



** This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at www.ksre.k-state.edu/news/stories/2023/12/first-friday-kansas-child-care-successes.html

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Kansas 'Rural Champions' discuss childcare challenges, successes

K-State's First Friday e-call highlights state's resources

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

MANHATTAN, Kan. – A Kansas expert on rural issues says there may be some common threads evident in communities where childcare issues are being successfully managed.

Kerri Falletti, the grassroots strategy developer for the [Kansas Department of Commerce's Office of Rural Prosperity](#), noted that every Kansas county likely faces some level of shortage in childcare availability.

ChildCare Aware of Kansas indicates that the state is approximately 85,000 slots short of fully meeting the childcare demand.

"It's an interesting challenge, because you've got the very rural areas and then you've got bigger communities – like Dodge City – that face these issues," Falletti said. "They are very different types of communities, but it doesn't matter where you go because it's such a challenge. Each community needs to be able to find their way and build support around this issue."

Falletti led a panel of Kansans that talked about their community's childcare efforts during the Dec. 1 [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.

Broadly speaking, the panelists – who represented Clay, Ford and Kingman Counties as well as the Oberlin school district – agreed that building support around five areas is key to successfully improving a community's childcare needs.

- Gaining community consensus (agreement) around what is needed.
- Building community partnerships.
- Addressing the labor shortage in childcare.
- Acquiring funding (such as grants) to address the issues.
- Providing training and ongoing support to childcare providers.

“The educational process was a bit of a challenge for us,” said Susie Swanson, who works with Grow Clay County in Clay Center. “We had to educate people about the needs in the community and why it’s important for businesses. If you don’t feel secure with your childcare, you’re not as able to do your job. And you’re not going to bring new people into the community if they don’t have a place for their children to go while they’re working.”

Clay County is one of 12 [Rural Champions](#) recognized currently by the Office of Rural Prosperity, Falletti said. In addition to childcare, she noted that some areas are also addressing other challenges, including mental health, housing, entrepreneurship, wellness and more.

“In Oberlin, our primary goal was to increase the number of childcare slots; we were seeing a huge deficit,” said Rebecca Nedland. “Our initial plan was to build a facility close to our elementary school...but we had some difficulties finding contractors in the area, and so we shifted and found a suitable property for sale in town.

“There had been previously community daycares that have failed for various reasons here, so we wanted to make sure we did our research and took our time making this process happen. Being a part of the Rural Champions program gave us resources and knowledge to make this a successful project.”

Other panelists during the Dec. 1 First Friday call included Dalila Boys from Ford County, and Amy Wallace of Kingman County. The full 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
Kansas Department of Commerce’s Office of Rural Prosperity,
<https://www.kansascommerce.gov/about/meet-the-team/office-of-rural-prosperity>

ChildCare Aware of Kansas, <https://ks.childcareaware.org/about>

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

First Friday e-calls, www.ksre.k-state.edu/community/business/entrepreneurship

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