



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

Your rural news 50+ years | Lyons, Nebraska | Pop. 851 | Spring 2026

'We won't stop': the Heartland Food Business Coalition carries on when funding falls short

By Kjersten Hyberger and Jessie Eby



The Center for Rural Affairs was one of 14 partners within the Heartland Regional Food Business Center, which has pivoted into the Heartland Coalition after losing its main funding source. CFRA staff offered technical assistance to local producers, including Perennial Homestead north of Omaha, Nebraska, who were able to update their website and improve marketing for their roadside stand and online store. | Photo by Kylie Kai

The Heartland Regional Food Business Center was established in 2023 as a resource for farmers and entrepreneurs. The program was created as part of a national initiative to strengthen America's food supply. In two short years, the Heartland Center helped more than 1,330 farmers and food entrepreneurs take steps toward building stronger local food systems and awarded more than \$3.7 million in grants to small businesses.

Our momentum was suddenly interrupted in July 2025, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced its intent to end funding for this initiative.

As the Center for Rural Affairs (CFRA), we were proud to be one of 14 partners to make up the Heartland Center, along with 20 collaborators in Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Iowa, Missouri, and Arkansas. CFRA provided technical assistance to applicants and helped spread the word about available resources.

—See Heartland Food Business Coalition on page 3

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Rural advocates honored

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

The Center for Rural Affairs has recognized five outstanding people and businesses building strong and vibrant rural communities as part of Center's annual awards.

"Each year, we honor the rural champions who help us accom-

plish so much for rural America," said Brian Depew, executive director. "This group of award winners has gone above and beyond to lay the foundation for a better rural future."

The following will be presented to each recipient this spring:

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Rural advocates, continued from page 1

Seventh Generation Award: Al Davis of Lincoln, Nebraska

A lifelong Sandhills rancher and former state senator, Al has engaged in multiple areas of the Center’s work over decades, in addition to serving his community and the state.

The Hyannis native served in the Legislature from 2013-17 and is a founding member of the Independent Cattlemen of Nebraska.

The Seventh Generation Award is a lifetime service award presented to an individual or individuals who have made major contributions to improving rural life and protecting our land and water.

Citizenship Award: Mitch Schlegelmilch of Exeter, Nebraska

Mitch is board president of Greg’s Market, a community grocery store owned by the Exeter Investment Group.

He testified in the Nebraska Legislature in support of a grocery store bill in spring 2024 and has worked with the Center to advance grocery legislation while advocating for his community and grocery store. Mitch has also participated in events hosted by the Center to spread the word about Exeter’s unique 24-hour self service store operating model.

The Citizenship Award is given to an individual or individuals who actively participate in the civic process of creating public policy, and who work closely with the Center to advance public policies that strengthen family farms, ranches, and rural communities.

Rural Community Champion Award: Sandro Lopes of David City, Nebraska

As owner and operator of Huerto Regenerativo NaTerra, Sandro is a native Brazilian hailing from the heart of the Amazon Rainforest. He is a leader in his community and in the regenerative farming movement in Nebraska.

Sandro farms using Indigenous techniques that he loves sharing with others including youth. He supports other beginning farmers in gaining land access.

The Rural Community Champion Award is bestowed to a person or persons who work with the Center and make extraordinary contributions to building community engagement within their own communities. People who receive this award provide a model for innovation, stewardship, or community development.

Entrepreneur Award: Tony and Amber Ellsworth of Waterloo, Nebraska

The owners of Ellsworth Crossing, a farm-to-fork market, offer a variety of local foods while emphasizing customer service. They pride themselves on providing natural, locally sourced food and involve their children in the business.

The Entrepreneur Award recognizes entrepreneurs who have received Center services and achieved remarkable success in business while demonstrating the values of innovation, community leadership, and social responsibility.

Partner Award: Ben Jewell of Lincoln, Nebraska

Ben has dedicated more than 12 years to strengthening local and regional food systems. The associate extension educator with Rural Prosperity Nebraska at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has made significant contributions to Nebraska’s food security and agricultural communities.

As a key member of the Nebraska Regional Food Systems Initiative, Ben helped to secure the largest-ever U.S. Department of Agriculture farm-to-school grant for Nebraska. He brought together food partners from across the state, including the Center, to create the Nebraska Rural Farmers Market Handbook. He organizes farm and food business workshops and was involved in the Heartland Regional Food Business Center.

The Partner Award is presented to an individual or organization that best exemplifies partnership to the Center. This person or organization has demonstrated outstanding support to the Center and exceptional dedication to either community or economic development.

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**Congratulations
to our
AWARD
WINNERS!**

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Paper & e-news

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, visit cfra.org/sign-up or email outreach@cfra.org

Editing and layout by Rhea Landholm, Kylie Kai, Jennifer Lentfer, Catharine Huddle, and Liz Stewart.

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Empty grocery shelves during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted conversations about local and regional connections in the food supply chain. The Center for Rural Affairs took action by joining a coalition that helped launch 39 new food businesses and awarded \$3.7 million. | Photo by Kylie Kai

Heartland Food Business Coalition, continued from page 1

Fortunately, alongside our partners we are continuing our mission under the new name Heartland Food Business Coalition.

Why and how we got our start

Empty grocery shelves during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted conversations about local and regional connections in the food supply chain. As families worried about how to put food on their tables, we became aware of just how reliant we were on a large-scale, national food system. Folks began to realize that shifting reliance toward local food sources was vital for community resilience.

The need for a stronger infrastructure to meet demand was clear. As a result, the Heartland Center was among 12 regional food business centers that were created to help support the local food supply chain.

How our work was impacting farmers and food businesses

The federal grant contract awarded in June 2023 was expected to run through May 2027, providing seed funding for on-the-ground organizations to build ongoing support for local and regional farm and food businesses.

The Heartland Center helped launch 39 new food businesses, with \$3.7 million in awards. Funded projects include adding a commercial kitchen, upgrading freezers, adding refrigerated deliv-

ery vehicles, and upgrading product packaging.

Our impact went beyond funding. We also provided technical assistance to more than 1,330 individuals and facilitated 145 new partnerships and collaborations bridging agriculture with nutrition, health, and community development.

A loss for communities

The loss of funding canceled round two of the Business Builder grant, which was a devastating blow to those planning to apply. Without this funding, new products won't make it to our grocery stores, producers won't be able to make the infrastructure improvements they had planned, and many first-time entrepreneurs will miss out on the opportunity to transform their ideas into viable businesses. These aren't abstract losses—each one represents food that won't be grown, processed, or sold locally.

When our producers are affected, the entire community feels it. Less support for local food businesses ultimately means more dependence on the long supply chains that are often fragile, expensive, and disconnected from our communities.

New name, same mission

As the Heartland Regional Food Business Center “closed,” the Heartland Coalition was created to

continue this work.

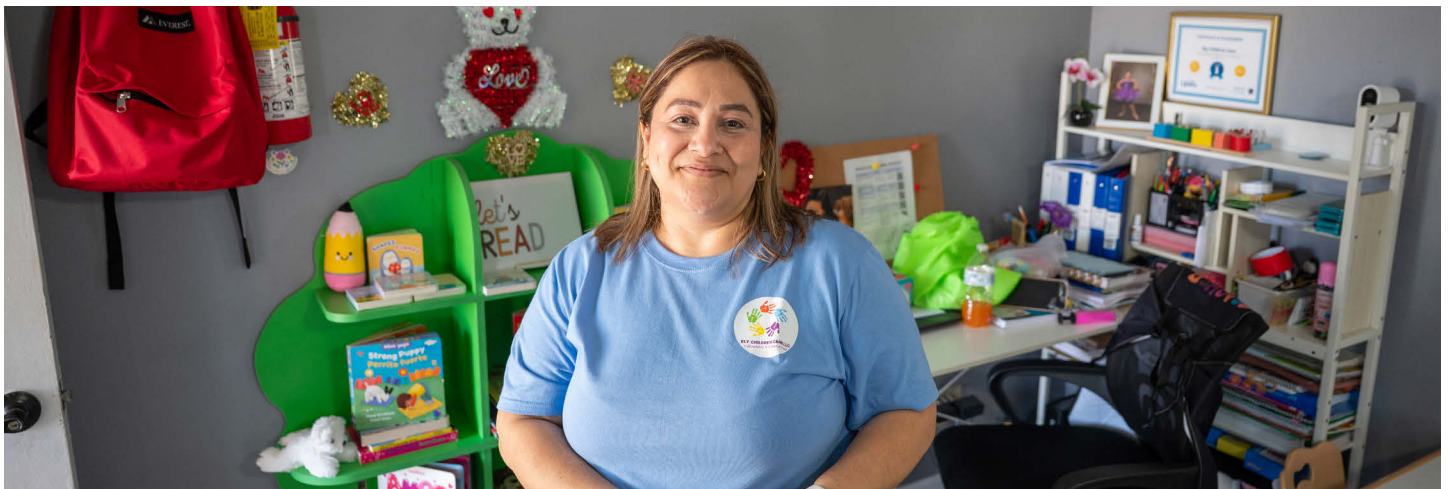
The Heartland Coalition's work aligns with the work of many of these organizations, so they are able to dedicate limited resources to supporting our reorganization. However, for most, continued participation will depend on future funding raised to support our work.

Moving forward, we will focus on providing technical assistance for food producers and entrepreneurs, advocating for Rural Health Transformation Program funding, supporting food hubs, coordinating supply chain logistics, and coalition building.

We won't stop

The Heartland Coalition proves that true agricultural resilience isn't built on federal funding alone—it's built on the determination of farmers, entrepreneurs, and communities who refuse to let setbacks define their future. The relationships forged, businesses launched, and knowledge shared through this initiative have created a network that transcends any single program.

Together, we're pivoting so we can write the next chapter of food security and economic vitality in the Heartland, powered not by federal dollars but by the unwavering belief that our communities deserve resilient, locally rooted food systems.



Elida Canjura owns the first bilingual day care center in Fremont, Nebraska. She recently participated in the Center's Childcare Accelerator Award Program, designed to assist licensed child care providers in scaling operations, expanding services, and improving sustainability in their communities. | Photo by Kylie Kai

Bilingual child care services are vital for town's next generation, says business owner

By Liz Stewart

Even though close to 19% of the population of Fremont, Nebraska—over 5,000 people—is Latino, until recently, the area lacked day cares that provided services specific to those families.

Elida Canjura decided it was time to change that, and opened Ely Children Care, the first bilingual child care center in the area. She serves three families.

"Even though I only have a few kids, one of the things I'm focusing on is the quality of services and getting my name out there and also helping the families here," said Elida.

She understands the challenges Latino families face all too well. Elida came to the U.S. from El Salvador in 2014 to be closer to her mom. Later, she navigated the process for obtaining the permits and licensing required to open her business.

"I lived through not being able to have child care as a mom and facing all the barriers that come with being an immigrant in the U.S., like the language and the cultural differences," she said. "My back-

ground is in education, and I was a teacher in my country. That was a big part of what pushed me and helped me to see the need for child care in Fremont."

Elida has over 10 years of teaching experience at the junior high and high school level in El Salvador and also spent time working with young children. She opened her child care business in November 2024 and now has her five-year operational license.

Recently, Elida participated in a Childcare Accelerator Award Program presented by the Center for Rural Affairs Women's Business Center (WBC), Stearns Bank, and the Association of Women's Business Centers. The Center's WBC was among seven across the country selected to serve as accelerator hubs and to receive grant funding.

After completing the program, participating child care businesses each received a \$10,000 Childcare Accelerator Award Program Grant by Stearns Bank. The funding helped Elida remodel and make updates and upgrades to her child care facility.

"For me, it was a great oppor-

tunity, and I got to work with wonderful people," she said. "This program was the first step in the ladder to making my dream come true!"

Helping the growing Latino community in her area is one of Elida's top priorities. She wants to show the people of Fremont that most immigrants are coming to the city because they want to help build a brighter future for everyone.

"For me, providing child care services is vital," she said. "My philosophy is to serve others, and I want to help facilitate people being able to go to work."

All her big plans and dreams feel more possible now, Elida said. And she is thankful for the Childcare Accelerator Program getting her started on this journey.

"I am very grateful for the Center because, for me, the program was the light, the beacon, that I needed so I could take off," said Elida. "We will grow and take advantage of the tools that places like the Center provide. Many of us in the Hispanic community will face many barriers, but it is not impossible!"

The perfect storm: as health policies start to take effect, rural states will suffer

By Heidi Kolbeck-Urlacher, heidiku@cfra.org

Health care providers and individuals face major challenges from a trio of policies set in motion by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) and Congress's failure thus far to extend expiring Affordable Care Act (ACA) subsidies. Without significant state and federal intervention, the country faces a growing crisis that could lead to rising numbers of uninsured Americans and the closure of numerous rural hospitals and health facilities.

Expiring subsidies and skyrocketing premiums will result in more uninsured Americans

Many Americans are grappling with rising health insurance premiums for health coverage through the ACA's Marketplace. Because Congress allowed ACA enhanced premium tax credits (subsidies) to expire at the end of 2025, costs are expected to more than double. Currently, over 90% of ACA enrollees, or more than 22 million people, receive the subsidy.

According to the National Rural Health Association, 35% of rural workers are not offered health insurance by their employer, as rural people are more likely to be self-employed or work for small employers. As of August 2025, 2.8 million rural residents were enrolled in Marketplace health plans, with 80% receiving a zero-premium plan as a result of the subsidies.

With enhanced subsidies gone and premiums rising, many will likely forgo purchasing health insurance. Reduced enrollment will create additional strain on medical facilities to provide care that may not be compensated, worsening the financial struggles many rural hospitals and clinics already face.



After decisions made by Congress last year, the country faces a growing crisis that could lead to rising numbers of uninsured Americans and the closure of numerous rural hospitals and health facilities. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

Cuts to Medicaid and SNAP threaten individuals, hospitals, and local economies

The OBBBA legislation signed into law in July 2025 ushered in major reforms set to cut \$911 billion in Medicaid spending over the next decade. Medicaid provides health coverage for low-income, pregnant, elderly, or disabled Americans, with more than 20% of the U.S. population, nearly 70 million people, enrolled in the program.

Rural areas have higher rates of Medicaid enrollment than urban areas, with 1 in 4 rural residents relying on the program, making it a critical source of funding helping keep rural hospitals open.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is another crucial program that helps safeguard health by ensuring low-income individuals and families have access to food. SNAP was unfortunately also on the OBBBA chopping block, receiving marked cuts with the passage of the law.

Once changes are fully enacted, the Congressional Budget Office anticipates that 4 million people, including families with children, older adults, people with disabilities, and veterans, will see SNAP benefits significantly cut or eliminated, having a significant multi-

plier effect on local food systems and families' spending power.

Access to health care is required for a healthy rural America

To have thriving rural communities, the people who live there must have equitable, affordable, and reliable access to health care.

As the OBBBA policies are rolled out over the next few years, states will be forced to grapple with the fallout. At the very least, decision makers must endeavor to limit harm by implementing changes in ways that mitigate burdens and limit unnecessary loss of coverage or benefits. Efforts should include providing public outreach and education on new conditions for coverage, such as work requirements or documentation, and ensuring sensible exemptions for individuals with extreme hardships.

Creating a healthy rural America requires ensuring that every resident has the access they need to resources that support their health and well-being. It's more important than ever to hold our leaders accountable and speak up about the realities of how these cuts directly impact our families and neighbors. By working together, we can continue to build a future where rural communities are healthy, strong, and resilient.

You can go home again: conservation fellow leaves city life behind, brings sustainable practices to family farm

By Liz Stewart

Five miles north of Pierce, Nebraska, sits the 80-acre farm where Denice Hansen was raised. She spent a childhood working cow/calf pairs, feeder cattle, and growing row crops and garden vegetables. After living in Omaha, she and her husband are now back on the farm.

Their move gave Denice's dad the chance to gradually step back from farm work. Along with her husband, Denice has taken on more tasks and learned how challenging farm life can be.

"Small farming is becoming harder, with more risk and less profitability," she said. "Traditional farmers are pigeonholed by what we can make, so including sustainable practices is not only financially beneficial by reducing our input costs, but it also returns nutrients back to our soil, which is the foundation of everything we do."

This realization impressed upon Denice the importance of making changes to keep things going, and she has been looking for ways to diversify their farm. One way is growing mushrooms, something she could grow in the 'off season' indoors.

Denice's interest led her to apply to the Center for Rural Affairs Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship Program. To be eligible for the fellowship, beginning farmers must be actively farming in Nebraska for less than 10 years. The program emphasizes a variety of conservation topics essential to farming.

As part of the conservation fellowship, farmers design and implement a project. Denice's project involves purchasing a freeze dryer to increase the lifespan of her harvested mushrooms.



Denice Hansen discovered mushrooms as a way to diversify her farm. As a Center conservation fellow, Denice is working on a project that involves purchasing a freeze dryer to increase the lifespan of her harvested mushrooms. | Photo by Kylie Kai

"Lots of people say they are interested in fresh mushrooms, but I haven't had the return I wanted," Denice said. "I'm not able to do many farmers markets, so I'd like to try making teas and tinctures that can be sold year round online, or in local stores."

While the project is still in the works, Denice's dedication to the cause drives her forward. She and her farmer mentor email back and forth about ideas and remain enthusiastic about her project's prospects.

Until she's able to purchase the machine, Denice continues to improve other areas of the farm. She started a compost system and implemented no-till in her garden, while her husband planted a cover crop in their cornfield. They also raise cow/calf pairs, and have land reserved for row crops where they

grow corn and beans.

"Both of us would love to do more, but it's hard to take the risks and put in the time it takes to convert to organic when the farm is barely making it as is," Denice said. "It's hard to just switch everything you're doing at once, so I'm hoping we can do some smaller test plots and build from there."

Denice is grateful to have learned so much during the fellowship to help her define and work toward her goals.

"It was really an honor, and I was very surprised to be chosen," Denice said. "I'll keep farming because I want to save it—I want nothing more than to preserve this way of life."

For more information, visit cfra.org/beginning-farmer-conservation-fellowship-program.

NOTES FROM SUPPORTERS

Below is correspondence that we've received recently and wanted to share with you. Feel free to send us a note at info@cfra.org or PO Box 136, Lyons, NE 68038.



Federal immigration actions, continued from page 8

have made great progress in building communities that are more welcoming, economically vibrant, and culturally diverse.

The current and aggressive approach to immigration enforcement threatens this progress. As we see from the examples, the dragnet approach is ensnaring citizens and non-citizens alike, legal residents, and even children. These federal actions ignore basic law enforcement safety protocols and constitutionally rooted rights. Without a fundamental change, we're likely to see more, not less, of this in our communities in the months ahead.

Consider, the rule of law underlies our individual and collective ability to do much of anything—start businesses, operate public institutions, and go about our personal lives. A breakdown in the basic tenets of the law and the apparatus of enforcement has far-reaching and deleterious implications for our communities and the values that the Center advances.

These ought not be controversial statements. They are deeply embedded American values, springing from the Constitution, and long held by the legislative, administrative, and judicial branches of government.

The current situation is neither fair nor just nor sustainable. A different way is possible. The Center has called on Congress to take action on comprehensive immigration reform for nearly two decades. The vast majority of Americans support the same.

The decades-long failure to enact positive immigration law is actively harming rural communities. Comprehensive reform is necessary to create a humane, sensible, and sustainable basis for immigration policy in our country. Enforcement action must then also operate within the bounds of the Constitution and our laws.



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Look inside: The perfect storm

As federal health policies take effect, rural states will suffer

From the executive director:

Federal immigration actions affect rural communities, too

By Brian Depew, briand@cfra.org

While the presence and actions of federal agents in Minnesota's Twin Cities were a high-profile national news story earlier this year, federal agents have also been active in small cities and rural communities across the country.

For instance, a news report from Saint Peter, Minnesota, a town of 12,000 people in the southwest part of the state, included video footage of ICE agents recklessly stopping the car of a local woman observing them from the road. Three masked agents approached her car, guns drawn and aimed at the driver.

Federal agents also surged into largely rural Maine earlier this year. In Lewiston, Maine, a town of 37,000, local news reported

that many residents opted to avoid school and work out of fear of being targeted. Family members, lawyers, and local officials all reported that many of those detained were legally present asylum seekers with no criminal record.

In Ohio and Oregon and elsewhere, you can find similar news reports of aggressive immigration enforcement action far from major metropolitan areas.

Center staff, too, have seen firsthand how the rapidly changing federal enforcement climate is affecting communities where we work. Heightened concern about being profiled or otherwise caught up in the current dragnet approach has led to residents who are scared to engage in public life, operate their businesses, or go to work.

A different way is possible

Rural America is often characterized as mostly white and a place with few newly arriving immigrants. Those of us who work in small towns across the country know this generalization is not accurate. Accepting that, but for Native Americans, we are all immigrants to our places, newly arriving Americans have been making a home in and contributing to our small towns and rural communities for decades, often breathing new life into local economies.

As new residents arrived, the Center built programming to help both long-time residents and newcomers create welcoming communities where everyone can be a full participant in local civic, economic, and cultural life. Together, we

—See Federal immigration actions on page 7

Thank you, 2025 donors!

This list reflects funders of the Center for Rural Affairs and its subsidiaries from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, 2025.



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The Granary Foundation is the Center’s endowment fund. Gifts to the Granary are invested and the income is used to support the Center’s mission. Please contact us if you would like to discuss making a gift to the Granary Foundation or would like to include the Center in your estate plan.

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Together, we advocate based on shared values. Thank you for taking action, answering our alerts, and contacting lawmakers locally and nationally. Let's keep making our voices heard in 2026 and beyond!

\$1 to \$249, continued

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In 2025, we worked one-on-one with 63 veterans in the third year of our farming workshop series. Thanks to you, we can connect veterans with peers and experts who specialize in resilient landscapes and accessing markets.

\$1 to \$249, continued

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Anita & Clint Menke
Grayce Mesner
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—Continued on Page B5

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Your support energized the Center as we brought forward legislation in Iowa and Nebraska to strengthen local grocery stores and increase fresh food access.

\$1 to \$249, continued

Mary Woolsey
 Katy Wortel
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Capital partners and investors provide capital to revolving loan funds operated by the Center for Rural Affairs and its subsidiary, Center for Rural Affairs Community Capital.

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 U.S. Department of Treasury, Community Development Financial Institutions Fund
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 U.S. Small Business Administration, Microloan Program
 William and Ruth Scott Family Foundation

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We developed the Conservation Mentorship Network and the Beginning Farmer Conservation Fellowship Program to share proven benefits of sustainable land management.

