



Fighting food deserts in Kansas

by: Jeremy Hegle

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New initiative provides funding and technical support to increase healthy food access.

Kansas is the nation's leader in wheat production and is third in beef production, yet according to the [Kansas Health Foundation](#), more than 800,000 Kansans lack easy access to fresh, affordable food.

Besides providing healthy food, grocery stores play several critical community development roles. They serve as anchors—providing jobs, a tax base and a community hub where people gather.

Many small grocery stores in both urban and rural areas are struggling. These grocers find meeting minimum order requirements from distributors a challenge. “Outdated refrigeration and inventory equipment, and aging owners with few prospective buyers are also taking a toll on the industry, particularly in small towns,” says Steve Radley, president and CEO of NetWork Kansas and a member of the Kansas City Fed's Community Development Advisory Council. Between 2008 and 2015, in towns smaller than 2,500 people nearly one of five Kansas grocery stores closed ([Center for Engagement and Community Development, Kansas Healthy Food Initiative 2016](#)).

Rural, remote grocers face additional challenges. Consolidation within the food distribution industry means some remote communities are farther away from food distribution centers, increasing the transportation cost of getting food into the hands of consumers. Tina Khan, Food Access Project Coordinator at Kansas State University, recalled a consumer in Colby saying they had to pay \$7 for a cantaloupe. “We want to explore models to grow and distribute food locally, and make healthy food options affordable,” Khan said.

Addressing a cross-sector issue through a cross-sector collaboration

In an effort to align community development, agriculture, health and small business resources, the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative (KHFI) was launched in November 2017. It's a multipronged approach to improving food access. Through the program, small businesses and community organizations can receive grants, loans and technical assistance for projects that improve access to fresh food. Approved KHFI efforts could include development or renovation of a grocery store, improvement of food distribution, technology or energy-efficient improvements to stores, or innovative solutions for food access points such as mobile food markets.

Both urban and rural communities may apply. Eligibility and key criteria include:

- A commitment to providing fresh healthy foods
- Initiatives that benefit low- to moderate-income populations underserved by fresh food retail
- Community support
- Operator experience

The initiative's mix of financial and technical assistance is the result of a collaborative effort, which includes:

- Center for Engagement and Community Development at Kansas State University
- IFF, a Community Development Financial Institution that manages the program's loan and grant pools
- Kansas Health Foundation
- NetWork Kansas

[KHFI](#) is seeking to grow the grant and loan funds and was one of seven opportunities presented to prospective funders Dec. 8 in Wichita at the Investment Connection Forum. [Investment Connection](#), a program of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, connects bankers and funders with innovative community development investment opportunities.

Visit the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative [website](#) to learn more.

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Jeremy Hegle is assistant vice president and Community Affairs Officer (CAO). In this role, Hegle leads the Tenth District's [Community Development department](#) with responsibility for leading and executing the Bank's districtwide community and economic development initiatives, which address challenging issues affecting lower-income individuals, underserved communities and small businesses' access to credit. He also represents the Kansas City Fed on the Federal Reserve System's CAO subcommittee and will manage the Bank's [Community Development Advisory Council](#). Prior to being named CAO in 2023, Hegle led the Bank's digital equity efforts. In 2019 Hegle co-authored [Disconnected: Seven lessons on fixing the digital divide](#), a layperson's overview of the digital divide. He led efforts to narrow the digital divide using three strategies: Expanding access to affordable home broadband. [Collaborating with state broadband directors](#), federal agencies, and local government on broadband deployment strategies and increased access through [affordable internet programs](#). Increasing the supply of low-cost computers by encouraging employers to [donate their used computers](#) to nonprofit refurbishers, schools and community organizations. [Informing banks](#), foundations, government and policymakers of the complex factors that cause the digital divide, the latest research on the topic, and creative solutions to fix it. Hegle joined the Kansas City Fed in 2015. Previously, he served in the Army National Guard and later helped launch KCSOURCELINK, a small-business support organization that links thousands of entrepreneurs with resources to start, grow and accelerate their businesses. Hegle has a bachelor's in business administration and an M.B.A. from the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

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