



Sunflower Foundation

HEALTH CARE FOR KANSANS

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Rural grocery solutions sought with \$120,000 pilot project

The Sunflower Foundation Board of Trustees has approved a statewide pilot project focused on supporting community-based strategies to address food access needs in rural areas, such as strengthening local grocery stores.

The pilot, called Project HERO – Healthy Eating: Rural Opportunities, will initially fund planning efforts in eight communities, totaling \$120,000. The planning grants are intended to provide community teams with the resources and technical assistance needed to explore and develop sustainable strategies for increasing access to healthy foods.

“We know that access to a full range of nutritious foods is critical for the health of growing children and their families,” said Billie Hall, Sunflower Foundation President and CEO. “Yet more and more Kansas communities are losing ready access to nutritious foods, with residents facing round-trips of an hour just to buy fresh vegetables. Over time, the consequences of families having less healthy diets will be stark.”

Sunflower has also partnered with Kansas State University’s Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI) to provide ongoing technical assistance to communities. At the end of the 12-month pilot, RGI will issue a report and resource guide based on lessons learned in each community. RGI has been working across the state since 2007 to improve community access to healthy foods as well as to establish and strengthen rural food retail, said Dr. David Procter, Director of the Center for Engagement and Community Development, of which RGI is part, at K-State.

“We are pleased to partner with Sunflower Foundation and their commitment to a healthier Kansas. Project HERO is a wonderful initiative where rural communities will identify their local food system needs and generate homegrown, innovative strategic actions to address those needs. Local leadership and community investment is vital for communities to address the significant challenge of ensuring citizen access to healthy foods, and K-State’s RGI is proud to assist in this effort,” said Procter.

Working with RGI, Sunflower identified multiple communities and counties that either met the USDA definition of a “food desert,” or would meet the definition if a remaining grocery store were to close. As part of the invitation to apply, each community group was asked to assemble a leadership team representing a wide array of stakeholders (for example, local grocers, producers, schools, churches, and health professionals), if one didn’t already exist. The planning projects are intended to set the stage for successful implementation with a two-pronged approach: assessing and studying technical data for long-term feasibility, while also gathering community input to foster local buy-in.

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In some communities, this means transitioning a struggling grocery store into a non-profit co-op model, or boosting the store's revenue by connecting purchasing to the school and hospital. Other communities are focusing on the local food systems and what it takes to actually get fresh produce into a grocery store or "micro-markets" for towns without stores.

The eight HERO grantees include:

- Western Prairie Food, Farm & Community Alliance, working with the Western Prairie Resource, Conservation & Development District, representing eight counties in northwest Kansas (Cheyenne, Decatur, Logan, Rawlins, Sheridan, Sherman, Thomas, and Wallace).
- GROW Hodgeman, working with the Hodgeman Co. Economic Resource Development Council, focusing on Jetmore and Hanston.
- Allen County GROW, working with Thrive Allen County, focusing on Moran.
- Harvey County Food & Farm Council, working with Harvey Co. Health Department, focusing on Harvey County as a whole.
- Southern Marion County Healthy Partnerships, working with Peabody Main St. USA, focusing on Peabody and Burns.
- Eat Well Crawford County, working with Crawford Co. Health Department, focusing on the eight towns in Crawford County without grocery stores.
- Community Enhancement Foundation Of Plains, focusing on Plains (Meade County).
- St. John Task Force for Grocery Store Access, working with Stafford Co. Economic Development, focusing on St. John.

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For contact information for these organizations or other information about Project HERO, contact Phil Cauthon, Sunflower's Director of Communications:
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The Sunflower Foundation was established in 2000 to serve as a catalyst for improving the health of Kansans. The Topeka-based nonprofit directs resources statewide aimed at promoting healthy living in partnership with Kansas communities and schools, improving health care for the whole person, and developing leaders of Kansas organizations in a variety of sectors to be even more effective advocates for the causes and communities they serve.