

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

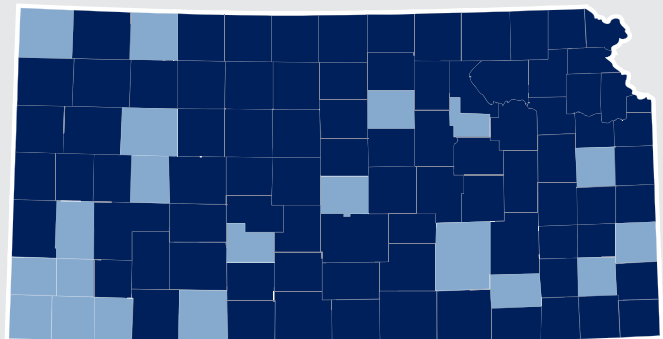
The Kansas [Power Up and Go](#) project is another exciting rural Kansas jobs initiative. Power Up and Go identifies personal and professional advancement opportunities for young, rural Kansans. In partnership with ORP, the Kansas Sampler Foundation is interviewing Kansans age 21 to 39 who want to live 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.

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.

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.