Kansas counties share housing success stories

State-funded grants help to support ‘Rural Champions’

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – In a year’s time, a state agency’s efforts to ease housing shortages in Kansas communities seemed to have helped pave a path in at least a few rural areas.

Kerri Falletti, the grassroots strategy developer for the Kansas Department of Commerce’s Office of Rural Prosperity, said the agency’s Rural by Choice grant program – launched in Fall, 2022 in partnership with the Patterson Family Foundation -- supported part-time positions to address critical community needs in 12 Kansas counties.

Known as “Rural Champions,” individuals in the counties gained access to resources from the Kansas Department of Commerce, including training, compensation and more. The program was implemented as a one-year pilot through October, 2023; Falletti said she is hopeful the program will be funded again for the coming year.

Three of the counties addressing housing shortages in their communities were featured during the Nov. 3 First Friday e-Call, a monthly online series hosted by K-State Research and Extension that helps to nurture small businesses and inspire entrepreneurship in Kansas.

The online discussions, which routinely host dozens of Kansas citizens from the public and private sectors, are available free each month.

“The positive side of (addressing housing shortages) is seeing the potential to fill empty positions in our local businesses,” said Darcy Wilson, who leads a project in Linn County. “This gives us the potential to fill open teaching positions, nursing positions, positions in the county office and in the larger corporations so that people don’t have to commute 60 miles one way.”

Wilson noted that housing stock in Linn County is aging, so there was a need to remove some blighted homes, while building new structures.

Cheryl Adelhardt, the Rural Champion in Harper County, said local officials identified challenges of vacant properties, dilapidation, affordability, rental vs. owner-occupied and a lack of middle-income housing as evidence of housing needs in the communities of Anthony, Attica and Harper.
Her group spent the past year conducting a Housing Assessment Tool – a guide developed by the Kansas Department of Commerce – to develop a strategic plan and identify resources to address their problems.

While they’ve made progress the past year, she said the work’s not nearly done.

“Addressing housing challenges is a long-term process,” Adelhardt said. “Our work so far has been in identifying possible resources and goals. We couldn’t have done any of that without information from our housing assessment.”

Also highlighted in the Nov. 3 call was Lissa Sexson of Wallace County, the second-least populated county in Kansas that she says “had not had any form of organized community development for 15 years.”

“For us,” she said, “it was a matter of starting where your community is ready to start.”

Sexson said one outcome of that process is finding out that many older people in the county are looking to downsize from their current home. A local builder, she added, is currently building two smaller homes to either rent or sell.

Other Rural Champions in Kansas have addressed such topics as childcare, entrepreneurship and community trails. More information on the Office of Rural Prosperity’s Rural Champions program is available online.

The Nov. 3 talk and other First Friday presentations are available online from K-State Research and Extension.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATION: Links used in this story
First Friday e-calls, www.ksre.k-state.edu/community/business/entrepreneurship

Rural Champions (Office of Rural Prosperity),
https://www.kansascommerce.gov/orp/ruralchampions

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