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“You can’t downsize an urban solution to make it rural.” ~Sue Evans – Smart Start, Colby KS

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Issues in Rural Service Provision

POSITION STATEMENT FROM
THE KANSAS CHILDREN’S CABINET & TRUST FUND

The Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund (Cabinet) recognizes the critical importance of identifying and addressing the unique needs of rural Kansans and service providers.

Nearly 1 million
Kansans live in
rural areas.

The challenges and opportunities faced by rural communities are qualitatively different than their urban counterparts. These communities require a closer look to adequately respond to their needs and leverage their potential.

Of the 105 counties in Kansas, 34 are rural, meaning they have 6-20 people per square mile, 19 are densely-settled rural (20-40 people per square mile), and 36 are frontier (fewer than 6 per square mile).¹

¹Kansas Department of Health and Environment classifications

Together, rural, densely-settled rural, and frontier counties make up 85% of Kansas. For the purposes of this paper, we’ll refer to all as “rural” as we discuss a variety of challenges and opportunities these communities face.

CHALLENGES

High Needs Populations. Most rural communities in Kansas are characterized by deep levels of need. Ann Elliot, Executive Director of the Family Resource Center in Pittsburg, says, “54% of our population live in poverty. Lots of families need services.” In comparison to Kansas as a whole, rural Kansas has higher rates of many risk factors.

	Rural Kansas	Kansas
Poverty	15%	12%
Children qualifying for free/reduced lunch	54%	49%
Teen violent mortality rate (per 100000)	38%	34%
Youth tobacco use	10%	8%
Binge drinking	11%	10%
Uninsured	8%	6%

*All figures are rounded to the nearest percentage point

In addition, in comparison to Kansas as a whole, the people who live in rural Kansas have lower income, education rates, and access to vital health services such as prenatal care.

	Rural Kansas	Kansas
Income per capita	\$40,488	\$45,876
High school graduation	87%	90%
College graduation	21%	31%
Prenatal care	80%	83%

*All figures are rounded

Inadequate Systems Capacity. Compounding this deep need for services in rural areas is a lack of the systems that urban programs typically depend on—early education and care, health and mental health support, infrastructure and public goods, etc. Sue Evans, Executive Director of the Northwest Kansas Council on Substance Abuse Inc. in Colby which administers Project Smart Start Northwest Kansas, says, “We don’t serve the numbers like a more densely populated county, but we are the only thing out here. If we weren’t here, many of the families wouldn’t have any services and just couldn’t manage.” Deanna Berry, Executive Director of Russell Child Development Center (RCDC) in Finney County, concurs: “Out there in our region, we are the services. We are the support system out here. We don’t have enough mental health care and health care in general. We don’t have enough providers that accept medical cards. A child might live in Ulysses and get referred to a provider in Liberal. Many Medicaid doctors aren’t accepting new clients. Systems are a challenge out here. We do a good job and problem solve as best as we can, but it’s very limited. Resources are very scarce.” Because of the distance between people and communities, and the lack of public transit, transportation is a persistent issue. These challenges mean that programs are not only particularly stretched in rural areas, but also that they are much more critical to family and child wellbeing.

Child care is an especially difficult issue in these communities. Quality child care is a fundamental need, but it is particularly expensive to make service delivery models like child care centers work. Sue Evans notes, “We believe we have to start kids off right with a qualified, caring, tenured young child educator doing that service. Quality is our first and foremost priority for these kids and it costs money. And in rural areas it has to be subsidized. Child care is very challenging in rural areas.”

Out-Migration. Endemic to these challenges is the problem of out-migration, as young adults leave their communities for population centers. Most rural counties in Kansas experienced a population loss between 2010 and 2016, which is partially attributable to long-term out-migration of young adults, and declining birth rates.² Increasingly, young people cannot imagine a way to thrive in their communities, even if they want to stay. This presents a nearly impossible choice for young adults, between community and family, on one hand, and their own future and wellbeing on the other. To stay in their communities, young adults need to know that they will be able to have a good job, and be able to depend on the infrastructure and support to raise their own healthy, happy families. In this way, children’s success is intimately tied with their communities’ long-term health and survival.

“In order for us to be successful we have to have working systems -- not just early childhood systems. A Medicaid system that works, a good road system for travel, a good foster care system so we aren’t all things to all people. It’s important to know that all the systems influence the other systems. They are all tied together. So, **if you want us to have a strong state, we have to have strong systems.** We have very much felt the loss of state-level funding.” ~Katrina Lowry, Building Blocks Program Director, Russell Childhood Development Center

² United States Department of Agriculture, “Rural America at a Glance: 2017 Edition.”

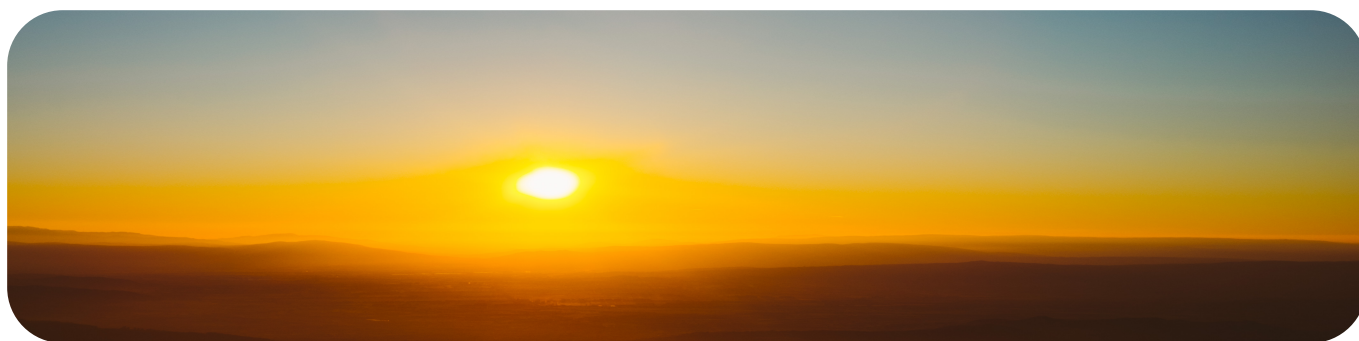
OPPORTUNITIES

Targeted Approaches. Programs that serve rural communities leverage tremendous strength and ingenuity to meet these and other challenges, and they employ a high level of specialized expertise. Program staff know their communities and their unique needs well, and recognize that collaboration is critical to serving rural populations. Katrina Lowry explains: “Home visiting programs are so well suited for our area. For the service area that we have we feel like this model is very well suited to rural and frontier areas even though it means a lot of travel for staff. This way we can really get into different communities. Southwest Kansas has 19 very different counties, and within counties very different communities. Our staff work with health departments, doctors, libraries, etc. What’s great is that we work with them and not try to do things to them, which can oftentimes be resented. “

Collaboration. Remarkably, rural programs tend to take collaboration to a whole new level, in an effort to meet the full spectrum of each family’s need. Ann Elliot explains the Family Resource Center’s approach to collaboration: “All services are available in our building to get a family whatever they need. We have interlocal offices located here, Infants and Toddlers services here, or just call someone for outside resources and services to come to our building. Parents feel comfortable and safe here. All of our programs kind of merge together and work really well together to do the big picture of the family.” Sue Evans says, “We’ve been doing this since 2001 and have a lot of expertise in that area. We have wonderful partnerships that

make it possible in the early education system in Kansas. Our partnerships with school districts are great. We have a good reputation, have been around a long time, provide quality services, and have great partners. We try to expand or fill in the gaps or enhance what partners do in early education. That’s why we provide early parenting programs, because we keep being told they are working. Another strong partner we have is within health care, including hospitals, private providers, public health departments, and WIC.” Deanna Berry notes that “the RCDC has been around for so long, we are a very regional hub type of organization and we have acceptance from families. It’s efficient to have a central place to help coordinate services. It’s constantly evolving but working for us. “

High Returns on Investment. These programs have another thing going for them: they offer an excellent rate on return, because small amounts of funding can go a long way toward making a real difference in the lives of children and families. Deanna Berry explains: “CIF dollars are getting such a bang for their buck here. Home visiting is intentional at looking at a multi-generational impact. You can’t separate the kid from the family. We are making an impact on some of these families that have high ACEs [Adverse Childhood Experiences]. We can’t do it all or by ourselves.” Many of the costs of service provision are lower in rural areas than they would be in urban areas. The deep level of need in these communities means that services are delivered to families with multiple risk factors. Finally, the high level of collaboration helps to avoid service duplication and yields cost efficiencies, while providing a high level of support to children and families.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Cabinet supports investment in rural Kansas to provide improved access to quality and affordable care and services. Equitable access to quality and affordable care and services can help rural Kansans lead healthy lives. Improved access also helps the sustainability, vitality, and longevity of rural Kansas communities.

The Cabinet advocates for the use and expansion of innovative best practices to ensure that all rural Kansans are receiving the help they need without having to leave their families, communities, and support systems.

The Cabinet endorses the following strategies to improve rural Kansans' access to quality and affordable care:

Reduce barriers to access to care, including promoting prenatal care and increasing rates of insured children

Promote evidence-based practices (EBPs) proven effective in improving rural service delivery, such as home visiting and telehealth

Continue to provide opportunities for communities to meet their own self-identified needs, such as the Early Childhood Block Grant

Support long-term community collaboration, including partnerships that include public, private, and nonprofit sectors



Support the development of new strategies that address the unique challenges to sustainability rural communities face

Support families at every stage of the life cycle so children can stay in their communities and eventually raise their own families there, including employment opportunities, quality child care, health care, and family support programming