

# NORTH CENTRAL KANSAS PANDEMIC RECOVERY AND RESILIENCY PLAN



## Addendum to the 2021-2026 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)

Serving North Central Kansas — including Clay, Cloud, Dickinson, Ellsworth, Jewell, Lincoln, Marshall, Mitchell, Ottawa, Republic, Saline and Washington Counties



**North Central Regional  
Planning Commission**

*Serving Kansans since 1972*

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# Executive Summary

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The past year has been one of adaptability as North Central Kansas worked to recover from the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, there has been innovation, collaboration and partnerships in the region working to make our communities more resilient.

The North Central Regional Planning Commission (NCRPC) was awarded funds from the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA) to help coordinate a response to the pandemic's economic impacts within the 12 counties the NCRPC serves. The research that follows in this Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan is one part of that response. The NCRPC remains committed to continuing to work with local businesses, non-profits, cities and counties to help build capacity and assess needs of the region to better plan for and respond to future disasters.

During the late spring and early summer of 2021, the North Central Regional Planning Commission hosted round table discussions with stakeholders in its 12-county service area to determine ongoing impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific focus was on the concept of **resiliency**. What would limit the region's ability to bounce back from hardships? What would position the region for future success? What specific aspects of the region are vulnerable? In addition, participants were asked what they felt were the biggest keys to economic development of the region.

**Economic Resilience** defined for purposes of the discussions was the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness. The description also included an ability to recover from or adjust easily to adversity or change.

At the conclusion of the round table discussions, NCRPC staff and contracted consultants interviewed 63 individuals who lived or worked throughout the entire 12-county region. These individuals were fairly evenly split across multiple sectors of the economy. Representatives worked in the areas of healthcare, public health, government, emergency management, public service, education, non-profits, businesses, and economic development.

In addition to the discussions, the NCRPC also conducted a regional survey to collect information on resiliency and the impacts of COVID-19. While the primary intention of the survey was to gather information about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the region, a few questions regarding resiliency also provided insight. The online survey had 183 respondents representing all 12 counties. While this is a very small percentage of the region's population, the trends in survey responses were strong.

Survey responses and roundtable discussion feedback both documented concerns in three primary areas:

- 1 Housing
- 2 Childcare
- 3 Workforce

## On the Cover:

**Photo second from left:** Technology has been increasingly relied upon to work and connect. Members of the North Central Kansas Public Health Initiative (NCKPHI) pictured here used Zoom to conduct meetings when meeting in person was not possible.

**Photo on right:** Communities rallied together to support each other over the past year. One example was the Mitchell County Strong program, which started as a collaborative effort to support local businesses, non-profits, and residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mitchell County Strong's food deliveries through Hungry Heroes was one way that the program shared its appreciation to those working on the front lines. *Photo courtesy of Mitchell County Strong*

## Statistical Monitoring in the Region

Participants in the round table discussions were asked what specific statistics they monitor to determine the health and economic vitality of their community. The NCRPC intends to build a trend line based on these key statistics in order to track them going forward. The following statistics were identified as directly contributing to resiliency and economic success:

- Day care slots available;
- Available housing units, number of houses sold and length of time on the market;
- Unemployment, number of job postings and length job postings are open;
- Sales tax collected; and
- Household income.

## Specific Input from Discussion Groups and Survey

Key lessons learned and ideas for improvement from the round table discussion groups are detailed below by sector. In many cases the same issues overlap across sectors, but may be described somewhat differently.

### Discussion Questions



- What are the main issues that have arisen or been made worse because of the pandemic?
- What key statistical change(s) are you monitoring?
- What are your next priorities for recovery and going forward?
- How can we increase resiliency against future pandemics, disasters, disruptions?

### Emergency Management

- Social media is your best friend and your worst enemy in a crisis;
- Weaknesses in local level communication and teamwork were exposed;
- The way the state communicated to the local level was not effective;
- Determining who is the "lead" agency is key and making sure they are talking to all other departments; making accommodations to have all hands-on deck to deal with the top priority and putting routine work on hold during a crisis (to the extent possible);
- Who the governor chooses to be the spokesperson in this environment is key to how the information flows to the local level;
- Counties would benefit from adopting a "one spokesperson model" for communication.

### Healthcare

- Struggles continue to fill key positions and entry level positions;
- This sector needs day care with unique, longer hours (i.e. 24 hours, 7 days a week).

### Public Health

- The pandemic exposed counties that had technology limitations (i.e. lap tops with no cameras when Zoom was critical or inability to work remotely due to lack of lap tops);
- There is intersection between pandemics and mass casualty events, but there needs to be unique planning for this type of event (i.e. the morgue becoming full during a pandemic much like you would expect in a mass casualty situation);

- Communication between state government departments is key and was lacking during the pandemic;
- Local communication plans are important;
- There are difficulties with billing and insurance, which requires a specialist;
- Communication that relied only on emails was overwhelming; too much information to digest and too much that was conflicting;
- Employees are burned out and positions are hard to fill which leads to a concern for employee health and welfare.

## Education

- Lack of key staff (i.e. math, science, counselors) has been a concern, but is now reaching a crisis level;
- Of most importance is identifying a consistent and accurate information source;
- People in public health were not trained for a pandemic situation and need more training to lead in a crisis;
- There are many high needs families and schools are expected to fill all those needs;
- Rural districts take great care of students because they are very visible, and everyone is concerned about students in a personal, one-on-one way;
- Teachers learned they can do new things in new ways and school districts want to maintain that momentum;
- Daycare need is critical for staffing;
- The generation of teachers that are retiring now have a different work ethic and approach to managing work hours. This will impact staffing going forward;
- Education that is hands-on does not work effectively over Zoom;
- There is a need to train students at secondary and post-secondary level for remote work.

## Businesses and Banks

- Day care is a very big need;
- Housing is in extremely short supply;
- Restaurants and retail are still struggling because they are not able to rebuild as rapidly due to employee shortages;
- Workforce is in very short supply, both in numbers and in skill sets;
- Training for business needs to happen one-on-one;
- Businesses need training in basic financial record keeping, business planning, estate planning, and succession planning;
- Strategic and tactical wage increases may help with the workforce issues;
- Higher end housing is necessary;
- Recruiting younger people for professional level positions has become harder;
- More efficient government is needed;
- Scholarships for the trades should be encouraged and business should help fund such scholarships.

## NCRPC Staff

- The importance of networks and relationships was prominent in the ability to access information and get it out quickly;
- Networking is not a wasted effort at the local level and between levels of government;
- Some money from the federal level is not helping those who needed it and may be going to those who did not need the funding;
- Local Economic Development staff were key conduits of information. NCRPC saw firsthand that in this pandemic and post-pandemic environment, businesses, cities and counties without economic development staff were left out of the process to a certain extent.

## Non-profits

- Lost the rhythm of volunteers, BUT made new connections;
- The stress was tough on people, there may be long-term mental challenges;
- Zoom is not the same as face-to-face for board meetings because a certain synergy is lost;
- There is opportunity if a model can be found to incentivize investments to keep investment dollars local;
- Governments and businesses have to be willing and supported to move forward with technology;
- Nursing homes and other long-term care facilities lost their connection to the community;
- Immigrants and diversity are important among boards and outreach must happen in new ways, such as in alternate languages;
- Key to resilience is helping each other;
- Vulnerable populations need “neighborhood” access to services and supports.

## Economic Development

- Workforce is lacking;
- Housing is limited in availability;
- The pandemic exposed issues with weak financial analysis among small businesses;

- Resurgence in shopping local may permanently change the landscape of business;
- Businesses realized the critical importance of an online presence;
- Communities need to learn to dream big and start taking steps around a rallying point;
- Uncovering and connecting with remote workers will be important to understand the economy going forward;
- Downtown buildings are in decline, but there is huge need for business space; therefore, saving downtown buildings and available business open spaces is important;
- Market business training and support programs with business mentors and testimonials or through banks with a financial carrot for participating;
- The region needs more people skilled in trades.

## Government

- Region needs a very tight county-wide emergency operations plan and tight communication plan;
- Need strong leaders in public office;
- Civic engagement is critical, including getting counted in the census;
- Internet access and speed, especially in the country, is highly important as a utility going forward. This access directly impacts remote work.

## Key Survey Questions

Some key survey questions and results related to resiliency are highlighted below. The following word clouds give a snapshot of the primary topics on participant's minds.

### 1 Did any overall community/commercial/governmental processes change in response to the pandemic that will likely stay in place? If so, what?

processes virtual meetings allow Zoom meetings work technology  
online one business local meetings Remote  
government Remote Working will public

As shown above, when asked "Did any overall community/commercial/governmental processes change in response to the pandemic that will likely stay in place," several obvious trends came forward. Survey respondents acknowledged that government and businesses changed some ways that they interact with the public that will have a positive impact on relationships and transactions, making overall communication easier in the future. Respondents noted having meetings available online and the availability of businesses who could sell online as positive results that should not be abandoned.

### 2 What area of your business or community is still vulnerable due to the impact of the pandemic?

Small businesses elderly Retail community People due  
Restaurants service businesses supply  
work vulnerable still will lack

The image above illustrates that when asked what area of business or community is still vulnerable due to the pandemic, retail businesses and restaurants, as well as especially small businesses, were the most common response.

Overall, the regional survey revealed information that complimented what was gathered throughout the round table discussions.

*The top critical weaknesses identified in the survey were:*

- Housing - 64%
- Childcare - 48%

*Items identified as needing further development or attention included:*

- Better understanding of public health;
- Whether or not businesses and individuals have sufficient "rainy day" funds;
- Decisions about government control; and
- Lack of workforce skills in certain areas.

*Positive outcomes from the pandemic included:*

- Remote work;
- Shopping local.

*Vulnerabilities exposed during the pandemic included:*

- Supply chain connections and roadblocks;
- Restaurants; and
- Lack of broadband.

## What Others Are Saying

Peer to peer connections and learning are important, especially in rural economic development. A survey of a broader rural area released results at the same time that the NCRPC was gathering resiliency feedback. The additional survey provided a beneficial point of ground truthing for what was discovered in the NCRPC region in Kansas.

Every year, the staff at SaveYour.Town, a professional training and coaching group out of Oklahoma, conducts a survey of rural challenges. It is noteworthy that the 280 participants of the survey across rural America, largely are similar in composition to the residents of the NCRPC service area. The most recent survey was focused on what concerns rural residents had moving through and beyond the pandemic. The results of the survey, which is not a scientific poll, show that during the COVID-19 era, concerns of rural individuals remained mostly the same as what had been concerning them for several years prior. Ongoing challenges identified included housing, population loss, business loss, and lack of workers.

Since 2015, over 1,500 people have been engaged with the rural challenges survey, which is carried out in cooperation with Small Biz Survival. Full results of the [Survey of Rural Challenges](#) may be found at [smallbizsurvival.com](http://smallbizsurvival.com).

We look to the results of this survey as a meaningful comparison to the information gathered from stakeholders throughout the NCRPC region.

In the Rural Community Challenges survey, the pandemic and economic crisis were not even in the top 10 rural challenges identified. Housing, as well as business and population losses continue to rank highest despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

*The top five rural community challenges in 2021 were:*

1. Not enough good housing
2. Downtown is dead
3. Losing young people
4. Need new residents
5. Not enough volunteers

*The top five challenges ranked by rural small businesses were:*

1. Can't find good employees
2. Online competition
3. Tried later hours without success
4. Marketing isn't working
5. Need to sell my business

## Building Future Resiliency in North Central Kansas

NCRPC has been working hard to build resiliency throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown in the results of our discussion groups, the pandemic brought to light many challenges throughout the region that were either irrelevant pre-pandemic or simply had not previously been addressed.

Through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act, NCRPC received funding provided by EDA in order to begin the process of building future resiliency throughout our region. At the time this CEDS document was being developed, the following projects were being overseen by NCRPC utilizing the CARES Act grant funding:

- Free trainings for businesses and non-profits in our region to aid in successful recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 as well as become more resilient overall;
- NCRPC hosted round table discussions with stakeholders in its 12-county service area to determine ongoing impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic;
- The findings from the round table discussions were utilized to begin developing this Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan.

While these initiatives made possible by the CARES Act funding have provided an excellent starting point for building future resiliency in our region, the NCRPC knows from our round table discussions that these ongoing projects are just a starting point. Based on the feedback received during the round table discussions, NCRPC has determined several possible cooperative projects at the regional level that could boost resiliency including:

- Creating a shared regional position focused on more effectively accessing insurance coverage in the public health realm;
- Development of communication plans and key points of contact at regional and county levels;
- Strategies to deliver services in a crisis with the primary focus being how to effectively serve all clients when every person needs significant help simultaneously; and
- Studying and recommending a reasonable approach to wage levels that will be feasible for gathering a workforce and keeping businesses financially viable.

The pandemic also brought to light several priority projects related specifically to recovery including:

- Government employees need flexible and up-to-date tools to deliver service effectively in a crisis;
- Daycare is critical to growing the workforce and the economy;
- Quality, affordable housing is lacking overall.

Several items were also brought to light as potential future major challenges in North Central Kansas. Preparing for these will play an important role in building a more resilient region overall.

Future challenges included:

- Managing and adequately serving immigrants; and
- Mental health concerns among parents and students.

While the nationwide pandemic seemed unprecedented, it made our region and the communities within our region much more aware of the need to prepare for future resiliency. As a region we learned that helping each other is critical in a pandemic or other emergencies and ultimately will accelerate success when times are good; however, we also learned the importance of being better prepared for future unprecedented pandemics or disasters.

In many cases, individual communities successfully came together to offer support to their neighbors, local businesses and local government; however, many concerns as well as opportunities identified are tied directly to regional cooperative efforts and the ability to share staff and expertise across county lines, or even city limits, in times of emergency. These same cooperative efforts can drive proactive projects that will fill gaps and strengthen the region's future resiliency and preparedness.



# North Central Regional Planning Commission

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