



## Project 17

# Building a Change Platform for Large-Scale Regional Economic Development Engagement

Health	Economic Development	Education/Workforce	Leadership	
<b>Generational Poverty</b> (Strengthen Families) Circles- 10 percent of child out of poverty in 10 years. Workforce program)	<b>Promote Local Business</b> (Promote the Rural Opportunity Zone Program and assets of the region)	<b>Promotion Region's Quality of Life</b> (Involve youth in seeing the value of the region and staying in the region)	<b>Improved "Soft Skills" of Workforce</b> (Circles Innovation)	<b>Youth Leadership</b> (Develop opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills and see the value of living in the region)
<b>Substance Abuse Prevention &amp; Intervention</b> (Education and access to affordable treatment)	<b>Improve Broadband</b> (Improve access, speed, and affordability to allow for business expansion and location of high tech businesses)	<b>Increase Innovation</b> (Promote and support innovation in the region including fab labs and makers mindset)	<b>Link Education to Business Needs</b> (Convening education and business to match needs)	<b>Civic Leadership Training (Kansas Leadership Center)</b> (Increase leadership capacity across region)
<b>Preventative Health</b> (Increase physical activity and healthy food to create healthier communities and workforce)	<b>Increase &amp; Support Entrepreneurship</b> (Ice House Entrepreneurship education and create entrepreneurship networks)	<b>Regional Cooperative Marketing</b> (Pool resources promote the region)	<b>Promote STEM Careers/Education</b> (Promote SB 155 credentials and STEM careers in region)	<b>Connecting Local Leadership Programs</b> (Network leaders across the region for a stronger SE KS)

**Abstract:** Since 2011 the Advanced Manufacturing Institute (AMI), within Kansas State University's College of Engineering, has been supporting innovation-based economic development initiatives in rural regions and communities of Southeast Kansas. This outreach engagement has resulted in working partnerships with many parts of K-State, the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA), USDA-Rural Development, the Kansas Department of Commerce, Casey Family Programs (a national child welfare philanthropy), Pittsburg State University, Wichita State University, and multiple other state, regional, and local organizations throughout the state. AMI has engaged students, faculty, and staff in the College of Business, the College of Agriculture, the College of Architecture Planning and Design, College of Human Ecology, College of Arts and Sciences, in addition to the College of Engineering to develop and deploy network-based strategies, tools, and resources to assist Kansas rural communities, businesses, and citizens to improve their lives, communities, and economic competitiveness in the global economy.

In 2011 AMI was approached by four state senators, representing the 17 most southeast counties of Kansas, to initiate a large-scale regional economic development initiative. This region has long had concentrated poverty and unemployment rates significantly higher than the state average and public health indicators are chronically among the poorest in the state. Additionally, 10 of the region's 17 counties have insufficient access to the high speed internet connectivity required to support business growth, education, and health care at an affordable cost with only a low percentage of the region's businesses having a website and even fewer participating in e-commerce.

In response, AMI worked with an initial coalition of 21 legislative/civic leaders and partner organizations from across the region to host a series of community meetings and engage the public in a civic conversation around these challenges. Citizens from within the region agreed that the chronic economic challenges, poverty, and health issues that have plagued the region for so long had to be addressed with a different approach if there was to be revitalized, broad-based economic opportunity and prosperity throughout the region. The outcome of this initial engagement was the creation of a regional change platform known as **Project 17**. Rather than a traditional top-down driven change

program, Project 17 is a network-based, grassroots supported, platform that enables all citizens to participate through active recruitment of volunteers and partners; tackles socially complex problems; focuses on linking and leveraging regional assets; places priority on strategic doing over strategic planning; and launches multiple initiatives/experiments across several project pillars in an effort to seed large-scale change. The following is a summary of the primary strategies under the project's four pillars:

In the last year and a half alone AMI has been engaged with: over 1,800 southeast Kansans; hundreds of different civic groups, public bodies, and businesses; all levels of state/federal government offices and agencies; statewide organizations; and all levels of public education institutions within the region to advance activities and projects that support the above outlined strategies. Through AMI, K-State's outreach and engagement has been wide and deep within the region. The following are merely examples of many of the engagements K-State has been able to engage in through Project 17: AMI led a proposal team that was awarded a three-year \$1.88M Rural Jobs and Innovation Accelerator Challenge grant funded by the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration (EDA) and USDA-Rural Development with matching funds coming from the Kansas Department of Commerce and Kansas State University. Kansas State University has also received over \$200,000 of additional funds from other USDA-RD grants on behalf of Project 17 activities focused on manufacturing reshoring and e-commerce for food-based businesses in the region. Faculty, staff, and students from five different Colleges have been engaged on the ground in Southeast Kansas in this work. Additionally, Project 17 has received over \$180,000 from a national foundation initially to implement the Circles anti-poverty program in three communities. Through this initial investment and the engaged work of Project 17

staff, along with local K-State Research and Extension agents and the College of Human Ecology faculty, Circles was started in four additional communities in the region this year. Also, AMI is providing expertise/services in technology development directly to businesses in the region and creating/applying new tools for regional asset mapping and analytics. AMI has engaged faculty/staff/students from multiple colleges/units within the University (Engineering, Architecture and Design, Business, Human Ecology, Agriculture, Research and Extension, Global Campus, K-State Polytechnic, and Center for Engagement and Community Development) to engage within the region in numerous ways.

Project 17 is simultaneously addressing multiple pillars of an entire large-scale economic ecosystem through a grassroots regional change platform by utilizing all of the expertise available through K-State and allowing students hands on educational experiences while helping local businesses and communities is an innovative approach which has already begun yielding a number of successful outcomes. The collective impact of Project 17 and its partners to date includes:

- Over 1,800 citizens from the region engaged in the work
- Over 1,000 citizen leaders trained,
- 674 Jobs Created, 431 Jobs Retained, 611 Future Jobs Anticipated
- \$25.54 Million in private investments leveraged
- 194 Businesses Assisted, 107 Entrepreneurs engaged
- Collaboration with 131 different organizations in the region.

Additionally, Project 17 continues to stimulate private sector investment in the region through: the installation of a multi-million dollar broadband fiber trunk line; increasing job creation and retention; strengthening local food systems; increasing business growth and activity; expanding civic leadership; increasing soft skills development of the region's workforce; raising awareness

of the root causes of poverty and has launched new Circles USA sites in seven communities to stop the cycle of generational poverty and increase the focus on healthy families. The activities and methods being undertaken by Project 17 have been presented and highlighted at the University of Nebraska Rural Future's Conference, and in multiple Kansas state-wide and regional conferences, published in multiple newspaper articles, covered in numerous regional TV and radio news-casts, and used as published case studies of innovation and civic engagement by the Kansas Leadership Center and the National Association of Development Organizations. Two thirty minute Kansas Public Radio broadcasts were also focused on Project 17 and K-State's engagement with the project across Southeast Kansas.

### **The Partnership:**

Multiple K-State entities have been integral university partners to Project 17 as it constructs a platform for large-scale regional change and innovation in many sectors of the community and economy of Southeast Kansas. In addition to direct engagement with Project 17 and its citizen constituents, as outlined above, AMI actively serves as both a connector and organizer of Project 17 engagement across the broader university as evidenced below:

**College of Business** - *Dawn Deeter-Schmelz, Professor, Department of Marketing, Director National Strategic Selling Institute; David Lehman Instructor Department of Marketing, Student Chapter of Pi Sigma Epsilon, K-State Marketing Club* – Involved students are the primary resources of E-Commerce and Marketing Assistance Program which is providing marketing technical assistance to client food-based businesses seeking revenue growth and online marketing presence.

**College of Agriculture- Research and Extension Services** – State and local extension agents have been actively involved in the Circles/Poverty program, food systems initiatives, health, leadership, and youth entrepreneur efforts. Agents involved include *Gail Price Regional Specialist* and *Rebecca McFarland in the Frontier*

*District*. Local agents in the following districts have also been involved: Wildcat, Rolling Prairie, and Marais De Cygnes. *Food Science Institute – Londa Nwadike, Food Safety Specialist* is supporting small food businesses with proper food handling of shipped food products. *National Agri-Marketing Association (NAMA) Student Chapter* – Students are actively engaged with regional food businesses in the development of marketing strategies.

**College of Engineering** – In addition to AMI staff: *Kerri Ebert, Biological and Agricultural Engineering, Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops* – supporting Project 17 E-Commerce and Marketing Assistance Program by convening regional producers and providing subject matter expertise with regard to food production and specialty crops. *Associate Professors William Hsu and Doina Caragea, Computing and Information Sciences*– supporting graduate research on regional data analysis methods.

**College of Architecture, Planning and Design** – *Katherine Ankerson, Department Head of Interior Architecture and Product Design (IAPD)* - Supported Independence Community College who was seeking to develop an open-to-the-public product fabrication lab infused with elements of design in an effort to seed innovation within surrounding communities. IAPD hosted several discussions and a site visit to tour the IAPD labs to help inform the college's planning. In addition, Dr. Ankerson and several students presented at the region's 2014 Innovation Summit to share more about design.

**College of Human Ecology** – *Elaine Johannes, Associate Professor, School of Family Studies and Human Services* has partnered with Project 17 and is engaging with the project to research and analyze the collective impact of the Circles program on individuals in the program and the systems in the community. Project 17 and Elaine are sharing a student and working with a graduate student who is interested in the impact of Circles on poverty in Kansas.

## College of Arts and Sciences and the Staley School of Leadership Studies

– Sarah I Pilgrim, Associate Professor, Social Work Program – As Project 17 has continued to work with moving people out of poverty within the region, Dr. Pilgrim was consulted regarding research and data with respect to child welfare and the Circles USA program. Mary Hale Tolar, Trisha Gott, Brandon Kliewer, and John Carlin have also been consulted about how Project 17 could better engage their students in the work in Southeast Kansas.

**Pittsburg State University-** Project 17 created a partnership between K-State and Pittsburg State University for the first known partnership for joint submission for federal scientific funding. This partnership engages K-State College of Engineering with Pittsburg State's world class Polymer Center and College of Technology to create strategic partnerships to advance local companies needing innovative bio-based products and also create new businesses and industry partnerships for both institutions. Additionally this partnership between K-State and Pittsburg State was enhanced through then creating partnerships with **Independence and Neosho County Community Colleges** and their community fabrication labs which Project 17 assisted them in applying for and receiving grant funding to support. These community college partnerships benefit both local businesses and have engaged community college faculty and students with K-State faculty and students.

In addition, below is a sampling of community partners involved in Project 17 strategies, activities and projects: **Civic/Nonprofit Organizations:** Kansas Leadership Center; Communities in Schools of Mid-America; Communities in Schools of Ottawa; SEK Inc.; SEK Prosperity Foundation; Innovative Business Resource Center; KVC Behavioral Health; Casey Family Programs; Circles USA; Pittsburg Ministerial Alliance; Ottawa Ministerial Alliance; Chanute churches; Fort Scott Churches; Crawford County Community Foundation; Chanute Community Foundation; Franklin

County Children's Coalition; SEK and EKAN Community Action Programs; Preferred Family Health; Chambers of Commerce in the region; Greenwood County Economic Advisory Group; Thrive Allen County.

**Businesses:** Independent Rural Telephone Companies in the region; Kansas Fiber Network; CenturyLink; CableOne; Cox Communications; AOS; Dawn Fiber; Allen County Farm Bureau; Franklin/Anderson County Meat Processing Group; Hugo's Industrial Supply; Niece Manufacturing, B&W Hitch; John Deere Coffeyville Works; Westar; hospitals in the region; Mine Creek Farm; R&B Produce; Mutton Hollow Herb Farm; Parker's Greenhouse; Summit Hill Gardens

**Public Sector:** Kansas Department of Commerce; Kansas Department of Agriculture; From the Land of Kansas Program; Kansas Department of Labor; Kansas Department of Children and Families; Kansas Department of Education; Kansas Department of Health and Environment; Network Kansas; city and county governments throughout the region; USDA Rural Development; Small Business Administration; Economic Development Administration; Pittsburg State University; Wichita State University; Montgomery County Action Council; Pittsburg, Parsons and Fort Scott economic development; Franklin, Linn, Anderson, and Miami county economic development; Mid-America Manufacturing and Technology Center; Southeast Kansas Works; Lake and SeeKan Regional Conservation Districts; Community Mental Health Centers in the region; unified school districts in the region; Greenbush; health departments in the region; Coffeyville, Allen, Labette, and Fort Scott Community College.

## Lessons Learned and Best Practices

The challenges that Project 17 is focused on overcoming are generally socially complex wicked problems where traditional hierarchical command and control structures and approaches are woefully ineffective. In response, K-State

through AMI and Project 17's leadership have focused on constructing a regional change platform that links and leverages collaborative networks and assets to encourage individuals to tackle significant issues that are often outside their traditional spheres of influence. This requires new ways of thinking, behaving and doing within the Project 17 region. Local actions and assets in hand take priority over grand schemes and plans, with the ability to be organic, responsive, agile and continuously experimental being highly imperative. Because of the potential depth and breadth that universities can bring to such complex wicked problems, universities are uniquely positioned and equipped to be trusted conveners and innovative boundary spanners in order to effect change and enable generational impact. But to do so, universities must also be able and willing to think, behave, and act in new ways that encourages socially-engaged (i.e. messy) complex problem solving, supports iterative experimentation, cultivates strong local civic leadership, and seeds trusted partnerships such that regions and communities know their university partner is equally invested in their long-term success.

The Project 17 Executive Director, an AMI employee, lives within the region and interacts with over 1,000 engaged people across the region each quarter in various formats. Project 17 is having an impact. A growing sense of regional interdependence is being both recognized and valued, but the region did not get into the situation it finds itself in overnight, nor will it be solved overnight. As highlighted above, AMI and Project 17 will continue to formally share the early learnings and impact from this large-scale engagement with both practitioners and researchers inside and outside the region in an effort to better understand regional change platforms.