2024 QUARTER 1 NEWSLETTER

NCRPC NEWS

An update from the North Central Regional Planning Commission

Program Training Youth Entrepreneurs

Dickinson County CEO Gives High School Students Real-Life Learning Experiences, Business Knowledge

A unique program is helping to cultivate and support the next generation of business owners and leaders in one North Central Kansas county. Dickinson County CEO (Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities) is an intensive year-long course. It pairs high school students with entrepreneur mentors to give them real-world experience in starting a business.

The idea for the program came after Kyle Becker, a native of Abilene, Kansas, learned about it from a local entrepreneur. At the time, Becker served on the Board of Education of USD 435. He and others researched and talked to the local schools and the Economic Development Corporation to see if there was interest in starting the first chapter of the program in the state. Dickinson County CEO has now completed four years of the program.

While it is not a school program, the course follows the school calendars, and students get credit for the class. The program meets five days a week for 90 minutes before school starts. It never meets in a school but moves to different host sites in various communities and businesses. The distance can create challenges with logistics and time management for students as significant travel time is involved. There are five school districts represented throughout the Dickinson County CEO program.

Students presented their business concepts to Dickinson County CEO Board Members to share their visions and receive feedback (top photo). The 2023-2024 class hosted a Rural Roots Live Music Event in Abilene on January 6. *(Courtesy Photos)*

"It's a big commitment for the students but very worthwhile," Becker says. "We do an exit interview with kids at the end of the program. It has been really encouraging to hear the mind shift of some of our students who can recognize the local opportunities that exist after they have been immersed in the program and the communities."

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ABOUT US

Our primary service area includes 12 counties and 83 cities in North Central Kansas.

OUR MISSION

Advancing rural Kansas through comprehensive planning and development services.

CONTACT US

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Project Spotlight: Clay County Efforts to Increase Healthy Youth Decision Making Receives Boost with Recent Grant Funding

A commitment to the mission of prevention of youth substance use is incredibly personal to a county that has seen tragedy. A community collaborative effort—Clay Counts Coalition—is working to effect long-term positive change for the good of the community.

"We are focused on kids, but not exclusively kids," says Lori Martin, who serves as Community Mobilizer for the Clay Counts Coalition. "The kids today are going to become the adult leaders of tomorrow. This initiative is investing in the future of our communities."

The Clay Counts Coalition has existed in Clay County, Kansas, since 2007. Many local partners and volunteers are involved in its work. Recent grant funding is helping to bolster community impact. The Coalition was awarded a $125,000 grant in September 2023 through the CDC Drug-Free Communities Support Program. It is renewable for up to five years. Clay County Health Department serves as the grant's fiscal agent, and Martin as the program director. A grant coordinator, Matt Weller, was recently hired. He will help coordinate efforts with the school district. Deb Ohlde, NCRPC's Assistant Director of Strategic Initiatives, provided grant writing assistance.

"We had been told that the program was highly competitive and that we would likely not get funded on our first try," Martin says. "We asked Deb not to write the grant completely but to serve as the captain of the team. She did a great job of keeping us on task and schedule. We could have continued to limp along as volunteers, but this funding solidified and amplified our impact in the community. This award has strengthened the structure of the Coalition."

The Coalition is planning many activities for the next five years of the project. Supporting Clay County YLinK, or Youth Leaders in Kansas, is just one example. The Clay Center Community High School chapter of YLinK hosted a Community Commitment/Courageous Conversations Night in November at the Rex Theatre in Clay Center.

In November, nearly 300 adults attended the first Courageous Conversations Night at the Rex Theatre in Clay Center, Kansas. This is one of many activities supported, in part, through the CDC Drug-Free Communities project awarded in September 2023. *(Courtesy Photo, KCLY Radio)*

> *"This initiative is investing in the future of our communities."*
>
> Lori Martin
> Clay Counts Coalition Community Mobilizer

"About 300 adults came out that night," says Martin, who also serves as YLinK sponsor. "This tells you the level of interest and involvement in the community. It was impactful."

The evening started with a video—"What We Need You to Know"—created by YLinK members. A small group of students will continue their advocacy by speaking at special state-level events this spring.

More Courageous Conversations events are planned, building on the success of the first. These events will focus on alcohol and drug education, mental health, and more.

The Coalition received additional funding from the Kansas Suicide Prevention Coalition and Drug Endangered Children in Kansas, which only help to further momentum to address challenges.

"I recently read a quote in an email that I think really captures the essence of what we do—'Creating resiliency by addressing the social needs of our communities,'" says Martin.

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

There are many great things happening in North Central Kansas. Project Spotlight shares stories from communities around the region and how they solved challenges. View more at ***www.ncrpc.org/tag/project-spotlight****.*

NCKCN, CTC Partner to Help Connect Remote Observatory for Research

NCKCN and Cunningham Telephone & Cable (CTC), based in Glen Elder, Kansas, provide high-speed Wireless and Fiber internet to the remote observatory of the North Central Kansas Astronomical Society. North Central Kansas Community Network Co., or NCKCN for short, is an affiliate of the North Central Regional Planning Commission.

The SSC Observatory (SSCO) deploys remotely controlled astronomical instruments to image and study the night-time sky. The SSCO takes advantage of the clear, dark skies in North Central Kansas. It also makes research simpler for Dr. Luke Schmidt of Texas A&M University.

Currently, a typical observing session for Dr. Schmidt involves a 9-hour drive from Texas A&M University to McDonald Observatory, located in the Davis Mountains of West Texas. Once all the telescopes at the SSCO near Beloit are fully operational, an observing session will only require traveling as far as his home office.

Dr. Luke Schmidt's research will benefit from the new remote observatory that NCKCN is helping to connect. *(Courtesy Photo)*

"This is one of the more unique projects NCKCN has helped to connect," says Systems Manager Todd Tuttle. "It will help provide easy access to many hours of observing time."

Youth Entrepreneurs, *From page 1*

Partnerships are essential for program success—including local buy-in from businesses and schools, investors, mentors, students, and a program facilitator. The program needed 35 investors to pledge $1,000 annually for three years before it could launch. Fundraising efforts are continual. Many supporters are repeat investors who see the value. Some of these same investors also serve as mentors, a role that is key to student success.

"Mentoring helps the students start to build a network of people they can use in the future as they transition into adulthood, and most of these relationships continue after the class ends," Becker says.

Prospective students apply in the spring. There were 12 students in the 2023-2024 class. Throughout the year, the students complete three businesses. The first is a badge business that teaches basic business concepts. The class decides as a group on the second business. The precedent so far each year has been a special event such as a 5K race or an evening of entertainment. The most recent class hosted a Rural Roots Live Music Event. Proceeds earned from the first two businesses fund the third, which is each student's business. Students create a business plan, go through a loan process, operate their own business, and present at a trade show.

"They learn a lot about themselves and life in this class," Becker says. "They come in as kids that are shy. Their soft skills are not good. By the end of the year, they are confident young adults."

MEET *the* TEAM: Kylee McBride

Kylee McBride has worked part-time as an office assistant at NCRPC for a year. Her duties include interoffice errands, getting mail, running errands to local banks, and completing other general office tasks.

Kylee McBride

Kylee was born and raised in Lincoln County and is the daughter of Rick and MeriLynn McBride. Ky grew up on the family farm and has an older brother and sister. She attended and graduated from Beloit Jr.-Sr. High School. Ky's favorite hobbies are bowling, helping her nieces and nephews with 4-H projects, playing Bingo, following K-State sports, and camping.

"Ky is a true joy to have around," says NCRPC Office Manager Pepper Roberg. "She is so helpful around the office and brightens each day with her good attitude and smile."

EVENTS & MORE

Executive Board Meeting
April 25, 2024

Did you miss the 2023 Annual Report? Find it online:
» **www.ncrpc.org/about/reports**

Funding sources and deadlines:
» **www.ncrpc.org/funding**

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Big Kansas Road Trip to Feature North Central Kansas Counties

North Central Kansas will take center stage in the Big Kansas Road Trip May 2-5 as visitors explore Ellsworth and Lincoln counties, plus the community of Lucas in Russell County. The Kansas Sampler Foundation organizes the event.

The Big Kansas Road Trip, which started in 2018, is a multi-day event highlighting unique points of interest, museums, attractions, shops, and restaurants. Last year, it covered Jewell, Republic, and Smith counties.

Local organizers have been preparing for several months for this year's event. The first task was educating communities, local businesses, and organizations on the event and how they can get involved.

"We wanted to give everybody a chance to show off what makes their attraction or community unique," says Kelly Gourley, Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation Executive Director.

Organizing the ideas into a user-friendly format for visitors to plan their itineraries took time. Volunteers, community stakeholders, local business owners, and nonprofit groups have all been instrumental in preparing for the weekend.

The Kansas Sampler Foundation considers several factors when selecting the host locations each year.

"We look for areas that may have lesser known but awesome attractions that deserve attention," says Marci Penner, Kansas Sampler Foundation Executive Director. "We look for places with scenic backroads, unusual things to see and do, and friendly people. We are thrilled with the participation of businesses, restaurants, organizations, and attractions, plus the activities added by community members to help share the story of who they are and what they have to offer."

Locals in the 2024 communities are ready to welcome visitors.

"Ellsworth County is delighted to share the opportunity with Lincoln County and Lucas to showcase all of our amazing attractions, mom-and-pop shops, and the welcoming spirit of our communities," says Stacie Schmidt, Grow Ellsworth County Executive Director. "We can't wait to roll out the welcome mat to our visitors."

For more information or to plan your trip, visit **bigkansasroadtrip.com**.