

## **Safety First in North Central Kansas**

Kansas has been grappling with a significant challenge: a high number of traffic crashes leading to severe consequences, including a substantial loss of lives and injuries. Recent data from 2017 to 2021 reveals that there was a total of 1,898 fatal crashes in Kansas, resulting in the tragic loss of 2,126 lives and 87,624 injuries. The state's average fatality rate of 1.37 (fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled) exceeds the national average of 1.19 (Appendix A). Notably, a significant portion of these fatal crashes occur in the rural areas of Kansas. Specifically, out of the 1,898 reported fatal crashes, 125 took place in eight counties within the North Central Regional Planning Commission (NCRPC) service area, in a rural region of Kansas. Moreover, of the 2,126 fatalities recorded from 2017 to 2021, 142 occurred in NCRPC service area (Appendix A). Data further indicates that fatality rates in these rural areas surpass the national average (Appendix A).

Within the NCRPC service area, several rural counties experience traffic fatalities in census tracts designated by the USDOT as Underserved Communities (Appendix B). The CEJST shows that almost 40 percent of the total population on average in these census tracts, reside in Historically Disadvantaged Communities (HDC). Notably, each county experienced an average of 7 fatal crashes between 2017 and 2021. These statistics underscore the urgent need to enhance safety within underserved communities in the NCRPC area. Additionally, the deteriorating transportation infrastructure within the NCRPC service area poses a significant traffic safety risk to residents. Stakeholder surveys within the NCRPC region have revealed that roadways, bridges, and sidewalks are in a state of disrepair, ranking high among failing infrastructure in need of repair. Improving transportation infrastructure is a top priority for regional bundled projects seeking BIL funding (Appendix C). It is crucial to address these infrastructure-related issues as they directly impact safety across the transportation system.

To address these safety concerns, the NCRPC has partnered with eight counties within its service area to develop a comprehensive *North Central Kansas Comprehensive Safety Action Plan* as part of a three-year, multi-county collaborative initiative. By bundling the action plan effort, the following counties: Clay, Cloud, Lincoln, Marshall, Mitchell, Ottawa, Republic and Washington will have a coordinated, regional approach to safety action planning. With a total population of 51,931, these counties experienced 53 fatalities due to traffic crashes between 2017 and 2021 (58 fatalities between 2016 and 2020) for an average fatality rate of 20.78 per 100,000 people for the period between 2017 and 2021 (22.29 for the period between 2016 and 2020)—a much higher value than the national median value fatality rate (Appendix A). The percentage of the population living in underserved communities for the bundling counties is nearly 40%. The *North Central Kansas Comprehensive Safety Action Plan* will emphasize equitable investment in the safety needs of the underserved population and in reducing the number of roadway fatalities and injuries in these rural communities. The plan will also enhance general awareness of safety issues, paving the way for adoption of a proactive approach to highlighting the role of roadways and roadway users in traffic safety. The *North Central Kansas Comprehensive Safety Action Plan* will be developed in accordance with program guidance and following the best practices developed by the FHWA. Particularly, the Action Plan components specified in Table 1 of the NOFO will be incorporated in the development process of the *North Central Kansas Comprehensive Safety Action Plan* and highlighted in the form of two core innovative programs:

## 1. Multijurisdictional Bundling Program

Regarding traffic safety, an individual NCRPC county faces many challenges including:

- Resource limitation: The lack of personnel and the burden of excessive workload pose significant challenges for individual counties in effectively addressing safety concerns within their jurisdictions. Consequently, the implementation of traffic safety measures is predominantly reactive rather than proactive, as the focus remains on responding to incidents rather than preemptively preventing them;
- Lack of public awareness/education on safety risks: As a rural area, the NCRPC counties have a significant population of young drivers and older drivers. However, the general population fails to properly acknowledge the inherent safety risks associated with these demographics. Further, there is a notable absence of safety education programs, further exacerbating the lack of public knowledge on safety risk issues;
- Lack of a region-level safety plan developed specifically for NCRPC counties.

Considering these challenges, a safety program which bundles projects across multiple counties, can maximize the safety benefits over the region by making the counties' preventative efforts consistent and providing an umbrella region-level solution to safety challenges which are similar across all counties. In June 2023, the NCRPC worked with FHWA and Build America center (BAC) and held a Project Bundling Workshop (Appendix D) to understand practical application of project bundling between local public agencies to solve infrastructure/safety needs. Representatives from many of the NCRPC counties participated in the workshop, which facilitated information exchange and increased participant's knowledge on bundling opportunities—especially with respect to safety-related topics. Similar workshops can be held in the future to extend bundling activities and facilitate knowledge exchange between NCRPC counties on traffic safety issues. Leveraging the knowledge gained and lessons learned through these workshops, the *Multijurisdictional Bundling Program* can effectively reduce the number of fatal crashes and fatality rates within the NCRPC counties.



## 2. Community-based Shared Safety Engagement Program

Shared responsibility is a vital principle of the Safe System Approach, ensuring that all stakeholders, including the public, play a crucial role in promoting traffic safety and preventing crashes. Engaging the public and seeking their participation in improving traffic safety within their communities can be achieved through an interactive public platform. This community-based platform serves as an innovative and accessible avenue for disseminating information, raising awareness, and educating the public about traffic safety. The advantages of such a platform, detailed in Appendix E, include promoting traffic safety awareness, encouraging safe behavior, addressing concerns, offering proactive solutions, and enhancing post-crash care responses. Developed based on the Safe System Approach, this platform will effectively meet the objectives of addressing roadway safety within the NCRPC counties (Appendix E). It will provide valuable data and insights for incorporation into the North Central Kansas Comprehensive Safety Action Plan and any subsequent regional long-range transportation plan, serving as a comprehensive tool to enhance traffic safety.