



\*\* This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/southwind-district-rural-health>

Released: Feb. 3, 2025

## **Kansas residents rally around rural health care issues**

Extension agents help to spur community conversations, put plans into action

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

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Residents in four rural Kansas counties are finding creative ways to improve their access to rural health care – with an assist from their local extension programs.

Tara Solomon-Smith, a family and community wellness agent with Kansas State University's Southwind Extension District, said community members in her area have reached out to ask for help in creating opportunities for improving civic health.

The Southwind Extension district covers Allen, Bourbon, Neosho and Woodson counties in southeast Kansas.

"Some of the communities we work with already have programs established, while others have a group of people but have not had a particular goal they're working towards," Solomon-Smith said. "Extension's role has been honing in on what the group wants to address, and looking at local data to understand their health care needs."

"Narrowing down what the communities want to address at a given time makes a big difference."

In Toronto, Kansas, Solomon-Smith said residents met to identify their community's assets and opportunities. "This led to a series of conversations on how to continue to develop the previous school gym into a more robust community center for the little more than 200 residents," she said.

Solomon-Smith calls the community center "a civic hub," where residents can not only get together to exercise, but also host such events as a farmer's market. Residents have helped to write grants that are helping the community build a playground on the site.

Solomon-Smith also applied for and received support to establish a [rural community health worker](#) in Bourbon and Woodson counties through K-State's Community Health Worker initiative. She said that rural community health workers provide outreach and education, and serve as a link for community members with healthcare and community services.

Toronto, in Woodson County, has no medical facilities and serves as a good example of the value of having a rural community health worker available.

“They have a senior center, but really no health care within 30 minutes,” Solomon-Smith said. “The residents have a deep desire to stay in their rural community, so having that rural community health worker – who is a trusted individual that meets with them and connects them to health and community services – is important.”

K-State’s Community Health Worker program is a product of K-State 105, an economic growth and advancement initiative available in every Kansas county.

“Our community members have a deep desire to stay in this area, even if it is very rural,” Solomon-Smith said. “One of the program’s strengths is that it pairs residents with a local, trusted person with whom they can share information while keeping care close to home.”

Also within the Southwind Extension District, Solomon-Smith said community members in Chanute and Neosho County have worked to address other barriers to health care, such as local transportation issues.

“We worked with a local health task force and presented the [Pathways to a Healthy Kansas](#) program to help them do a deep dive into their transportation issues,” Solomon-Smith said. “We were able to come back with an action plan on how to address the challenges, who would do it and when, then evaluate the action plan and sustain the program.”

Regardless of a community’s health care needs, “the avenue that helps a lot is our local coalitions,” Solomon-Smith said. “We’re all better together, and other people in our communities have their own understanding of issues based on those they serve. It’s definitely important to have collaborative connections to work toward long term goals of health.”

More information on programs available in Kansas to help improve health care is available at [local extension offices in Kansas](#).

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**FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS:** Links used in this story

Rural Ag Community Health Worker program, <https://www.k-state.edu/105/projects/rural-ag-health-community-health-worker.html>

K-State Research and Extension local offices, [www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html](http://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html)

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