

Nancy Daniels - First Impressions

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

"You never get a second chance to make a first impression." Did your mother tell you that? If so, she was right. First impressions are important, for communities as well as people. Today we'll learn about a program which can help Kansas towns create their community's best possible first impression for visitors and prospective residents, while setting the stage for community action. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Nancy Daniels and Nadine Sigle are community vitality specialists with K-State Research and Extension. They use a program called First Impressions to provide helpful feedback for community improvement initiatives across the state.

The First Impressions program was created by the Extension service in Wisconsin and used in other states, including Kansas. In 2015, with support from the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, the program was relaunched by K-State Research and Extension in a new and improved format.

The central goal is community assessment and improvement, starting with feedback about the community from outside sources. The program offers a way to identify strengths and weaknesses of a community through the eyes of a first time visitor.

Kansas communities can apply to the K-State Office of Community Vitality to participate in the First Impressions program. The community will then be matched with another town of similar size about 90 miles or so away. Each town provides at least three volunteers to make unannounced visits to the other community. "Participants become 'secret shoppers' for a day to discover what they can about their sister community," the program guide stated.

The visitors are trained to follow a process to observe and assess various elements of the community they visit. Before visiting, they check the online presence of the community. During their in-person visit, they assess community entrances, housing, education and social services, local economy, public services, recreation, friendliness, and more. Their comments and photos are compiled and presented to the community at a public meeting.

Of course, their sister community is conducting a similar assessment on them. "I think that's key," Nancy Daniels said. "The participants not only give feedback to the other town, but they come back with lots of ideas for their own community."

After the visits, the results are presented at a town meeting, where Extension specialists then lead community residents through a process of identifying the town's strengths and weaknesses. In approximately six months, a followup meeting is to be held to track progress.

These assessments are not statistical measurements. They are literally first impressions, which often become lasting impressions. Ultimately, the goal is to encourage community action.

First Impressions reports can be a "wake-up call" to a community. "There was a business owner who hadn't paid much attention to the outside appearance of his building (until he saw the pictures at a First Impressions meeting)," Nancy said. "No one was criticizing him, but he didn't like how his entrance looked," she said. "He brought some painters in and it looked totally different by the time the community meeting occurred."

Communities in northwest Kansas are using the results to help shape a strategic doing process with support from the Hansen Foundation.

Since 2015, 64 communities have participated in the program. These include larger towns as well as rural communities such as Arlington, population 452; Robinson, population 212; and Olsburg, population 189 people. Now, that's rural.

How does a community participate? There is no charge, but the community must commit to provide volunteers to make an exchange visit and to host the public meeting. The application must also be signed by the town mayor so that public officials are aware of the process. The First Impressions program provides sample news releases and flyers to help the community promote public engagement in the town meeting.

For more information, contact nkdaniels@ksu.edu or nsigle@ksu.edu.

Mom was right. One never gets a second chance to make a first impression. Those impressions from outsiders can help a community identify areas where progress is needed. We commend the many volunteers who are participating in this program across Kansas. They are making a difference with their evaluations and commitment to improvement. Such actions are important, because first impressions count.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.