



**Kansas Sampler Foundation
Final Report to Office of Rural Prosperity
Power Up and Go Project
May 2021**

WHAT WE DID

The mission of the Kansas Power Up and Go project is to gain a greater understanding of current challenges and opportunities in rural Kansas for young people — helping figure out why they choose to live in rural communities, and why it could be difficult to make that choice.

The Kansas Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) enlisted the Kansas Sampler Foundation (KSF) to listen to and learn from Kansans ages 21-39 to find ways to help recruit and retain young people in rural Kansas communities. In 2020 and 2021, KSF Executive Director Marci Penner received 460 surveys from Kansans in this age group from all 105 counties and conducted 175 follow-up interviews to understand and explain opportunities and challenges about living in rural Kansas.

The project's outcomes were two-fold: help state government consider its approach to young rural Kansans, and identify grassroots support and advocacy opportunities in Kansas communities. This is the final report to ORP; it is bookended with a report from the KSF that is more broad in its recommendations to communities, philanthropy, non-profit organizations and beyond.

WHAT WE LEARNED

We asked Kansans for their ideas to get and keep young people in small towns, to refresh or to revive communities that have lost or are losing population. It's important to note that it's not one action or one business or one government policy that will achieve this goal. The Kansans with whom we spoke illuminated the need to create a culture, an ecosystem, that supports and builds the capacity of rural communities.

The following are highlighted actions and steps identified in our work. While broadband access and housing were areas of significant shared concern we did not focus on recommendations for the issues because of the initiatives currently underway at the state level to address them.

A. Improve connections to the government

Community doers have done the best they could with few resources. State government — including the Kansas Legislature — can reinforce their grit and gumption.

1. Formally recognize and support local grassroots efforts by creating a state-level “grassroots support division” to build connections to the grassroots network. This division could be a clearinghouse of information, help find funding sources, and share constructive ideas

2. Support local champions:
 - a. Direct public and private funding to create training opportunities for local champions to understand and overcome challenges (i.e., child care, healthy food access) — AND financially support local champions
 - b. Create a shared “circuit rider” grant writer and/or grant manager
 - c. Increase flexibility for local projects funded by state government
 - d. Tap in to emerging projects such as Lead For America

B. Child care is an issue for everyone

The lack of quality child care is keeping young people in rural Kansas from taking jobs or even having kids — and may be pushing them away from rural Kansas. This is not just an issue for parents, but for an entire community. It undermines economic development efforts that focus on job growth and when combined with housing shortages, it compromises the viability and appeal of rural life. There are significant efforts to improve child care at the state level; these efforts are important and are showing promising signs of progress. Because of the grassroots nature of many rural child care efforts, additional resources and technical assistance may be needed to more fully address child care access in our state’s smaller communities.

1. Improve coordination of state programs, regulations, advocacy efforts and providers
2. Train and support local champions (consider using Skilled KC Technical Institute model of rapid-response training) to understand and navigate systemic challenges
3. Elevate teachers and providers

C. Create the choir - and then listen to it

The most accessible target audience for recruiting and retaining young people in rural communities are K-12 students. The saying “preaching to the choir” reflects a pool of like-minded individuals. We may need to create that choir — as well as space and flexibility for the choir to sing a newer song than before. How can we find ways to encourage “influencers” who help the youngest Kansans see rural communities as long-term homes?

1. Spread the good word about rural communities, highlighting positive approaches
2. Create a community of practice and fellowship opportunities for “rural influencers”
3. Expand programs that connect kids to their communities

D. Businesses are the engine of the town

A small town’s approach to businesses in the town can be a deciding factor for young people on whether to live there or not. New and small businesses are essential to the economy of rural communities. For young entrepreneurs, the right ingredients can make a big difference to start or grow a business — and for all who live there, the success of businesses is critical to keeping the community thriving. Perhaps the greatest of these ingredients is the openness to new ideas.

1. Create an entrepreneurial ecosystem
 - a. Rural Kansas should find ways to build on the ecosystem infrastructure that NetWork Kansas has established
 - b. Rural communities and counties could consider redirecting tax dollars from larger established businesses to support entrepreneurs; counties could provide additional incentives and capital to entrepreneurs
 - c. Starting in high school, create and nurture this mindset
 - d. Local communities can establish local revolving loans funds, offer professional consulting services, celebrate local businesses, help with transition planning, assist in accessing regional, state and federal resources, and serve as a connector within and outside of the community
 - e. State agencies and non-profit organizations could connect businesses in rural communities through their networks or to other resources for business planning or marketing
 - f. State agencies are skilled at creating “one-stop shops” for current issues affecting business owners once common stumbling blocks are identified.
2. Be good to employees -- consider unique rural opportunities for work-life balance
3. Build on our agricultural heritage and economic base
4. Promote the idea that one can live rural and change the world from here

Changing our approach to rural Kansans

Supporting young rural Kansans supports everyone in rural Kansas. And when rural Kansas does well, the entire state does well.

One of the most significant themes from our work is a concept we describe as “communities of the future.” Communities of the future like themselves. They listen. They engage. They believe in — and invest in — themselves. Local leaders in positions of authority ask how they can help instead of directing community members and volunteers to a traditional solution. They seek to understand a situation or a perspective to eliminate barriers. They cultivate civic leadership.

This shift in approach is essential to creating inclusive, vibrant communities. If we’re going to make progress in rural Kansas, we must commit to the work of listening, especially to those who are next in line to continue the hard work of making a community run. And we must begin now.

WHAT WE NEED FROM YOU

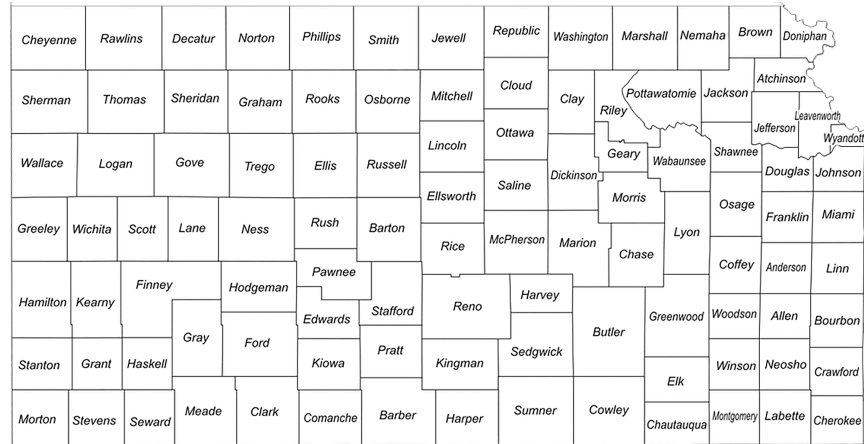
- **Keep it up!** Continue focusing attention to rural issues, especially the need to build capacity in our rural communities. There is a huge opportunity to harness the skills, interests and passions of young rural Kansans. They need boosters at all levels.
- **Reinforce the local doers.** We call out a need to figure out how to support “local champions” working on community projects. It’s a local need but the issues are systemic. Help us find ways the state could plug in and assist with this work.

- **Continue investing in evaluating the child care system - and, maybe, even do more.** We think Kansas could be a national leader in figuring out child care in rural areas. There's so much momentum with state agencies and advocacy organizations to address our current challenges -- and so much interest, especially among the young Kansas that we interviewed, that it's a great candidate for additional resources of time, energy and other resources.
- **Help us call out the places doing things well -- in dollars and in attitude.** Economic development announcements that not just report financial investment but also support a narrative for communities (and the state) being welcoming, inclusive and open to new ideas will shore up the belief that Kansas is the place one would want to live as a young person.

Thank you to Office of Rural Prosperity for your interest and investment in rural Kansas.

SURVEY FORMS SUBMITTED BY COUNTY

The numbers next to each county indicate how many people filled out the survey form. Although not everyone chose to be interviewed, 175 did. The opportunity to fill out the survey form was shared through news releases, social media, networking and word of mouth.



Allen	3	Greeley	8	Osborne	3
Anderson	3	Greenwood	1	Ottawa	1
Atchison	1	Hamilton	2	Pawnee	5
Barber	2	Harper	11	Phillips	2
Barton	9	Harvey	5	Pottawatomie	2
Bourbon	5	Haskell	4	Pratt	1
Brown	3	Hodgeman	4	Rawlins	1
Butler	3	Jackson	2	Reno	7
Chase	3	Jefferson	3	Republic	10
Chautauqua	4	Jewell	11	Rice	2
Cherokee	9	Johnson	6	Riley	8
Cheyenne	2	Kearny	1	Rooks	11
Clark	1	Kingman	1	Rush	7
Clay	2	Kiowa	5	Russell	8
Cloud	8	Labette	7	Saline	7
Coffey	1	Lane	1	Scott	2
Comanche	2	Leavenworth	5	Sedgwick	3
Cowley	7	Lincoln	4	Seward	6
Crawford	2	Linn	1	Shawnee	5
Decatur	4	Logan	1	Sheridan	2
Dickinson	3	Lyon	10	Sherman	1
Doniphan	4	Marion	14	Smith	2
Douglas	4	Marshall	5	Stafford	9
Edwards	10	McPherson	5	Stanton	6
Elk	2	Meade	19	Stevens	4
Ellis	6	Miami	7	Sumner	2
Ellsworth	16	Mitchell	9	Thomas	2
Finney	4	Montgomery	6	Trego	1
Ford	3	Morris	5	Wabaunsee	7
Franklin	5	Morton	2	Wallace	2
Geary	1	Nemaha	4	Washington	1
Gove	6	Neosho	3	Wichita	1
Graham	11	Ness	5	Wilson	2
Grant	1	Norton	2	Woodson	2
Gray	3	Osage	2	Wyandotte	2