



SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER

# NCRPC NEWS

An update from the North Central Regional Planning Commission

## Growing the Housing Stock

*One local group is expanding housing options in rural Kansas*

In rural housing, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, but one local development group has found a niche building new homes in communities across the region.

The path to housing development was unique for Austin Gillard and his wife, Michelle, who own Rural Development Group, based in Clay Center, Kansas. They first moved to Clay Center for Austin's job as CEO of Clay County Medical Center 11 years ago. The topics of housing, daycare, and workforce have been a concern since his arrival on the job. Gillard said he was inspired to tackle the housing challenge after completing several large hospital projects and working with several contractors in the region.

"We need quality and affordable homes in our rural Kansas communities," said Gillard. "This attracts people to stay and come to our communities, including all healthcare occupations. My goal is to fill needs in North Central Kansas."

The Rural Development Group has developed and implemented new housing with support from programs provided through the Kansas Housing Resources Corporation. Homes cost around \$250,000, often with \$30,000 in down payment assistance for the buyer.

The new 1,886-square-foot homes have three bedrooms, two baths, a two-car garage, a reinforced storm



The Rural Development Group has built new homes in several communities in the region, similar to the one shown here. *(Courtesy Photo)*

shelter, and are built to meet Kansas accessibility requirements.

One of the company's first steps in determining project feasibility is to review the City's housing assessment. The NCRPC provides guidance on the Housing Assessment Tool (HAT) for communities.

Gillard said the company works with local contractors and suppliers whenever possible. Households earning 60 to 150% of the Area Median Income (AMI) are eligible to purchase the homes. The company is on track to build 25 new homes by the end of 2027.

"We are not in the business of large margins or building low-quality homes. I have a great full-time career outside of building homes," Gillard said. "We have been blessed to work with so many neat community members, home buyers, contractors, and Cities to make this all possible."

To learn more, visit <https://ruraldevgroup.com/>.

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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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 If you have a story idea or would like to update your address, email us at: [communications@ncrpc.org](mailto:communications@ncrpc.org)

# Kansas Micro-Internships Connect Students, Employers

*Program Offers No-Cost Project-Based Internships*

Kansas businesses, nonprofit organizations, and entrepreneurs are eligible to benefit from no-cost, short-term projects completed by students in areas such as business, communications, finance, information technology, marketing, research, and social media.

The project-based internships are part of the Kansas Micro-Internships (KMI) program, which began in 2021. Kansas organizations and entrepreneurs can complete their first five projects at no cost, with a simple startup process.

"It only takes about 15 minutes or less to post the first project," said Tim Peterson, Senior Project Director

for Workforce Development at the Kansas Board of Regents.

These paid assignments typically range from 20 to 40 hours and can be completed remotely, providing students with both income and skill development.

"By completing the short-term paid KMI projects, students gain both real world experience in many professional fields and essential skills including the career readiness competencies identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers," said Peterson.

The program is open to students at all 32 Kansas public colleges and



universities. Parker Dewey, LLC manages the platform, with funding support from the DeBruce Foundation, Strada Education Foundation, and the Kansas Department of Commerce.

To learn more or get started, visit [info.parkerdewey.com](mailto:info.parkerdewey.com)/[kansasemployers](http://kansasemployers.com).

## Courtland Prepares to Host Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference

Courtland, Kansas, will serve as the hub of activity June 24-26 as it hosts the annual Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities (CEC) conference. The event focuses on fostering an entrepreneurial mindset in rural areas and is a collaborative effort among Kansas State University, Network Kansas, the Kansas Department of Commerce, the Kansas Department of Agriculture, and local partners. A pre-conference event will be held the evening of June 24, followed by workshop sessions June 25-26.

Courtland applied in 2024 to serve as a host site for the conference, which launched its inaugural event last year in Kingman, Kansas.

"We are thrilled for this opportunity for our community and county, as visitors from across the state will be staying in surrounding communities," said Josey Hammer, Director of Operations at JenRus



Marketing, and Courtland's community coordinator and planner for the conference. "It's not just about what Courtland has to offer, but it's about the conversations that will be had in these small business settings as the speaking locations. It's important that anyone with a connection to entrepreneurship in the region join the conversation."

Registration is \$175 through May 31, increasing to \$200 in June. Entrepreneurs can receive a \$75 discount with a code at checkout. Learn more at <https://www.bit.ly/KansasCEC>.

## Two Seniors Win Rural Voices Contest

Two high school seniors have been named winners of the 2025–2026 Rural Voices Youth Contest.



Lainey Peschka of Ellsworth Junior/Senior High School and Grant Rice of Minneapolis Junior/Senior High School each received a \$1,000 award and the honorary John R. Cyr Rural Voices Award, named for Cyr, who served as NCRPC Executive Director for 22 years.

Since 2006, NCRPC has invited seniors across its 12-county region to submit essays or videos on an annual theme. This year's theme was "Rural Kansas...Tomorrow's Possibilities."

View the winning entries at <https://bit.ly/2026ruralvoices>.

# Introducing Our New Team Members

We are pleased to announce the hiring of two new employees.

Amber Koenig joined NCRPC in January as a Program Assistant, primarily supporting the Weatherization Assistance Program while assisting other areas as needed. Amber is passionate about helping clients and brings a strong service-oriented background to her position, with many years of experience as a Certified Nurse Aide, Certified Medication Aide, and working with elementary students.

Originally from Burr Oak and now living in Beloit, Amber enjoys cheering on her two children in their many activities and spending time with family and friends. She is engaged and will soon welcome a stepdaughter into her family.

"I am ready to learn, build, and grow with the Weatherization Assistance Program and NCRPC," said Koenig.

Laura Leite joined NCRPC in February as a Community Development Advisor, supporting communities with planning, grant



Amber Koenig

writing, and project management. She brings more than 25 years of experience in government, nonprofit, and private-sector work, along with degrees from Kansas State University and Fort Hays State University.



Laura Leite

She recently moved back to her family farm near Republic, Kansas, into the home her father built. Laura and her husband enjoy hiking when visiting their daughter in Colorado, and she also enjoys photography and caring for her animals.

"I'm looking forward to combining my experience in grant writing and management to assist the communities we serve," said Leite.

## NCRPC Honors Lisa Peters' Retirement

The NCRPC congratulates Lisa Peters on her retirement at the end of 2025 and thanks her for her dedicated service.

Lisa joined the organization in 2011 and played a key role in supporting NCRPC's work as fiscal agent for six Regional Homeland Security Councils across Kansas.

Her contributions were recognized in 2022 when she was honored by the Kansas Emergency Management Association with the Outstanding Service Award, recognizing exemplary service to the Homeland Security Program and the counties and communities it serves.



Family, friends, and staff celebrated with Lisa earlier this year. Pictured are Kansas Highway Patrol Lt. Edna Murphy, Homeland Security/Emergency Operations, and Lisa Peters.

From 2020 to 2025, Lisa Peters also served as NCRPC's Assistant Director of Administration.

## 2026 Lifetime Public Service Award Nominations Open



We are now accepting nominations for the NCRPC Lifetime Public Service Award.

Established in 2022, this award aims to recognize individuals or organizations that have made outstanding contributions over many years to the communities and citizens of the region. Selections are made every other year, and the selected recipient is honored at the NCRPC biennial gathering. This year's event will be on September 24, with more details to be announced soon.

Award nominations will be accepted until Friday, July 10. View past winners and submit nominations by visiting [www.ncrpc.org/lifetimeserviceaward](http://www.ncrpc.org/lifetimeserviceaward).

### EVENTS & MORE

#### Office Closure Notice

The NCRPC offices will be closed on the following days:

May 25, 2026  
June 19, 2026  
July 3, 2026

#### Upcoming Board Meetings

May 28, 2026  
July 23, 2026

#### Save the Date!

September 24, 2026  
NCRPC Biennial Gathering  
More details to be announced soon.





## North Central Regional Planning Commission

109 N. Mill | PO Box 565  
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# Washington County Automotive Business Completes Addition

*NCRPC Business Finance Program Assists in Business Expansion Project*

Duis Automotive LLC has been serving the Hanover community and surrounding areas since 2018, helping keep vehicles and farm machinery running reliably.

The business offers a full range of auto repair services for both older and newer vehicles, including oil changes, diagnostics, engine repair, brakes, A/C, and transmission service. In addition, they service tractors and heavy trucks.

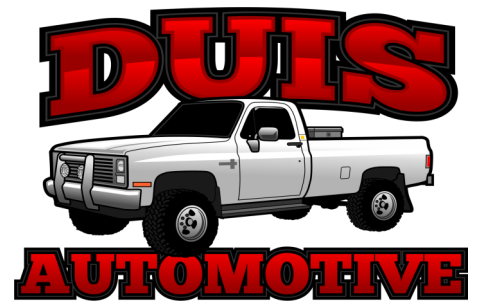
Owner Kurt Duis brings extensive experience in automotive and equipment repair. He earned an associate's degree in Farm Diesel Mechanics from Southeast Community College in Milford, Nebraska, in 2007. After many years working for a local implement dealer, Kurt established his own business in

2018, choosing Hanover, Kansas, as its home.

To meet growing demand, the business expanded its facility last year with the addition of a new 60-by-60-foot shop. The expanded space, which includes three additional hoists, has improved workflow efficiency and increased service capacity.

This investment allows the business to serve more customers efficiently while ensuring area producers and residents have access to dependable, high-quality service.

"As demand grows, our business remains committed to providing reliable repairs and supporting the long-term vitality of the Hanover community and surrounding area," said Duis.



The business expansion project was made possible through investments from the owners, assistance from the Citizens State Bank in Hanover, and the North Central Kansas Business Down Payment Assistance Loan Program.

To learn more about the financing program used, contact Debra Peters, NCRPC Business Finance Director, at [dpeters@nckcn.com](mailto:dpeters@nckcn.com) or visit [www.ncrpc.org/services/business](http://www.ncrpc.org/services/business).