

# THE ACTION REPORT



K A N S A S

**P****OWER UP & go**



A PROJECT OF  
THE KANSAS SAMPLER FOUNDATION  
& THE OFFICE OF RURAL PROSPERITY



## Dear Kansans,

I have always been hopeful about helping rural communities be the best they can be, but after reading 460 surveys submitted by Kansans ages 21-39 from all 105 counties and conducting 175 in-depth interviews, I am ecstatic about their passion and commitment for living rural by choice and the collective brilliance of their ideas. If we can create a culture, an ecosystem, where young people feel welcomed and are able to be engaged and make a difference, we will be on our way to creating communities of the state's future.

The mission of this project was to to gain a greater understanding of current challenges and opportunities in rural Kansas for young people — helping to figure out why they choose to live in rural communities, and why it's difficult to make that choice. This report provides context and meaning to potential actions for state government, local government, businesses, non-profit and philanthropic organizations, and community members who want to invest in the future of their communities. The rich diversity of challenges and opportunities in rural communities lends itself well to support of locally identified challenges AND locally identified solutions.

These are the goals that emerged from the Kansans with whom we connected:

- Make rural life viable, possible and attractive to young people and families — and keep up the momentum in places where this is already happening
- Value diversity in all its forms — in culture, in ideas, in age, ethnicity, in gender, and in thought
- Support civic champions, entrepreneurs, public servants and volunteers by creating a place that everyone is proud to call home

The report shares actions for recruiting and retaining young Kansans by improving connections to government, making child care an issue for everyone, acknowledging that the most accessible audience to populate rural communities is our own K-12 students, embracing diversity and allowing new business ideas to be championed, resourced and celebrated.

Child care, housing, broadband and a culture of open minds and positivity were the issues that came up most often. This report provides support and suggested actions for child care, the business community and for government to consider; it should be viewed as a complementary piece to the state's broad and ongoing broadband and housing programs.

**This report shows what can happen when we start listening to and believing in our young people.** Supporting young rural Kansans supports everyone in rural Kansas. And when rural Kansas does well, the entire state does well.

To all of you who care about our communities, there is a place for you in this work. Let's make rural Kansas the place to be.



Marci Penner  
Executive Director, Kansas Sampler Foundation

# INTRODUCTION

**Communities that support young people are built on engagement. So, let's engage.**

**The Kansas Sampler Foundation defines a Power Up as someone who is between the ages of 21-39 and is rural by choice.**

The Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) enlisted the Kansas Sampler Foundation to listen and learn from Kansans ages 21-39 to find ways to help recruit and retain young people in rural Kansas communities. This subset of the rural population is looking for a place to make a difference, to be part of a welcoming and engaged community, and to provide for their family in a satisfying work environment. Many have moved away for college or work opportunities and returned; others have stayed close to their hometowns.

These Kansans care about where they live. They want to smooth the edges of their towns, to add services or amenities that make it just a little easier — or more fun — to live in their rural communities. They welcome diversity, in culture and in perspectives.

They have big goals, some of which are so complex they don't know where to begin. These

goals, discussed below, are often influenced not just by a community but by government, availability of capital and the availability of time and energy to navigate systems, agencies, processes and more.

This report provides context and meaning to potential actions for state government, local government, businesses, non-profit and philanthropic organizations, and community members who want to invest in the future of their communities. In 2020 and 2021, Kansas Sampler Foundation Executive Director Marci Penner connected with more than 460 Kansans ages 21-39 who identify as rural in every one of the state's 105 counties. She conducted 175 in-depth interviews to gain a greater understanding of current challenges and opportunities in rural Kansas for young people.

This report reflects the good thinking of those who would benefit the most from targeted, intentional support for Kansans who wish to improve their communities — for themselves, for their elders and for their children. There are solid ways for anyone at any level to make a positive difference and stories that help illustrate the need for change.

**Before we put a plan together, we have some work to do. If we can commit, as a state, to attending to these three goals, we can make a significant, positive difference in rural communities:**

- 1 Make rural life viable, possible and attractive to young people and families — and keep up the momentum in places where this is already happening**
- 2 Value diversity in all its forms — in culture, ideas, age, gender and thought**
- 3 Support civic champions, entrepreneurs, public servants and volunteers by creating a place that everyone is proud to call home**

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

Kansas communities will be stronger and more dynamic for every age citizen with engagement of residents under age 40. There's work for everyone in this:

- 1** **State policymakers and agencies who can focus attention on supporting rural Kansas communities;**
- 2** **Business owners, industry leaders and financial institutions, who can leverage efforts to improve the state's economy;**
- 3** **Non-profit and philanthropic organizations that can take on complementary support and advocacy work; and, most importantly;**
- 4** **Rural Kansans, who will lead the charge to ensure that their communities are able to meet the requirements of their residents.**

We learned so much about young Kansans' ideas to improve their communities. Many of these ideas fall neatly into the areas of community development, housing, rural healthcare, broadband and infrastructure, workforce and early education and child care. We also received constructive comments and ideas about mental health, the legal system, the state's foster care system, K-12 education, agriculture, the organization of local government structures like townships, pharmacies, historic preservation, access to the arts and more.

The interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic; while its impact on rural communities is not yet known, the structural and cultural examples provided during our work are likely to persist until addressed.

We recognize the good work that is being done across the state to address challenges for rural communities. Bearing those efforts in mind, we will focus on Kansans' stories and related ideas that complement everyone's efforts to make rural Kansas the best it can be.

Unless granted permission, identifying information has been removed from the quotes provided in this report.

The Kansas Sampler Foundation would like to thank Sarah Green, Chris Harris and Christy Hopkins, three Kansans who have professional experience in and a personal passion for rural Kansas, for providing technical assistance, guidance and support for this effort.

**One interviewee said: "To truly effect change we first need to identify if Kansans want to have rural communities. Then, we will need to adopt policies and practices at the state and federal level that encourage people and businesses to call rural communities home. These policies and practices may not always adhere to currently adopted fiscal attitudes and may require a paradigm shift in philosophies about resource allocation."**



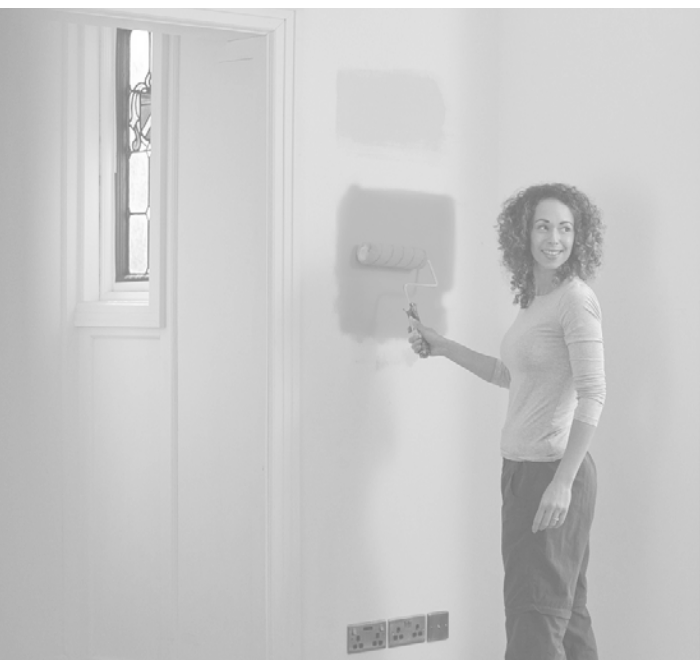
## PROLOGUE: A supporting narrative for rural Kansas

*Almost every issue that surfaced during our work connecting with young rural Kansans will require significant systemic actions to truly address. To illustrate these challenges, we created the following narrative to describe a person who would be a top-notch asset to a rural community. The person and community are both fictional, though they are both crafted from our interviews and our surveys. It may be helpful to keep in mind “Kim’s” story when reading this report:*

Kim moved to Brighton, a Kansas community of about 2,500, with her husband, Michael, and their two-year-old son, Jamie from a suburb of Chicago a year ago. They moved to be closer to Michael’s parents, who, now in their 70s, were ready to start transitioning their farm and their regional ag business to Michael and his brothers. Kim and Michael are both 32. They had good jobs in Chicago - she worked for a non-profit as a communications and outreach director and he worked for an accounting firm. They loved their neighborhood, with its restaurants and farmers market, and their close friends, who couldn’t believe they would give up their life to move to “the middle of nowhere.”

But they were both tired of the city traffic and their long commutes, and they were ready to add to their family. They were excited about living close to a small state lake where they could camp and hike. They also hoped the lower cost of living would help their family budget. Kim still had three years left to pay on her student loan that she took out in college.

They had a good plan before they moved, and also a little luck, but the move was a challenge in ways they didn’t anticipate — Michael’s aunt had died the year before they moved, and they were able to buy her house on the edge of town from Michael’s cousins. But it needed significant work to repair the old stone foundation and update the electrical system — and Kim found it would take months before they could get on the schedule of the local repair people. Kim planned to keep some remote work with her old organization, but couldn’t get a high-speed broadband connection to her house, and she was concerned about being able to conduct video conferences for work. Kim looked for jobs once they moved to Brighton, but couldn’t find a website or a central location where jobs were listed.



## PROLOGUE: A supporting narrative for rural Kansas — continued

One of Michael's cousins ran an in-home daycare in town. They assumed that it would be no problem to take Jamie and their future children to Katie's house — but when they mentioned it to her at a barbecue shortly before they moved, they learned that Katie wouldn't have openings, especially for an infant, for almost two years because of previous commitments. Kim continued to look for part-time work from home while she cared for Jamie.

Walking downtown with Jamie one day, she noticed an old stone building. Peeking in the windows, she saw that it was full of old vehicles, bed frames and parts for farm equipment. Her first thought was that it would be a terrific location for a coffee shop, with sunny windows that would be perfect for a co-working space. The back area had been used as a machine shop and had enough space for a small production area. Between the three uses for the building, she estimated that it could provide enough jobs for 10 or 15 people. She did some research to try to figure out how to buy the building, with the coffee shop as the anchor, but wasn't always sure where to start with her idea, which didn't seem to fit neatly into any of the existing programs offered by the state. And, like her husband was quickly learning, there weren't enough documented workers nearby to properly staff such an operation. And she'd still have to find somewhere to take Jamie during the day.

Kim was also lonely. Most of the families in town seemed to already have well-formed circles of friends and family. Other moms she met at the park where she took Jamie to play spoke Spanish, and Kim did not — and there were no local language classes in which to enroll. Her main social connection was the monthly Bunco game her mother-in-law invited

her to join, though most of the ladies were old enough to be her own mother. She mentioned the coffee shop idea to others at her table one night and they told her that they liked the idea. She came home excited for the first time in months, and Michael was relieved.

**But when she saw one of the ladies at church the next day and mentioned how happy she was that they liked the idea, the older woman, who was also the town's city clerk, replied, "it's a great idea, dear, but it'll never happen here. We had a coffee shop 10 years ago and it just didn't make it."**





## SECTION 1: HOW DO WE GET THERE?

### Actions for Recruiting and Retaining Young Rural Kansans

We're often asked what we can do to get young people back 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 "answer" is to support and build community champions who will recruit businesses, build child care centers, improve access to STEM education and help the state's youngest Kansans believe that they have a bright future no matter the size of their community. The answer is for state government to take a close look at its practices, perhaps improving coordination between agencies or convening stakeholders to find public-private partnerships that can work in small communities.

The answer is also in what we choose to do now to build the communities of the future. Young rural Kansans are uniquely positioned to make decisions now that set their communities on the course to grow and thrive — or close up shop.

The following ideas are suggestions, recommendations and ideas to spark conversations for anyone working to improve rural communities — created by those living and working in rural Kansas today.

## IMPROVE CONNECTIONS TO GOVERNMENT

**For too long community doers have done the best they could with few resources. State government — including the Kansas Legislature — can reinforce their grit and gumption.**

### VOICES IN SUPPORT

*"We should reform state government to support grassroots initiatives."*

*"Our northwest Kansas county feels disengaged from state politics. People don't know where to turn for information so I'm often asked to contact legislators for them."*

In regards to grants for his small city, a mayor says, *"The burden of compliance is just too much."*

One woman didn't know who to raise her concern with. *"You need not have any experience to be a dispatcher in Kansas. You're treated more like a secretary than a first responder. Right now there is no training to deal with someone on the dispatch call who is having a baby, or choking, or at a school shooting. Dispatchers need to learn to stay calm, keep people on the line, deal with other languages, find places without addresses. Knowing CPR is not required so how do you help someone on the other end that needs to administer CPR? This needs to be changed to develop and require training."*



## ACTIONS - Improve Connections

**Formally recognize and support local grassroots efforts.** The rich diversity of challenges and opportunities in rural communities lends itself well to support of locally identified challenges AND locally identified solutions.

**At the state level, policymakers should consider the development of a “grassroots support division.” This division would create a connection to the grassroots network to:**

1

**Be a clearinghouse of information regularly sought by volunteer-led communities.**

2

**Help find funding sources (not just state programs).**

3

**Create a portal to share constructive ideas about overcoming common stumbling blocks.**

**This harnesses state support in a way that is respectful of the lived experiences in rural communities yet builds capacity of those local champions doing the heavy lifting.**

The benefit of of this division would be its ability to work across programs, divisions, and agencies — removing barriers and “silos” that make navigating government challenging for volunteers and community-based grassroots doers. There are similar conversations underway in the federal government, including some recent discussion of moving programs such as Rural Development out of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and into a single rural-focused office.<sup>1</sup>

Not only would this help state government track current “hot spots” of needs in rural communities, the focus on support could also continue the state’s efforts of providing good customer service to constituents by asking “how can we help?” This effort could also bolster work in the Kansas Legislature to strengthen rural communities by providing additional data and context to the policymaking process. It could produce annual bipartisan reports that highlight grassroots successes and challenges. This effort could speed up the policy process.

<sup>1</sup> “The Path to Rural Resilience in America”: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2020/09/21/490411/path-rural-resilience-america/>





## ACTIONS - Improve Connections

**Support local champions.** Paid and trained local champions are needed to spearhead any complex issue in a community. A stakeholder group can assist but to solve the challenge in a timely manner, a paid, trained and supported champion is essential. The information coming from every part of the child care world (for example) is that the system is disconnected and it's hard to pick out what is most important and how to prioritize action steps. Communities report similar struggles with improving healthy food access, working on recreational options and more. It seems the missing piece is a LOCAL point person. It isn't a permanent position, but one that would last until the particular challenge was met.

### How can we support local champions?

1

**Direct public and private funding to create training opportunities for local champions to understand and overcome challenges.** Consider the Skilled KC Technical Institute as a model to develop a structure for Local Champion Institutes. Topics should be both specific (how to create a child care center) and general (how to manage volunteers).

2

**Direct public and private funding to financially support local champions.** This could be done strictly at the local level; another idea is to create a statewide fellowship-type program where champions receive a stipend for their participation. Their goal is to work on a local project — but the program could connect them to state agencies, non-profits and other resources that could help them with their work. Because they are paid for their work, it would allow them to focus on the problem with fewer competing commitments for their time. It also would build local capacity and connections to help the community.



## ACTIONS - Improve Connections

### How can we support local champions? - continued

3

**Create a shared “circuit rider” grant writer and/or grant manager.** This person would be able to find and write grant proposals for rural communities, bringing in additional resources and expanding capacity without each community supporting their own position. Some consideration should also be given to a shared grant management position to help communities comply with reporting requirements. These positions could be created in the public or the private sectors, potentially a good fit for a philanthropic organization or non-profit. The “circuit rider” refers to frontier clergy, who were assigned territories instead of congregations to broaden a church’s reach.

4

**Wherever possible, consider flexibility for local projects funded by state government.** The “spark plug” behind most community projects is usually a local resident with a passion for the issue. While they must work jointly with public and private entities, flexible funding can ensure that they are more successful. The former Small Community Improvement Program operated by the Kansas Department of Commerce was given as an example of a flexible cost-share program between state and local governments for quality of life and cultural improvements. The program was a 60-40 match, with 60 percent of state dollars matching at least 40 percent local efforts, including labor.

**Tap in to emerging opportunities such as Lead For America.** This national program has started recruiting participants in Kansas. It is focused on building a strong bench of public servants across the country by empowering young people to consider their own opportunities in government. This program is a practical, solid model that will make supporting grassroots efforts even stronger across the state.

## 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. It's also not just an issue limited to rural areas. Improvements in this sector would be a game-changer for the entire state.

There is a growing number of news stories<sup>2</sup> and economic studies<sup>3</sup> about the declining national birth rate, including younger people putting off having children because of the cost/availability of child care, student debt and inflexible work culture. Rural communities could experiment with new models and explore new paths to change this situation.

**Our goal should be to make Kansas the best place to raise a family in the country. We can be the ones to figure this out.**

<sup>2</sup> “The U.S. Birthrate Has Dropped Again. The Pandemic May Be Accelerating the Decline”: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/05/us/us-birthrate-falls-covid.html>

<sup>3</sup> “Economic Engagement of Mothers: Entrepreneurship, Employment, and the Motherhood Wage Penalty”: <https://www.kauffman.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Economic-Engagement-of-Mothers-How-and-When-Entrepreneurship-Matters.pdf>



### Child care challenges in Kansas:

*"I drive 30 miles to take our child to child care and then drive 30 back to work. I do that twice a day."*

*"We didn't have a second baby because there is no child care space available."*

*"People are putting down deposits to save a space in 2023 now."*

*"If we had a kid now I'd have to quit my job to stay home with the baby. Nothing is available for under three, except low income."*

*"My four-year old son has had to move five times in four years due to in-home daycares closing. Only one move was voluntary."*

*"No one in town knows how to find grants or state support or tax credits, or to know what else is out there."*

*"Regulations are so complex that people who want to start a child care center or in-home just give up. Interpreting the regs are even more unfriendly for minority providers."*

*"A huge struggle for providers is the terror of what they are up against to create."*





## ACTIONS - Child care

**Improve coordination of state programs, regulations, advocacy efforts and providers.** The child care issue is impacting recruitment and retainment of young people as much as anything. This issue needs to be magnified with a sense of urgency in finding solutions.

This report acknowledges the many parts and pieces of systems that must work together to effect true positive change in rural Kansas communities. The question needs to be asked if an Office of Child Care Services would bring disconnected pieces of the child care system together. This office would be charged with creating an ecosystem where access points are easily created for providers, community members and others. It should not replace the work of organizations in the public and private sectors but complement the work, ask questions and help to make child care services agile, flexible, and “customer-service” driven. The goal needs to be more than successfully following the regulations. It needs to be

### A note about regulations:

During our interviews, we asked Kansans to lead the direction of the conversation. We provided open-ended questions to learn more about what should change to keep and attract young people in rural communities, paying close attention to any statutory or regulatory barriers that were potential barriers to progress. It’s worth noting that the issue of regulations came up most often when related to child care. The regulatory complexity is hampering efforts to create more child care options. We need to make it easier for providers to create a safe environment.

providing quality and accessible services in cities of all sizes.

### VOICES IN SUPPORT

*“One inspector will be OK with one thing and then a new one will come and not approve the same thing.”*

*“A church did an add-on for child care. The guy in charge didn’t realize there were certain requirements so when the inspector came, there was so much to revise.”*

*“Regulations made it difficult for the school to pursue having a center there.”*

**Train local champions.** Trained and paid local champions are needed to spearhead the child care services issue in a community. We can’t expect a volunteer stakeholder group to have the knowledge, be able to filter the entanglement of disjointed information or have the time to solve the challenge in a timely fashion. In the case of child care, a champion is needed who has been trained in the step-by-step process to get child care services up and running in a town of any size.

**Note:** *There are degree programs for early childhood but no training exists to bring a child care center to town. The dozens of child care agencies/orgs in the state need to create that training and then build the infrastructure to offer that training in a variety of venues.*

This training could be provided by agencies and/or the private sector. One model to consider as a starting point is the Skilled KC Training Institute, which creates training programs to accelerate capacity that meets a specific need.



## ACTIONS - child care

**Elevate teachers and providers:** To elevate means to value the importance of their work with a living wage and health insurance. Our interviews show great support for additional resources for providers – and likely would support proposals at the federal level to increase child care provider pay as well as additional resources for families who use these services. There may be additional support for local child care funds supported through tax incentives or by business, economic development, and philanthropic organizations.

***“Teachers are taking care of our youngest for \$8.25 an hour, no benefits. I’m concerned about the quality of teachers and the turnover.”***

Child care needs to become a community mindset. It was repeatedly mentioned in the interviews that communities needed more activities for young kids. Quality sidewalks are needed for use with a stroller. Libraries could loan out playpens, toys, baby needs. Elders could be “certified” to help or observe. Diaper banks could be available as needed. Develop standards so cities can be known as a Child Care Approved Town. Create a child care-designated fund at the community foundation to be supported by employers and citizens.

A principal in another small town said, *“Ask: how does this help the kids and the community? If it’s a positive answer then move ahead with the idea.”*

### How can we measure our progress?

The child care sector has a number of opportunities to measure progress. Here’s a list of possible data points to consider for anyone working on this issue:

- Number of child care homes or centers started
- Number of child care slots available in a community
- Average teacher wages
- Job-to-child care availability ratio

## 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. As the saying goes, “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?

### VOICES IN SUPPORT

*“I felt like people saw me as a failure when I returned. Oh, you have a master’s (degree), so why are you back here?”*

*“This city has had a reputation for seeing success as leaving and not coming back. We need to make graduates feel invited and to change the conversation for students.”*

*“I came back to take a professional job because someone in the community called me and asked if I would consider coming back.”*



## ACTIONS - Create the choir

**Spread the good word.** Interviewees repeatedly stated that they chose rural as the preferred place to raise their kids. They report that not only are they looking for a certain quality of life that a rural community affords, they often want their kids to get to know their grandparents, to have them present at birthday parties and ball games. If they come back to their hometown, they may have a head start on a support network for their families.

The narrative thread throughout the interviews showed that those who were involved in community projects or felt supported by the community as kids were mostly likely to return. Those who had a good experience in high school came back. It was common to hear that teachers (at any level) often gave the message that success meant leaving the town and going to a bigger city. Instructors at

higher levels of education mostly directed students toward getting jobs in metro areas. These interviewees didn’t hear the message often enough about how living and working in a small town could be productive and a place to find success, or that they were wanted. This action is something that ANYONE in Kansas who works with rural youth could commit to doing; it could be bolstered by state government and private-sector non-profit organizations sharing the same message.

Also, think hard about subtle messages. One Power Up told the story about their entire senior class receiving luggage as their graduation gifts. While that is a kind gesture, it also acknowledged that just about everyone would leave. What’s the opposite of a gift of luggage to a high school graduate? What might make someone feel valued?



## ACTIONS - Create the choir

### **Create a Community of Practice and fellowship opportunities for “rural influencers.”**

Consider developing a youth leadership summit, hosted by a state government agency or in conjunction with private sector organizations. Invite higher education administrators, guidance counselors or representatives from 4-H, Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge Series and Nex-Generation Round Up for Youth. Stress the importance of the message that rural Kansas is worthy as a place to live and work.

We need a  
big dose of  
“Kansas  
swagger.”

It’s difficult to sell a location without an awe-inspiring message. If the message is that a town is old, boring and stale, it’s tough to convince a young person to start their career there. We need to start talking more positively about ourselves — and to ourselves.

This is another action that will take many to accomplish, yet it can be done by anyone, regardless of their authority. Adults can model excitement about their communities for young people through their words and actions. Every young person is a “local champion” in training, but they need to see that it’s a possibility. The message can even reflect that a young person might leave for job education — but creating a space where they want to come back and make a difference starts early. Keep the conversation — and the door — open.

**Expand programs that connect kids to community.** Extra-curricular classes and educational training opportunities, often provided by the private sector, are creating terrific connections between young students and community members. Explore ways to expand localized programs such as the Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge Series statewide and Nex-Generation Round Up for Youth, as well as classes on trade skills and information technology certificate programs for which apprenticeships might be available. John Deere mentorship program (<https://www.btiequip.com/check-out-our--ag-tech>) is a good example of one of these programs.

Also, local government and school districts could explore creating a “keeping it local” class for communities that engage students in all aspects of communities, from learning how local government works to visiting non-profit organizations and more.

**Find the love.** Create volunteer or helping opportunities that involve kids in a town in a productive and meaningful manner. If they love something, they’ll return to it or invest in it later.



## BUSINESSES ARE THE ENGINE OF THE TOWN

A small town's approach to businesses 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.

Removing barriers and reducing friction for business owners is the goal. Like all other challenges, the approach will need to be systemic and involve many aspects of a community — not just state and local governments, but housing, child care, local attitudes and more.

*"My ultimate dream is to use tech to upstart the economy and do something with empty downtown buildings."*

*"The ecology of businesses in small towns needs to be agile, flexible and customer-service driven. A good product is no longer enough. It's about how the business is operated and how are they as stewards of all that goes into the company, including being good to employees, using good environmental practices..."*

*"We need a program, not just for non-profits, so that young people can use these downtown buildings and start a business. It's almost impossible to afford fixing them AND start a business, and many have student debt and no health insurance."*

*"I got a grant to start coding and a hands-on maker space in K-5. The kids love it. We're the only ones in North Central Kansas that do this."*

*"I'd like to see trades taught in high school. Finding teachers for this is the biggest problem. The only electrician in our town is 82. These are viable and available jobs."*

*"Thirty-two jobs are open in one small town in welding and tech. We can't really advertise because we have no housing available."*

*"I'd like to see a program that targets needed jobs in a community."*

*"Change some rules so it's not only to pay back college tuition but use it to incentivize bringing jobs like through Rural & Remote. How about a ROZ ala carte?"*



## ACTIONS - Businesses are the engine

**Create an entrepreneurial ecosystem.** No matter the size of a town, young people are interested in what the businesses are, how they are run and how supported they are from the community. What kind of broadband access is available, are regulations business-friendly, what support systems are in place and how is the customer service?

The goal is an entrepreneurial ecosystem, where businesses can not only prosper but give back to a community, be a supporter of a community, while the community contributes to the business' success. The "ecosystem" also could be understood as the degree to which new ideas are supported in a community. Are they championed, resourced and celebrated or are they dismissed, discouraged, and perceived as threats?

When we say "ecosystem" we can mean it in both the entrepreneurial sense and the civic sense. Regulations and related issues are likely more abstract to the average entrepreneur in the beginning – the support issue along with the need for capital and infrastructure are much more real.

### Actions that could help create these ecosystems:

1

**Rural Kansas should find ways to build on the ecosystem infrastructure that NetWork Kansas has established.** A benefit of the NetWork Kansas model is that it pairs local control of funding decisions with statewide matching funds. The organization also provides technical assistance, though there is a gap between the organization and prospective entrepreneurs across the state. Expanding outreach efforts would be a solid action that could make a difference.

2

**Rural communities and counties could consider redirecting tax dollars from larger established businesses to supporting entrepreneurs.** They could create locally directed and funded angel investment capital programs, pair existing business owners with new entrepreneurs for mentorship and coaching, view restoration of buildings as "site development" for entrepreneurs rather than site development for traditional recruitment, waive property taxes for any entrepreneur starting a new business in a currently vacant building and/or connect existing K-12 efforts with the entrepreneurial ecosystem in some sort of community /entrepreneurship internship model.

3

**Counties could provide additional incentives and capital to entrepreneurs** who are planning to start a business in a sector that is needed in the region (child care, building trades, healthcare, tech, restaurants and culture).



## ACTIONS - Businesses are the engine

### Actions that could help create these ecosystems — continued

4

**Starting in high school, create and nurture this mindset.** Help new entrepreneurs know where to find support locally or in the network, to know about shared services and platforms for commerce. Help people know what kind of gig or side-hustle jobs are available in the town or area. A continued emphasis on career and technical education, particularly building trades and tech jobs, could be emphasized as not only a career but a service to rural communities.

5

**Local communities can take a number of approaches both big and small to support businesses.** They could establish local revolving loans funds to assist with gap financing; offer professional consulting services (accounting, legal, business plan development, art, etc.) for entrepreneurs; celebrate, feature and drive traffic to local businesses; host formal welcoming events/ribbon-cutting ceremonies; work with existing businesses on transition plans and needs; assist in accessing regional, state and federal resources; share ideas and concepts working in other places; and serve as a connector within and outside of the community.

6

**State agencies and non-profit organizations could connect businesses in rural communities through their networks or to other resources for business planning or marketing.** They might be particularly helpful for niche businesses and start-ups that fall outside a traditional model. One idea for either the public or private sector to consider is to create pools of specialists — like accountants or marketers — for a small rural business to access as a shared resource.

7

**State agencies are also skilled at creating “one-stop shops” for current issues affecting Kansas business owners once common stumbling blocks are identified.** These portals can reduce the friction of obtaining operating licenses and cut down on surprises as a business gets ready to open. Industry organizations can also help with these education efforts. Recent topics of interest include starting a cooperative grocery store, building e-commerce platforms and direct marketing opportunities. Some of these efforts may be helpful not just to business owners but also to local champions working to address a need in their community. Special consideration should be given to expanding outreach for these efforts — if these are front doors for assistance, they should be easy to find.

**Be good to employees.** The Kansans with whom we spoke are searching for work-life balance. They seek jobs with livable wages, a modern benefits package and health insurance. The opportunity to work remotely even part of the week is appealing. Maximize each person in whatever job they have. Rural businesses could tap in to these dynamics when considering how to recruit and retain employees under age 40.

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated a strong desire for flexible work environments and how important they can be to employees — particularly as this flexibility can address challenges that women face in the workforce related to balancing family and work activities.



## ACTIONS - Businesses are the engine

**Build on our agricultural heritage and economic base.** Support ag technology businesses and programs such as accelerators and incubators. Focus venture capital funding on early-stage ag tech ventures. Create programs that provide affordable access to comprehensive health insurance to agricultural families and devote resources to researching emerging markets and diversified crop options. Celebrate Kansas' agricultural heritage while building rural and urban linkages through food and fiber. Source Kansas products, celebrating the products that are grown, raised and produced here.

Even for the most determined farmers and ranchers, barriers to entry include largely inaccessible financing unless they are already established as a producer. Young farmers are rarely able to purchase land at auctions due to requirements related to approved appraisers.

**Live rural – change the world from here.** Communities and counties could set up remote worker recruitment programs. The opportunity isn't just in recruiting and retaining employees for existing rural business; with the proliferation of remote work, rural Kansas communities could be recruiting employees from all over the country regardless of where their employer are based. Communities should start with engaging with their former residents, some of whom would be interested in moving back if they could understand how it could work.







## SECTION 2: HOW WE CAN INVEST IN YOUNG, RURAL KANSANS

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

There are two additional categories of interview comments that bear inclusion in this report. They shed light on the thoughtful perspectives of the Kansans under 40 who identify as rural residents who participated in this project by completing surveys and generously sharing their time to talk about their challenges, their aspirations and their commitment to their communities.

Just like all rural Kansas communities are not the same, not all in the 21-39 age group are the same. This group has a wide range of professional and life experiences. They benefit from mentors. They want to be involved and make a difference, even if they might not know where to begin. The questions about how to fit in multiply if they move to a rural community that is not their hometown or is fully established with all the roles filled by long-time residents.

The final section tackles a softer side of this work, the often invisible forces that can shape a community. They are perhaps less defined than the recommendations above, but no less important when thinking about how to make Kansas rural communities attractive to young people.



## COMMUNITIES OF THE FUTURE

**Young people want to live and thrive in what can be best described as communities of the future.**

**Communities of the future like themselves.** They are welcoming to newcomers, interested in supporting all who live in their town and have a desire to engage all residents in moving a community forward.

They find ways to be inclusive and supportive. They support the arts, with creative local projects that reflect and amplify the vibe of the community.

**They listen. They engage. They believe in — and invest in — themselves.**

There are so many opportunities to create a new model of community in rural Kansas, one that honors and respects traditions and the places and attributes that make each community special while taking advantage of new thoughts and approaches.

What if we approach rural communities as start-ups<sup>4</sup>? This idea, best described in a commentary piece from the Kauffman Foundation, provides additional research, thinking and ideas about how this approach alone could change rural Kansas in the future. What if the goal of a community was to create an ecology in which the community would be agile, flexible and person-service driven? The concept builds on a recommendation by one of our interviewees who helped us ask the question: What if we created a mindset that helped Kansans want to dive in and help make the community an appealing place to live and work?

<sup>4</sup>“After generations of disinvestment, rural America might be the most innovative place in the U.S.”:  
<https://www.kauffman.org/currents/rural-america-most-innovative-place-in-united-states/>





## ACTIONS - Communities of the future

Thinking of rural communities as start-up businesses will require hard questions to be asked and an experimental mindset to be adopted. Roadblocks to new ideas might be the same barriers that keep momentum going for those who have always made decisions in a small town.

This approach may also serve us well as our state changes. Projections indicate<sup>5</sup> that our population will shift in race, ethnicity and culture. Diverse communities are essential to the Kansas economy, especially in rural areas, especially in the agriculture sector. Rural Kansas communities of the future will build on attitudes of inclusivity developed today.

We want to acknowledge that change can be difficult. Challenging existing structures can be uncomfortable and messy. We also want to encourage communities to keep trying. It is worth noting that this report relied on robust, long-standing networks to connect with young Kansans; we noticed that these networks are not well-connected to Kansans who are undocumented, immigrants or otherwise outside of what some would consider “traditional” groups. For this work to be sustainable, these connections must be built. Programs such as those at the Kansas Leadership Center that bolster civic engagement could also be helpful in this work.

Some questions that rural Kansas communities could ask themselves related to diversity, equity and inclusion as it pertains to this project:

1

How many second- and third-generation immigrants do you have in your community?

2

How many immigrants have started businesses? How many women? How many people of color?

3

Do key civic and non-profit boards accurately reflect the demographics of a community?

*“It’s hard, but stick with it. You have a vision then make it happen. We were watching*

*our small town die slowly because no one wanted change, then younger couples started to establish their lives here and get involved. It’s nice to see the rural communities continue to thrive and I wouldn’t live anywhere but rural.”*

*“We (rural towns) short sell what we are. Part of the sell should be to come help make this your vision, too.”*

*“Investing ourselves, in a holistic way in our hometown, is contributing to a community we love that we can easily imagine to be even more vibrant and full.”*

*“It was a really difficult first six months. It was the shock of the size, I just didn’t get it. But now I wouldn’t leave for anything.”*

### VOICES IN SUPPORT

<sup>5</sup>“A Changing Kansas: Implications for Health and Communities”: <https://kansashealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/KHF-KHI-Demographic-Report-060518.pdf>



## ACTIONS - Communities of the future

*When big city friends ask about <the interviewee> living in a small town, they look at them like they've "stepped down" in life, lowered expectations. But that's not true at all.*

### VOICES IN SUPPORT

*"I want a community filled with other professional, civically engaged individuals who want to make this the best community they can."*

*"Graduates go out and then when tired of that busier, big city lifestyle, come back to a place where you can make a difference."*

**How-can-I-help? mindset.** City and county government, organizations and boards can transform their communities and organizations by reframing their approach. Shifting from "you should do..." to "how can I help?" demonstrates a willingness to being open to listening and being responsive to ideas that can help make a community the best it can be. The mindset should encompass a view of each age group, different cultures, different needs in the community. A culture of volunteering could be grown through this mindset as well.

In our interviews, it became clear that while these attitudes are deeply felt by young Kansans who want to make a difference in their communities, they are not limited to a single town or place. Yet the shift in approach costs nothing and could be the most important shift in a community's efforts to grow and sustain itself.

When someone comes to a Main Street director in rural Kansas with an idea, his response is "What can we do to help?" The notion of reframing, asking how you can help, having an open mind and moving forward will help grow communities of the future.

*"When authority and 'the doers' all feel about on the same level you can really get things done."*

### VOICES IN SUPPORT

*"When our hospital administrator came on he changed the culture working inside out. He asked the staff (all the staff) what they needed and when he presented to the board about those things he not only had the personal reasons for it but the staff felt empowered, cared about and like they have a voice."*

*"The culture in our town from the mayor is 'no red tape.' Don't make it challenging or hard when people ask to do things. It's the ability to 'not say no.'"*





## ACTIONS - Communities of the future

**Help me understand, where are the needs?** Seeking to understand a situation or a perspective eliminates barriers. Understanding leads to seeing people of different cultures, abilities and ages with new eyes.

There were many ideas from young rural Kansans about how to improve understanding within a community. Two top ideas from those interviewed included finding ways for community members to share about cultures and perspectives through food, story, shared activities and traditions. Communities and organizations could consider developing classes and programs to help community members know more about the inner workings of a city and organizations.

### VOICES IN SUPPORT

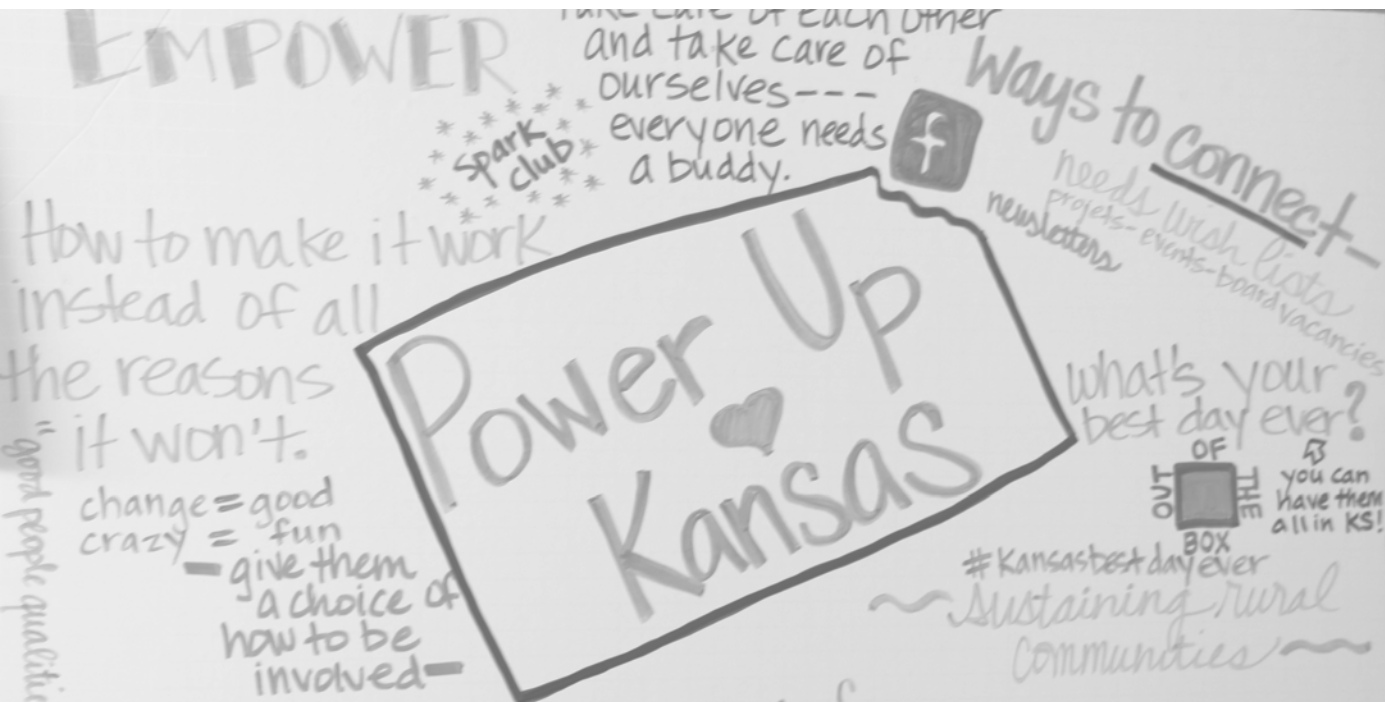
*"If the general public was given the opportunity to learn about how a city works, that would make a big difference in how people see local issues."*

*"I'd love to take Spanish lessons to be better able to communicate with some students/families but no one in the area offers this."*

*"We need to teach our students how to appreciate each other. These people are going through so much, living in fear or, at least, not understood."*

*"They do surveys with high school students about if you do drugs or smoke cigarettes but they don't ask if you're hungry."*

*"We need more public spaces for cultural things."*





## ACTIONS - Communities of the future

**You are welcome.** More than anything, people want to feel welcomed into a community, a club, a school. This simple act lays the groundwork for everything. Anybody can help do this. It needs to be a mindset.

### VOICES IN SUPPORT

*"I felt it took two to five years to be accepted. It takes an investment of time to be accepted."*

*"Because of all the support I got when we arrived, I want to work hard for this town."*

*"It's really hard to show up to things when you don't know anyone."*

*"It was difficult to fit in when we first moved here, even though this was my husband's hometown."*

*"We should involve newcomers, welcome them so they want to stay! The thing about a newcomer is that there are no sacred cows, no "we always did it this way" to get in their way of thinking how to do it."*

*"There was no welcome type of program. Nothing was online so we had a hard time figuring out how to set up "life" in here."*

*"A neighbor, 85, came over to introduce himself. A few days later he brought over a bag of sweet potatoes from his garden. Later he offered us his hayer. He made us feel so welcomed out here in the country."*

**How can I be involved? Make a difference?** Structures that nurture new ideas and new leaders are needed and would be welcomed. **Perhaps there are new leadership structures for communities, i.e., ad hoc groups.** Ad hoc groups, established for specific purposes and easily dissolvable, may be more agile and better suited to move projects forward in rural areas.

*"Gatekeepers control what is happening."*

*"The most dangerous phrase in the world applies here: "we've always done it that way."*

*"There is a VP of No in every org. Need to encourage young leadership, new ideas."*

*"I chose rural because I can make a bigger difference in small towns."*

*"All the volunteer roles are all pre-filled so I feel shut out."*

*"We'd like to get more involved but it's not so easy to get in."*

### VOICES IN SUPPORT



## ACTIONS - Communities of the future

### How can I be involved? Make a difference? — continued

*“What if cities had an “advisory council” of young people to hear out decisions, programs, planning and had a chance to give their take on it. Since they aren’t often involved in developing the idea, at least try it out on them.”*

*“It would be nice for the city council to involve younger people in decisions. The county is run by the older generation. I’d love to be more involved”*

*“We wanted a rural community so we could get involved and make a difference. We need to make that possible for newcomers to town!”*

*“When new, you get invited to get on boards but then it feels like a lifetime commitment. When you’re young, they want your muscle more than your ideas.”*

*“The biggest struggle is the local government and pillars of the community bring up “always did it like this” and are immovable at times though they can acknowledge the need to progress.”*

*“Leaders are those with age, wealth and are long-time community members.”*

*“The presence of youth at the table in our city is so encouraging. It makes all the difference.”*

.....

**Work together to get things that are good for the community:** Community gardens, a community greenhouse. More activities for families, entertainment, recreational options, diversity, aesthetics, access to the arts, lifelong learning options, sidewalks. Are there incentives to convert abandoned buildings, like schools, into community uses?

*“How about a community maker’s space used as a social space, an entrepreneurial space, a creative space? With commercial kitchens, people could bake or make cultural dishes and serve here.”*

*“Farm people could come up with good old-fashioned playgrounds for the kids using dirt, water, rocks and twine.”*

*“What do young people want in a community? We need things to do that are spontaneity-oriented, to do on our own schedule. We want healthy food options. We’re tired of monotony. Rural doesn’t always want leftovers. We want an upscale bar, a coffee shop with board games and books. Daily walk-in fun things for kids and adults like an open art studio. Trails, parks, yoga. Young people want experiences, something to remember. We will spend money if it’s worth it.”*

## CONCLUSION / NEXT STEPS

One of our favorite quotes from our surveys and interviews is the following:

**“All I want is a salad with some nice lettuce and soft-serve ice cream for my kids.”**

This quote does not tackle the hard issues, like immigration or taxes or housing or child care. It reminds us that not all communities have the same access to goods and services. It speaks to what a market might support, if an entrepreneur was able to find a way to connect supply and demand.

It also shows that young rural Kansans do not live in a vacuum. They travel; they move away from their hometowns for education and for work. They have friends and family members who influence their views of the world. Social media adds additional layers of exposure to different perspectives and views.

Each of these Kansans under age 40 brings with them a rich set of experiences and knowledge that could expand a community and help prompt new avenues of progress and possibility.

If we’re going to make progress in rural Kansas, we must engage with and listen to those who are next in line to continue the hard work of making a community run. And we must begin now.

There’s work for everyone.

**Let’s get to work.**

(Turn to the next page to find out what happened to our fictional young Kansan, Kim, if her rural Kansas town made some big changes.)





## EPILOGUE: WE CAN DO THIS

We wanted to end on a high note. We let ourselves think about the example of Kim, our fictional young rural Kansan, and what her experience could look like if many systems, working together, could support her — and if the town welcomed her ideas:

Two years after Kim moved to Brighton, Kansas, with her husband Michael, and their young son Jamie, things changed. She never gave up on her dream of starting a series of businesses in an old building downtown, but her opportunities and focus shifted. When the city clerk retired after 40 years of service, the city council agreed to find someone to fill the role who was open to new ideas about not just running the city government but expanding the city's capacity in community development. They found Hannah, who instantly brought people in town together to talk about projects that could be done quickly — and only if everyone worked together.

The project the community landed on was to rehabilitate the historic theater next to the building where Kim saw the potential for a coffee shop. They were able to apply for a new grant program through the state that was flexible with its terms but required local investment, including community volunteer hours. Hannah asked Kim to lead the committee. Hannah found a high school teacher who could translate their meeting materials into Spanish so everyone in town could participate. The ladies in Kim's mother-in-law's Bunco group provided food and refreshments for meetings and for work days. The high school service clubs pitched in to help with the project and Kim found herself mentoring a 17-year-old girl with a talent in design who had been

determined to move away because she couldn't see her future in her small town, even though she loved it. An 18-year-old boy worked with the town's electrician on the project and decided to attend a trade school so he could come back to work with the electrician — and take over the business one day.

The people Kim met through the theater project began to notice that she could fill gaps that existed in Brighton and started asking her how they could help with her ideas. There were others in town who also wanted a coffee shop, and wanted her to succeed. They encouraged

her to apply for a new community champion project supported by state government and philanthropic partners to create a business model for a coffee shop that included space for community events, like language classes and cooking classes. She created a partnership with the local library to help give children access to computers when the library was closed.

When she was selected for the program, the people in town helped by taking turns watching her newborn, Anna. Around this same time, Michael's cousin Katie teamed up with another daycare provider to create a co-op child care program. Anna was one of the first children enrolled in the program.

Brighton's reputation for working together began to get them noticed. They were one of the first small communities in their region to get expanded broadband coverage. A developer helped create a small, affordable housing program that focused on filling vacant lots in town. Other young people liked how welcome they felt when they came to see the theater and considered moving there themselves.

