



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Office of Rural Opportunity

RURAL KANSAS PROUDLY SERVES AS THE ECONOMIC BACKBONE TO THE STATE

and provides a unique quality of life not found in metropolitan areas. Neighbors still roll up their sleeves and work side-by-side to help those in need and improve their community. While the successes of rural communities don't always hit the headlines, most residents prefer it that way.

Despite this tremendous spirit of volunteerism and generosity, many rural communities face problems too big to overcome alone. Some communities just need a hand from time to time. Sometimes a listening ear and a little direction can make a big difference in the success of a rural community. Resources are limited but, if a

community is truly committed to solving a local problem, help can be found to turn dreams into realities.

The Kansas Department of Commerce continues to see and value Kansas' rural communities. In 2007, the Legislature created the Office of Rural Opportunity to support rural community development. Housed within the Department of Commerce, the ORO is staffed by a team with a demonstrated history of supporting rural Kansas.

ORO staff offer listening ears and experience to rural communities under 5,000 in population that are seeking assistance to help attract businesses, improve their communities and solve local problems with local, state and federal and private resources. The staff is spread between four regions, which encourages a grassroots approach to rural development.

Examples of projects with which the Office of Rural Opportunity can assist:

- Determining the needs and priorities of the community
- Installing warning sirens or a public storm shelter
- Finding used and donated equipment for a community center
- Learning how to build energy-efficient buildings
- Improving an assisted-living facility or local library
- Installing sidewalks and curbs for students to walk to school
- Preserving historic buildings
- Repairing local water and sewer systems or deteriorating housing
- Meeting ADA-compliance requirement
- Building a new park and installing walking trails or a public restroom
- Planning for community growth
- Preserving historic documents
- Beautifying a downtown
- Supporting a local farmers market and grocery store

SUCCESS STORIES IN RURAL OPPORTUNITY REGIONS

Northwest Region – For years, Rawlins County (population 2,966) has needed improved health care. The ORO was able to get the ball rolling. The process started with Office staff visiting with Rawlins County economic development officials. At that meeting, a number of health care needs were expressed. Upon learning of this need, Office staff connected county officials with a grant writer on staff at the hospital and program managers at Commerce. The result was \$250,000 in Community Service Tax Credits for a hospital expansion. Additional grants were also obtained through Community Development Block Grants for a front entrance renovation and handicapped accessibility upgrades. On a separate project, Office staff located human capital to create a dental clinic and successfully leveraged approximately \$300,000 from multiple funding programs to kick-start the project.

Southwest Region – The City Commission of Minneola (population 717) was tired of talking and ready to act. The Office of Rural Opportunity helped this southwestern Kansas community with strategic thinking to move the community toward a prioritized plan. Once initial planning commenced, Office staff connected Minneola with resource partners such as USDA Rural Development, Kansas Department of Transportation, grant writers and other Commerce programs that fit their expressed needs. The result? Local business people made it possible for a new business to get started, and the City committed matching funds for sidewalks on Main Street and storm water mitigation. The City continues planning efforts around accessing additional funding opportunities. Their prioritized plan is becoming reality!

Central Region – Sometimes the unexpected happens, and sometimes it has big consequences. That was the case for Anthony (population 2,440) when a ruptured gas line caused a devastating fire that destroyed most of the central block of their downtown. The Office of Rural Opportunity is uniquely positioned to assist communities when disaster strikes. As the community started to work through the aftermath, ORO was there to help the community evaluate the situation, identify resources to address immediate needs, and bring together programs available for businesses interested in rebuilding.

Eastern Region – In April 2008, the Office of Rural Opportunity visited the City of Humboldt (population 1,999) for the first time. This city in southeast Kansas had already identified some potential projects to better the community and simply needed help identifying potential sources of financial assistance. In conjunction with local resource partners, the Office of Rural Opportunity helped the community locate a grant through the Sunflower Foundation for an asphalt walking trail, trail lighting and landscaping. Another grant was secured for signage through the Kansas Health Foundation to designate City bike routes to connect parks, ball fields, schools and the local pool.

OFFICE OF RURAL OPPORTUNITY REGIONS

James Foster • E-mail: jfoster@kansascommerce.com

James serves in the Office's Northwest Region, headquartered at Colby Community College. He previously served as the Executive Director of Deseret Healthcare in Colby, where he managed more than 75 full- and part-time employees and worked on a daily basis in the rural health care sector. James has a vast knowledge coming from his past experiences, including facilitation, mediation, budgetary, marketing and community/team building.

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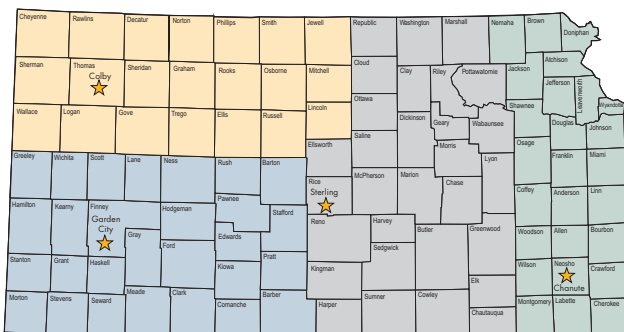
The Office's Southwest Region is covered by Carol Meyer, operating out of Garden City Community College. Carol previously served as Economic Development and Chamber Director in Garden City. Carol brings 30 years of experience to the Office of Rural Opportunity. With additional experience and training in leadership development, volunteer non-profit boards and regional cooperation, Carol continues to serve southwest Kansas.

Renee Lippincott • E-mail: rlippincott@kansascommerce.com

Renee is responsible for the Office's Central Region, headquartered at Sterling College. She previously served as the Executive Director of Main Street Sterling, where she managed more than 50 volunteers, assisted committees in the development of annual work plans and helped the organization effectively respond to challenges as well as opportunities for downtown.

Barbara Chalker • E-mail: bchalker@kansascommerce.com

Barbara is responsible for the Office's Eastern Region, headquartered at Neosho County Community College in Chanute. Previously, Barbara served as the Executive Director for the Iola Area Chamber of Commerce, where she was in charge of day-to-day activities, economic development work and tourism initiatives. Barbara worked closely with local businesses, city and county government, as well as regional organizations to build awareness, funding and recognition for all of southeast Kansas.



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