searching for a new site for its grocery store. For many St. John residents, the Project HERO funding is providing hope for a solution that can't come soon enough.

HEALTHY EATING: RURAL OPPORTUNITIES



Cheyenne, Decatur, Logan, Rawlins, Sheridan, Sherman, Thomas and Wallace Counties

NW ALLIANCE

MISTY JIMERSON, SUE EVANS

In the northwest corner of Kansas, eight counties are using a forward-thinking approach to address an important problem. The counties of Cheyenne, Decatur, Logan, Rawlins, Sheridan, Sherman, Thomas and Wallace have formed the Western Prairie Food, Farm and Community Alliance, or the Alliance for short. With two appointed members from each county, this 16-person council is initiating the conversation around food and healthy communities in northwest Kansas.

“We have come to the realization that we cannot do this by city, by community or by county, but that we have to do this as a region,” says Misty Jimerson, a public health practitioner by trade.

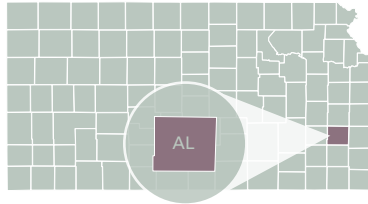
Jimerson is now working for Western Prairie Resource Conservation & Development Area to guide the Alliance. She works in all eight counties and serves on the leadership team that will host eight World Café events in the coming months. World Café events are meant to provide useful information on potential next steps that communities

can take to improve their access to local, healthy food. The funding for the events came from the Sunflower Foundation’s Project HERO pilot program. In addition to community conversation, these World Café events will include a meal of locally grown and raised foods “to highlight that we already have some of that food here,” Jimerson says. In many ways, these World Cafés will be a way for northwest Kansans to envision the role that their eight-county coalition can play in a regional food system.

With the feedback from the eight events, Jimerson aims to create a strategic plan to increase the number of producers in the region, strengthen the network and number of grocery stores, and improve linkages between producers and restaurants.

Jimerson is confident that the Alliance is doing something innovative because members are not looking at county lines. “We know that we have to work with the other counties to be successful, and they have to work with us to be successful.”

HEALTHY EATING: RURAL OPPORTUNITIES



Allen County

ALLEN COUNTY

BEN ALEXANDER, LISSE REGEHR, YVONNE SCOTT

In Yvonne Scott's first week as the healthy food access organizer for Thrive Allen County, she hit the ground running. "She's probably met 100 people," says Ben Alexander, Thrive deputy director. Thrive is working in the small town of Moran, Kansas, where the owners of the local grocery store, Stub's Market, are ready to retire. Allen County residents, with the help of Thrive, are envisioning the future of Stub's Market and creating a framework for maintaining the store as a community resource.

"The future is uncertain for the store and we're trying to give it some certainty," says Alexander.

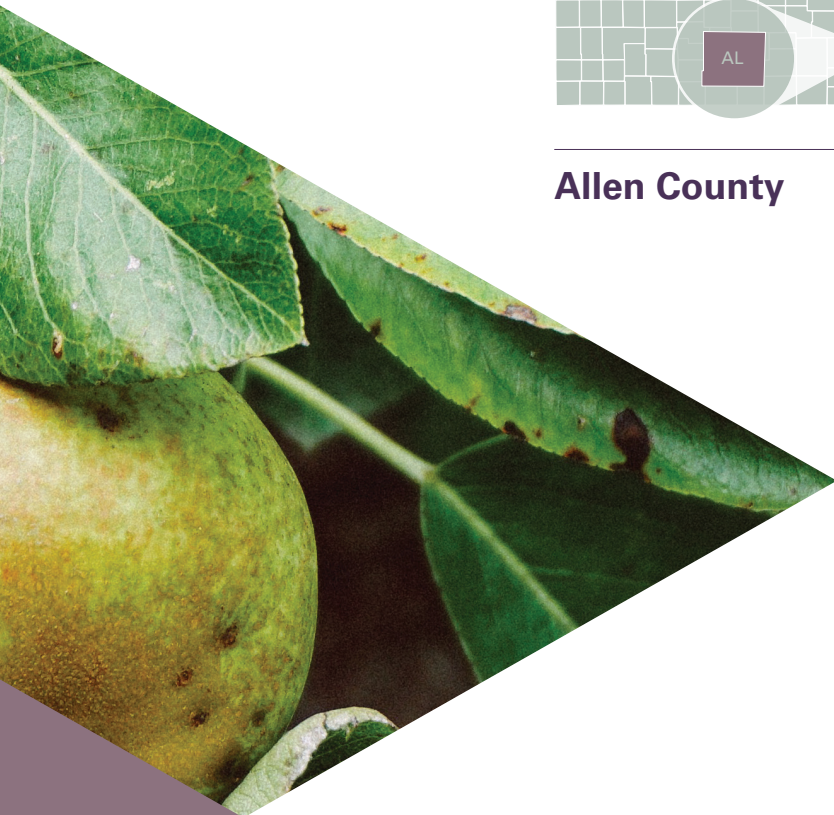
Scott's AmeriCorps VISTA — Volunteer in Service to America — position was partially supported by grant funding from the Sunflower Foundation's Project HERO pilot program. The big idea for the grant is to transition Stub's Market into a community-owned cooperative.

"Right now, the store is for sale," Alexander says. "It's been for sale for several years, and we want to make sure that it doesn't get taken off the market and closed. We want to make sure that it gets transferred to an entity that can keep it open and keep it as a community resource."

Thrive plans to host many community conversations about this project. There is much to discuss with community members related to the vision and goals of their grocery store. Lisse Regehr, director of outreach and advocacy for Thrive, feels that the organization is uniquely positioned to facilitate this process. "Thrive has been in this community for almost 10 years now," she says. "People know that they can trust us, they know they can have open conversations."

Thrive wants to make Allen County the healthiest rural county in Kansas and this project is one of the steps toward meeting that goal. "It's about maintaining access to healthy food," Alexander says.

When asked about the challenge of running a grocery store especially in a rural area, Alexander is certain: "Moran can pull this together. I have absolutely no doubt in my mind that this little town can do something like this."



IT LOOKS LIKE A GROCERY STORE

MARCI PENNER

It may look like a grocery store but upon further review, you'll see it's so much more.

At the Thriftway in Perry, you'll also find the public library. If you want a hot meal in Palco, McDonald or Olsburg, the only place to find it is at the grocery store. The owner of the Mildred Store organizes music concerts once a month.

Some entire counties in Kansas are without a grocery store. To have one is gold. Ladow's Market in Lebanon serves as the grocery, cafe, variety store, fabric store, tourism office and gathering place.

Ownership might be private or some version of a community-owned or nonprofit enterprise in rural communities. Having a grocery store can literally be the deciding factor for someone deciding to move to that town.

Almost every small-town grocery store owner has a common trait: they love their community. Owners go to incredible lengths to keep a store open, enduring long hours, dealing with coolers in need of constant maintenance, high utility rates, meeting the volume minimum and finding good help. It's a tough way to earn a few pennies on a can of beans.

The Tipton Grocery displays museum items. If you want to get in to the Washington Street Emporium in Marquette, you go to the nearby Piper's Food Store to find someone to open it. Stores in Goessel, Alta Vista and Quinter are just a few that offer fresh deli sandwiches. The aroma of German sausage being made wafts through Inman's Cornerstone Market every Tuesday. Spearville's grocery store sells antiques, variety store items and is the place to get an ice cream cone.

Woodbine's Our Store consists of several aisles in the trucking company office. Owners Tom and Tamara Blake knew their community needed grocery items. Since they had an employee in the office every day, they took it upon themselves to set up this convenience. In Courtland, Jensen's Tire and Service is the only place to get groceries.

When the electricity went out in Little River during an ice storm, the Garden of Eden grocery invited people to use its cooler, which was operating on a generator. Special people own grocery stores in small towns and they all believe that community matters.





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RURAL GROCERY HIGHLIGHTS



CONWAY SPRINGS, KS
CLINT & JENNY OSNER

HIRED MAN'S GROCERY & GRILL, INC.

Since its grand opening in July 2008, Hired Man's Grocery & Grill, Inc. in Conway Springs, Kansas, has always been about keeping a sense of community.

"We are homegrown," says Jenny Osner, a local teacher and lifeguard, of the grocery store she and her husband, Clint, co-own. "We did it because we believe in the community."

Even building the store was a family affair. "My brother-in-law is a builder, my uncle is a plumber and my cousin is an electrician," Osner said. Her mother, Nancy Koester, is the store's daytime manager, and her husband's parents, George and Donna Osner, help out in the meat department.

So, when the opportunity came to participate in a research study that would help promote healthy foods in the community, the Osners were game. Under the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative's National Institute of Food and Agriculture grant through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Hired Man's Grocery & Grill was one of three case study stores.

In partnership with Kansas State University, K-State Research and Extension, University of Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, Affiliated Foods Midwest, Loyalty Lane and NuVal®

Nutritional Scoring System, the store provided its customers fun nutrition and cooking education classes, nutritional ratings for foods and shopping rewards. The overall goal of the project was to discover strategies that would help increase healthy food purchases in rural grocery stores.

"The shift to eating healthier in our community has been around for over a year," Koester said. "The nutrition education modules that we are doing as part of the grant have been a nice addition to the healthy talk around town."

At the end of the project, Hired Man's Grocery & Grill was awarded \$2,000 that will go toward a community project. After giving the store input, residents are now voting among three potential projects: funding the Junior Rec to develop signage leading people to Conway Springs' most visited places; providing benches for the recently revitalized community pool; and purchasing a piece of handicap-accessible children's playground equipment in cooperation with the community foundation Billy's Place.

"Clint and I feel very fortunate to be a part of a national study where the results will benefit the community directly," Jenny Osner said. "It's a homegrown community at its very best."

RURAL GROCERY HIGHLIGHTS

RURAL GROCERY HIGHLIGHTS



MILDRED, KS
REGENA & LOREN VANCE

MILDRED STORE

It finally happened. The store closed.

That's when Regena Vance came home with one question for husband, Loren, a calf and cattle farmer in Mildred, Kansas: "What do you think of Charlie Brown's store?"

It was more than a conversation starter; she was proposing they purchase the grocery store and keep it in operation. The kicker for Vance was eggs. "I went to make a cake and I didn't have any eggs, and I didn't want to drive 30 minutes to Walmart to get eggs," she said.

The major focus behind the couple's purchase boiled down to good ol' fashioned values and tradition. "We just wanted to do what was best and keep a lot of the tradition alive and bring the community back together," Vance said.

In 2014, the Vances traveled to the National Rural Grocery Summit to network with others like themselves.

"We had not a clue what was going on and had no clue what we were doing,"

Vance said of meeting other grocery owners across Kansas. The couple said the information they took away from their summit experience was phenomenal. Vance feels her collaborations with other rural grocery owners at the summit is what eased many of the fears and anxiety with owning their own store.

Unknown to the Vances, recognition for their dedication and perseverance was in the works. The Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development presented the couple with the 2016 Kansas Rural Grocer of the Year award at the 2016 National Rural Grocery Summit. It was a well-deserved credit for a couple whose cellphone numbers are hanging on the front door of their store, displaying a 24/7 availability.

In a town of 28 people, what is the purpose of the Mildred Store? Community service, plain and simple.

"It's making sure the community is happy, making sure they have a place to go and get food," the Vances said.

RURAL GROCERY HIGHLIGHTS



WAKEENEY, KS
MARK WATKINS

HEARTLAND FOODS

Nineteen years ago, Mark Watkins walked into an abandoned retail space formerly known as Bogarts in WaKeeneey, Kansas, and opened a new rural grocery store. Today, the thriving store employs 25 and sees around 3,500 customers a week.

The store is active in the community. Store manager Cindy Welch orchestrates community partnerships on a daily basis and the store's involvement with the local food pantry is a major focus of her work.

"Needs have grown," says Watkins of the increase in food provided to the community. Welch assesses the store's inventory and identifies all donations needed for the local food pantry and other organizations in town.

"She's engaged in every aspect of our donations with the food bank," says Watkins, who believes the continued success of the store is because of this community engagement and support.

"You know if it's fair season, you donate, and whether it's basketball or any sport with school, you sponsor it," he says.

Watkins' positive attitude is evident in the customer service at store. "It's a courteous, friendly relationship with customers and with each other; they really care," Watkins says of his employees. He says the close-knit bunch is committed to the success of the store, which is evident in their common belief that if the store were to close, the community would suffer.

In a time when locally owned rural grocery stores are closing rapidly, there is immeasurable stock in friendly, courteous customer service — service that connects with the community to ensure all of its citizens have access to fresh, healthy foods.

RURAL GROCERY HIGHLIGHTS



PERRY, KS
RUSTY SPENCER

PERRY-LECOMPTON THRIFTWAY

Located in Jefferson County, Kansas, with a population of less than 1,000 people, the Perry-Lecompton Thriftway is a rather unique rural store. It has offered space within its walls to house the community public library. Open on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, it is completely staffed by community volunteers.

This unique partnership is a testament to how innovative locally owned neighborhood stores can be. Just ask store manager Rusty Spencer. “We used to carry videos, but now we just have the books,” he says.

Spencer has managed the Perry-Lecompton Thriftway for 10 years and vows that each customer will have groceries “carried out ... and be greeted with a smile,” both when coming in and leaving the store.

Community support is important to Spencer and his staff, as evidenced by their sponsorship of the Perry PRIDE Days, a community event that includes a classic car show and a variety of vendors showcasing original arts and crafts.

In operation for more than 60 years, the Perry-Lecompton Thriftway is known for its homemade pies. Featuring many locally sourced items for sale, the pies are probably the most popular. “Everybody asks when we’re getting new pies,” Spencer says. Made in Melvern, Kansas, even Spencer is fond of the treats. “They are oh, so good!” he says.

Small-town rural grocery stores are the cornerstone of a community, so ensuring customer satisfaction is everything. Local resident Julie Copeland says citizens are lucky to have such a positive store in their small town, asserting her affection for the Thriftway. “Everyone is friendly and helpful,” she said. “Rusty will order things for you if they don’t carry it. They have a good meat counter and good sales, and they are so handy to have.”

Be sure to say “hi” to Rusty if you are passing through Perry. And if you’re staying awhile, you can always check out a good book.

RURAL GROCERY HIGHLIGHTS



OVERBROOK, KS
DOUG HERMANN

OVERBROOK THRIFTWAY

“They’re not really customers anymore; they’re friends,” says Doug Hermann, store manager at the Overbrook Thriftway.

Hermann has been with the store more than 20 years and attributes its success to community familiarity. “Small-town people realize to keep a store in town they need to support it,” he said.

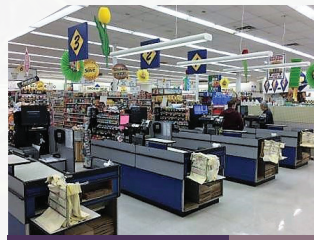
Serving approximately 2,000 customers per week, the Thriftway is fully committed to supporting its community as well. Whether volunteering for school athletic events or donating massive amounts of ice cream and root beer to the school’s after prom, the Thriftway is dedicated to the citizens of Overbrook, Kansas.

The store recently changed hands after 80 years of family ownership, but Hermann has remained a staple of the store. His favorite thing about being with the store for more than two decades is his connection with customers.

The capacity of rural stores to connect with customers is a key factor to its success in the community. Thriving neighborhood stores play a large role in the lives of local citizens, especially when dedicated employees take the extra step to ensure the environment is friendly and welcoming to everyone who walks through the doors. This includes the summer lake traffic from those taking part in the recreational activities of the three surrounding lakes near Overbrook.

Customers are eagerly greeted at the Overbrook Thriftway as they stock up on their grocery needs before heading out to spend hot days on or by the water. Finding customers who become friends and knowing the Thriftway is always there with employees offering smiles as you pass through are just a few of the reasons the store been successfully going for more than 80 years.

RURAL GROCERY HIGHLIGHTS



EUREKA, KS

LEEVI AND JOY WERNER

G&W FOODS

Just off of Main Street in Eureka, Kansas, you'll find the local G&W Foods. As the seat of Greenwood County, Eureka is home to the governmental offices, the Eureka Public Library and the only grocery store in the county.

Walking into the G&W Foods, one can clearly see that the county's sole grocery store provides much more than groceries. The store is a part of the social fabric of Eureka and provides a place for community members to catch up with their neighbors, hear about the latest news in town and start planning their next get together.

Leevi Werner and his wife, Joy, raise their family of five children in Eureka and recognize the importance of their local grocery store. With the next available grocery store being a minimum 30 miles away, many residents would experience difficulties making a trip of that distance.

"For the size of our community this store is a better-than-average source for food and produce," Leevi Werner said.

Eureka's G&W Foods is one of four stores in Kansas that is participating in a research project with the Center for Engagement and Community Development at Kansas State University. Sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Food Trust, the project's focus is understanding how rural grocery stores interact with their communities and, in turn, how communities perceive those interactions. This integral relationship between a community and its grocery store provides a unique lens into the enduring capacity of rural towns.

The Eureka store is a model partner for this project because it is an example of a rural grocery store that has inserted itself into a community and become a piece of the cultural identity of the town. Nestled in the heart of downtown Eureka, G&W is easily accessible to many locals and those passing through to marvel in the beauty of the Flint Hills of Kansas.



2018 NATIONAL RURAL GROCERY SUMMIT

**Providing Healthy Food Access to Rural America
National Rural Grocery Summit**

Hilton Garden Inn

Manhattan, Kansas

June 25-26, 2018

Join us for the 2018 National Rural Grocery Summit
Save the date!

An important source of healthy rural food access is the local grocery store. Grocery stores are a vital source for nutrition and health, providing a supply of fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy and protein.

Kansas State University and a broad range of partners are working to assist rural communities and their grocery stores. At the Sixth National Rural Grocery Summit, we will bring together storeowners, citizen leaders, food suppliers, academic researchers, policymakers, and funders to talk with one another about how best to sustain this critical piece of community infrastructure and improve the health of our rural citizens.



KANSAS STATE
UNIVERSITY

Center for Engagement and
Community Development

