

# Kansas

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**UNLOCKING HOME:**  
ADDRESSING HOUSING  
NEEDS ACROSS  
KANSAS

**LEGAL FORUM:**  
FAMILY MEDICAL LEAVE  
ACT FREQUENTLY  
ASKED QUESTIONS

**BEST PRACTICES:**  
USING BENEFIT  
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THE  
**LEAGUE**  
OF KANSAS MUNICIPALITIES

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# UNLOCKING HOME:

## ADDRESSING HOUSING NEEDS ACROSS KANSAS

*By Emily Sharp, Director of Communications, Kansas Housing Corporation*

In 2007, Cherise Tieben, City Manager of Dodge City, attended a meeting of local bankers, developers, realtors, and employers to discuss the community's housing needs.

"I went to the meeting a firm believer that housing was a market-driven segment of our economy and there was no need for government to step in," Tieben testified to the Kansas House Rural Revitalization Committee in 2019. As she listened to her colleagues' and community members' stories, the complex and dire nature of the problem became more apparent.

"Employers were placing recruited individuals in hotels for up to six months while they tried to find housing; the potential citizen usually left dissatisfied," Tieben said. "Families were living in unbelievable conditions and paying premium for the opportunity. Teachers were living in the basements of other teachers. I heard contractors say that the cost of infrastructure was too high, and the risk was too great. Realtors told us that most of the available housing was overpriced and difficult to sell."

Tieben left the meeting cautiously skeptical. "As an accountant, I wanted numbers indicating the need was verifiable," she said.

Over the course of the following year, the city pursued a comprehensive housing study, which confirmed that each of the concerns shared were accurate. The data indicated that, if Dodge City were to keep pace with projected growth, the community would need 946 new housing units between 2008 and 2013.

Unfortunately, Dodge City's experience is not unique. Across the state communities struggle to provide quality, affordable housing for low to moderate-income residents. For rural communities, the dearth of contractors and high cost of development make investing in housing a particularly risky proposition.

Lt. Governor Lynn Rogers' newly formed Office of Rural Prosperity kicked off last summer with a listening tour of 44 communities across the state. Administration officials gathered with citizens and local leaders to explore how Kansans define prosperity, what they feel their communities have done well to

achieve it, and what roadblocks stand in the way. Lack of quality, affordable housing was cited as a major barrier to growth and prosperity at 10 of the 12 tour stops.

Ryan Vincent serves as Executive Director of Kansas Housing Resources Corporation (KHRC), which administers state and federal housing programs. "As the state's housing corporation, our role is to connect the dots," he said. "To bring the right players to the table as the catalyst for housing development, which ultimately strengthens neighborhoods, revitalizes communities, expands the tax base, and promotes the economy."

The approach is three-pronged: In collaboration with housing partners, Kansas Housing works with communities to assess needs. Next, the team connects community leaders with stakeholders who can suggest resources and programs that might be a good fit. Finally, housing partners help communities navigate the maze of programs and services available, providing support throughout the application and award process.

### Assessing the Need

"We view our role as a statewide entity serving all stakeholders," Vincent said. "While we administer a number of programs serving everyone from the unsheltered to homeowners, we recognize that no community's specific needs are the same."

In Dodge City, the process began with a comprehensive housing study that revealed the depth of the community's needs. The same can be said for other cities taking steps to address housing in their communities. Audree Aguilera, Community Development Coordinator for the City of Lyons in Rice County said the research stage proved illuminating.

"The first thing any community should do is the Housing Assessment," Aguilera said. "You may identify things you didn't even know about your community."

Kansas Housing, working in partnership with the Department of Commerce, assists communities in navigating the process through



their Housing Assessment Tool (HAT). The HAT provides a template for assessing a community's current housing inventory and demographics, infrastructure, and services. Input is solicited from community members and stakeholders ranging from major employers and business leaders, to public agencies, social service providers, and community organizations. While the process is comprehensive, it need not be expensive or cumbersome.

Communities with resources to do so may choose to work with external consultants or paid staff who can assist them in completing their HAT, but city officials stress it's not necessary. Rural communities like Lyons completed their HAT without the assistance of paid consultants. Others, including Greenleaf, a community of just over 300 near the Nebraska border, found the support of partners like the North Central Regional Planning Commission (NCRPC) instrumental in the needs assessment process. Greenleaf leaders had embarked on a series of infrastructure improvements and beautification efforts when NCRPC made them aware of a Department of Commerce program to demolish dilapidated homes and rehabilitate those that could be salvaged. With guidance and support from NCRPC, city leaders began soliciting input and interest from the community. They sent mailings, conducted a resident survey, hosted informational meetings, posted flyers, and appealed directly to citizens they thought might be interested.

"We were surprised initially at the amount of people who wanted to be involved," Mayor John McGrath said. "We put out the word and with the size of the community, once that word got out people talked to each other. That process didn't take very long. We didn't have to have anybody around, we didn't have to have staff."

No matter the size of the community, leaders stress that collaboration in the needs assessment process is essential.

"When we first did it, it was very intense, a little bit overwhelming," Emporia Community Development Coordinator Jeff Lynch said. Emporia officials conducted a citywide survey and had conversations with key stakeholders, including the local school district, major employers, and social service agencies. "We assembled all that information, and it was pretty easy to see what the public and stakeholders were concerned about," Lynch said. "It took a few months to do but in the end it was worth it. It gave us more information and reinforced what was needed."

### Collaboration and Solutions

Once a community has a good understanding of its needs, housing officials encourage them to attend a Housing Interagency Advisory Committee (HIAC) meeting. KHRC, along with USDA Rural Development, Federal Home Loan Bank of Topeka, and the Kansas Department of Commerce, hosts joint meetings to allow funders the opportunity to learn, listen, and suggest resources for communities to address their specific housing needs. With all parties gathered around the same table, there's no need to schedule separate appointments or risk disjointed recommendations.

"You meet with other folks in the housing business at the state, and you tell them what you found out in your HAT," Lynch said. "They advise you on resources available." Emporia officials also organized a committee of community volunteers to guide

the process and participate in HIAC conversations. The group proved effective not only in determining needs, but in building relationships with housing partners and preparing funding applications.

Since the 1990s, Emporia has participated in a series of housing programs, including the Department of Commerce's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, the state's Moderate Income Housing (MIH) program, and Rural Housing Incentive Districts (RHID) to spur new housing development. Program funding has supported demolition and rehabilitation of dilapidated homes, new construction, and down payment assistance for new homeowners.

"There's been a tremendous change for the better," Lynch said. "We've learned lessons along the way, and we're going to keep the process going."

The HIAC process provides a "good opportunity for small cities to see which programs are available and what might work well for them," said Nick Gregory, McPherson City Administrator. His central Kansas community of nearly 14,000 has struggled to provide enough housing to meet the needs of its robust industrial base. Between 2013 and 2018 the community added nearly 700 jobs, most in manufacturing. Leaders responded to the demand by constructing 244 new housing units during roughly the same period, financed in part through the RHID program, Housing Tax Credits, and local cash incentives to encourage citizens to purchase or build homes in the community. McPherson also made use of CDBG to finance the demolition or rehabilitation of dilapidated properties. Looking ahead, the community has set its sights on the MIH program, a state tool to address housing needs for those who earn too much to qualify for federal housing programs yet can't afford market rate housing.

"I've been here for 10 years, and the issue is not solved, but you have to keep going," Gregory said. "Housing is something that you can't just build and expect you'll have what you need. You've got to look at new, creative ideas, see if existing ideas are working. You can't ever rest on your laurels."

BEFORE



AFTER








## Addressing the Need


It's been more than a decade since Cherise Tieben sat down with local leaders to tackle Dodge City's housing shortage. In that time, through aggressive needs assessment, collaboration with local, state, and federal partners, and participation in a number of housing programs and initiatives, the community has successfully developed nearly 456 units, with another 30 under construction and more than 280 in development. City leaders offered housing incentives through Neighborhood Revitalization Programs, RHID initiatives, and local fee waivers. They established a Housing Incentive Committee with representation from each taxing entity, appointed a Housing Coordinator to serve as a single point of contact for all of the city's housing development, and pursued funding through the state's MIH program and USDA's Rural Development initiatives. City leaders have also prioritized ongoing needs assessment, updating their housing study regularly to make sure the numbers are accurate.

Partnership with community organizations and local educational institutions also proved fruitful. Community leaders established a nonprofit organization, Community Housing Association of Dodge City (CHAD), which works in cooperation with volunteers and the building trades program at Dodge City Community College to tackle blight, rehabilitate abandoned homes, and stimulate infill development, all while giving students hands-on construction and renovation experience. CHAD has built four new housing units, renovated eight abandoned homes, assisted 28 low-income homeowners with repairs, trained 31 students, awarded \$10,500 in scholarships, logged 4,474 volunteer hours, invested \$400,000 in the community, and was awarded KHRC's Ad Astra Award for Housing Preservation in 2019.

While the community is still working to address the need, city leaders have made tremendous progress. Dodge City was one of just two communities on the Lt. Governor's listening tour that did not identify lack of housing as a barrier to growth, perhaps due to the city's ambitious efforts to address the challenge.

"We have touched every aspect of housing from single family high market values to low income, as well as multifamily market value to low income rentals," Tieben said.

Reflecting on his community's experience addressing housing needs, Nick Gregory echoes the lessons learned in communities from Dodge City to Greenleaf. "In housing you're growing or you're dying as a community," he said. "You've got to continue, to stay alive and thrive." 

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## Statewide Initiatives & Rural Opportunities

**MODERATE INCOME HOUSING PROGRAM.** In 2012 the Kansas Legislature recognized the essential tie between affordable housing and economic development, establishing the Moderate Income Housing (MIH) program. The initiative serves those who earn too much to qualify for federal housing programs, yet not enough to afford market rate housing. Each year since the program's inception, the Kansas Legislature has allocated \$2 million to address housing needs from infrastructure development to new construction in cities or counties with a population of less than 60,000. The flexibility and responsiveness of the program are its greatest assets. "If communities identify that their need is single family housing, or infrastructure development, the program is so flexible we can grant or loan the funds to address their unique needs," Vincent said. The program is competitive and growing in popularity, with applications doubling in 2019 alone.

**"The MIH program has been incredibly beneficial for a wide range of community housing needs. It has worked because it is flexible and KHRC has a tremendous staff that assists communities with ideas and suggestions to overcome challenges," Tieben said.**

### OFFICE OF RURAL PROSPERITY HOUSING WORK GROUP.

Following up on the success of his statewide listening tour, the Lt. Governor's Office of Rural Prosperity launched an interagency work group to tackle housing issues across the state. The group will explore how state leaders, federal partners, and industry stakeholders can expand moderate income housing, remove barriers to rehabilitation and development, maximize impact of state funding and investment, and replicate successful public/private partnerships to encourage prosperity in rural communities. The goal of the group is to develop a long-term housing vision to analyze the research, catalog the resources available, and propose recommendations to expand access to quality, affordable housing across the state.



## WHAT ARE CITIES SAYING ABOUT HOUSING?

### Emporia:

**Population:** Almost 25,000

**Community Housing Challenge:** Dilapidated housing, shortage of low-to-moderate income housing, workforce housing, minimal build-able lots or green space for new development.

**Housing Programs Used:** CDBG, MIH, RHID

**Advice to Others:** "The first thing I'd do is develop a neighborhood revitalization program that allows people to invest in the area and offer a tax rebate or incentive. Then you can apply for funding to assist with demolition and rehab. Starting out with a revitalization program doesn't cost money and, once started, doesn't take much to run." – Jeff Lynch, Community Development Coordinator, City of Emporia

### McPherson:

**Population:** Almost 14,000

**Community Housing Challenge:** Keeping up with housing demands of growing industrial base.

**Housing Programs Used:** RHID, CDBG, Housing Tax Credits, Local homeownership, relocation cash assistance programs

**Advice to Others:** "Development doesn't happen overnight. We worked nearly five years on our last development before it got off the ground. Think about how you're going to grow—it's different for different communities." – Nick Gregory, City Administrator, City of McPherson

### Lyons:

**Population:** 3,700

**Community Housing Challenge:** Shortage of quality, mid-range housing to address the needs of moderate income households

**Housing Programs Used:** MIH, HOME, CDBG, Weatherization

**Advice to Others:** "We've brought in more jobs and we've sustained jobs, but also our population. The population of the city of Lyons has stayed about the same, where in just about any other small community around us population is declining rapidly. Sustaining population is the biggest ripple of housing projects we've done." – Audree Aguilera, Community Development Coordinator, City of Lyons

### Greenleaf:

**Population:** 331

**Community Housing Challenge:** Dilapidated housing, aging infrastructure

**Housing Program Used:** CDBG

**Advice to Others:** "The process isn't as daunting as you may think. The state has resources that will walk you through this process. Any small community has an opportunity for assistance. All you have to do is ask." – John McGrath, Mayor, City of Greenleaf

NO MATTER THE SIZE OF THE COMMUNITY, LEADERS STRESS THAT COLLABORATION IN THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS IS ESSENTIAL.

