

# MIDWEST RURAL ASSEMBLY



## *Proceedings of the 2009 Midwest Rural Assembly*

*August 10–11, 2009  
Sioux Falls Convention Center  
Sioux Falls, South Dakota*

**Cultivating a Stronger Rural America**

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Cultivating a Stronger Rural America

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# MIDWEST RURAL ASSEMBLY

August 10–11, 2009

## PROCEEDINGS



On August 10 and 11, 2009, 170 people gathered in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to launch the Midwest Rural Assembly—a network of community leaders, organizations, and policy-makers dedicated to creating a stronger rural America. They came from 15 states and one Canadian province. They discussed the issues that mattered most to them, assessed policy

opportunities and challenges, and committed to action. They left with new connections, knowledge and skills that will help them move their work forward across the Midwest. They also returned home with the desire to remain engaged with this new network.

***“We need to keep rural communities vibrant. People want to continue to live in rural America, but they have to feel like there’s something to come back for.”***

The idea of a regionally based rural assembly was hatched in June 2008, during the second gathering of the National Rural Assembly in Washington, D.C. During regional discussions, a small group of people discussed what they as Midwesterners had in common. In the months that followed, they recruited other individuals and organizations focused on rural development in the Midwest to help plan a regional rural assembly. An initial planning meeting was held in December 2008 in Sioux City, Iowa, to set a preliminary agenda and gain commitments from interested organizations. Ultimately, over twenty organizations came together to coordinate, plan and carry out the event.

The Midwest Rural Assembly organized itself around the four principles identified at the national Rural Assembly and drafted into a Rural Compact: quality in education, stewardship of natural resources, health of our people and investment in our communities. As planning moved forward, an additional focus became high-quality broadband access across the rural Midwest.

### The Rural Compact

We offer this compact as a set of principles on which to build the kind of rural America that is needed now and a rural America that is ready to face the challenges to come.

**Quality in Education.** Every child should have an equal chance to learn, excel, and help lead America to a better, brighter future. Education policy should recognize the distinctive challenges and opportunities for rural schools and reflect the unique needs of those students, families, and educators.

**Stewardship of Natural Resources.** Eighty percent of our country’s land is rural. It is a heritage and a trust. We all have a responsibility to protect the environment and develop and sustain our natural resources in ways that strengthen rural communities for the long haul. Good environmental practices and responsive public land management provide the opportunity to promote energy independence, grow healthy food in a sustainable manner, mitigate climate change, and develop stronger natural-resource-based economies.

**Health of Our People.** All people in America deserve access to good, affordable healthcare. If we want small towns and rural communities to contribute to the well-being of the nation, we need rural healthcare systems that work. These should include preventive care, health education, and both community-based and high-tech delivery systems.

**Investment in Our Communities.** To fight poverty, create wealth, and build sustainable communities, everyone in America needs access to a safe and equitable system for saving, borrowing, and building capital. To fully participate in and contribute to the American economy, rural communities need public and private investment, access to philanthropic resources, and the tools to develop their own community-controlled assets.

For more information see [www.ruralcompact.org](http://www.ruralcompact.org)

## The Purpose and Goals of the Midwest Rural Assembly

With the Rural Compact principles as a framework, the coordinators envisioned the assembly as an occasion and a starting place for the region to dig deeper into the issues that people cared about, share strategies for addressing them, interact with policymakers and determine strategic action to move forward in the region. The ultimate vision for the network is that it will serve as an ongoing, effective means through which rural people can help develop, promote and share both community-based solutions and public policies that will strengthen their individual communities and the Midwest as a whole.

The desired goals of the assembly were to:

- Build the capacity and network needed in the Midwest and Great Plains region to move forward the rural policy principles identified in the Rural Compact.

- Share strategies and capitalize on opportunities to address key regional concerns within the four principles of the Rural Compact.

- Include a strong focus on democracy, diversity, social justice and the next generation of rural leaders and citizens.

## Attendees

The 170 people who attended the assembly hailed primarily from South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska and Iowa. Some also came from Kansas, North Dakota, Wisconsin and Missouri, with a few others who flew in from the East, South, Southwest and Manitoba. Many worked in the areas of economic and community development, entrepreneurship, education, sustainable agriculture and health care. Many were drawn to the assembly by the topics addressed and the opportunity to network. Others looked forward to the opportunity to gain new knowledge and to unite and create common goals.



## DAY 1: ISSUES AND POLICIES

### Opening Plenary

Kathy Callies, Vice President of Advancement at the Rural Learning Center in Howard, South Dakota, introduced Randy Parry, president of the Rural Learning Center, and Elsie Meeks, South Dakota's State Director for USDA Rural Development, who welcomed participants to the assembly.



Parry, a former teacher, entrepreneur and coach, shared a moving personal story and described 10 years of revitalization in his community, Miner County, South Dakota. He pointed out that urban and suburban areas across the U.S. are looking more and more alike, both in their physical and demographic make-up. "It is the rural areas—farm fields, vast plains, forests and mountains," he said, "that provide a wealth of geographic, economic and increasingly ethnic diversity in our country." He focused on rural residents as the leaders who will create positive, intentional change in their communities. He introduced the audience to an inspirational video on rural vitality and diversity called the [Architects of Change](#).

***"It is the rural areas—farm fields, vast plains, forests and mountains—that provide a wealth of geographic, economic and increasingly ethnic diversity in our country."***

Elsie Meeks, an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, acknowledged the many challenges facing rural communities, but said that there is still a sense of pride among people when they band together. She discussed the need to focus resources on, and learn from, the many Indian tribes in South Dakota, where the population is growing instead of declining. She also shared what became a major theme at the assembly: "We need to keep rural communities vibrant," said Meeks. "We need to keep people there, or encourage them to move back. People want to continue to live in rural America, but they have to feel like there's something to come back for."

## The Assembly Café: A Community Dialogue and Harvest

Jerry Nagel and Maggie Schmaltz from Northern Great Plains Inc. and the Meadowlark Institute, together with Lindsey Karlson from the Rural Learning Center and Joe Bartmann from the Meadowlark Institute, hosted a World Café on the first morning of the assembly to help participants get to know each other. Participants were asked two questions:

What personal intention brought you to this rural assembly?

What will our grandchildren praise us for having dared to start today?

Participants met in small groups to answer those questions. They then traveled to other tables to find out how others had responded. Themes that emerged from this “harvest” of the discussions included:



**Youth:** Participants focused on the importance of retaining youth, who play a significant role in revitalizing rural lands. They discussed the importance of making sure that youth know it is okay to grow up in a small community and to return to that community, and to feel welcomed when they return.

**Rural futures:** In looking at improving the quality of life in rural communities, people discussed the need to reverse the decline of rural population and the need for new ideas and models for economic development. They also noted the importance of rural people becoming empowered to act on their own behalf and create change. “Rural should not mean being left behind and should be a choice rather than a sentence to serve,” commented one participant.

***“Rural should not mean being left behind and should be a choice rather than a sentence to serve.”***

**Sustainability:** People discussed making personal investments in rural communities, building a sustainable economy that works for rural America, and the need to adopt new ideas in order to sustain resources and communities. “The trick,” commented one attendee, “is how to learn from our past while remaining innovative.”

**Diversity:** Participants saw a continuing need to understand and hold dialogues regarding the diversity of the region. Communities must collaborate, integrate and embrace diversity or they will not survive. One participant saw the assembly as a safe place for diversity to have a voice in policy and economic development.

**Dialogue:** There was a consensus that boundaries and barriers need to be broken down in order to move forward. Many agreed that a way to break down these barriers is through dialogue. Change needs to occur in the conversations around the kitchen table in rural homes.

**Positive stories:** Telling positive stories about rural America can help change people’s views about rural life, and potentially contribute to its growth. As one participant said, “Story is how we communicate with one another and the best stories come from our hearts. We need to tell the story of rural America not just from our heads, but from our hearts.”



## Issue Break-Out Session: Investment in Our Communities

Nicole Sedlacek, the director of the Holt County Economic Development Agency, shared the story of Holt County Nebraska’s revitalization. Youth were leaving in large numbers and young adults were not engaged. Communities worked in isolation, fed by past hostilities and competition.

In 2004, however, led by the example of two communities, county residents started coming together and sharing resources. They used the [HomeTown Competitiveness](#) framework—focused on leadership, entrepreneurship, and charitable assets—and received grants from state government and the Federal Home Loan Bank Topeka.

As a result, all of the county’s communities participated in an inter-local agreement, found corporate sponsors, and opened an office with 1.5-time paid staff and a group of committed volunteers. The new Holt Community Economic Development Agency visited 98 existing businesses to talk with them about their expansion, retention and transfer needs and organized a countywide celebration that brought residents together from all over the county.

They also created a leadership program with help from the Heartland Center for Leadership Development.

Since that time, 70 residents from all walks of life—including high school students—have graduated from the leadership program. The agency has helped develop 58 new jobs and businesses, retained 60 jobs, and helped 11 new families move into the county. Future goals include a \$2.3 million estate gift to foster entrepreneurship and a \$1.5 million estate gift for scholarships to traditional and nontraditional students who have a sincere desire to come back to the area. The agency is also developing a county-

wide youth advisory council through which young people ages 14–19 can help create a community that is attractive to them.

Sedlacek emphasized three elements to success:

**Have patience.** Things will not change overnight. It took three years to create a countywide organization that was able to hire staff and have an office.

**Bring everyone to the table.** New residents, long-time residents, youth, seniors, the business community, education, government—everyone needs to there.

**Set short- (1–3 yr.) and long-term (5–10 yr.) goals.** People need to see some tangible results before they will support and contribute to the effort.

View [Sedlacek's PowerPoint presentation](#).

David Hengel, from the Center for Community Stewardship (CCS) shared the story of how community leaders in Bemidji, Minnesota, a town of 13,500 people, turned their economy and community around. In 2003, Bemidji, like Holt County, was a community without direction. There was little institutional cooperation and though the city was growing, opportunities were slipping away. The staff at the Center for Community Stewardship challenged local leaders to come together as stewards of Bemidji's future. These stewards helped the community agree upon a "shared destiny" and with it an action plan of seventeen "destiny drivers" to get there. In the process they created a new organization—Bemidji Leads!



The results of Bemidji Leads! are impressive:

After nearly 15 years of struggle and the defeat of five referenda, funding is now in place for a \$50 million regional event center.

New clusters of economic innovation include Bemidji Bio and the Ingenuity Frontier, which are creating jobs in the knowledge economy.

Through concentrated development and marketing, the regional airport has become a major economic engine.

More than 50,000 trees were planted in Bemidji during the last five years to reforest the community; 10,000 more will be planted every year for the next decade.

More than 300 community members are working with Bemidji Leads! to create positive change.

## ***A joint planning board of city agencies in Bemidji, Minnesota, celebrated their first "Interdependence Day" in 2009.***

How did Bemidji change its path?

Creating "civic entrepreneurs"—or community stewards—who have a broad perspective, are committed to the long-term well-being of their community, can work across boundaries, and take an integrated approach to solving problems.

Looking at community development holistically, including education, economic development, natural resource management and more.

Taking collective action toward a single goal. For example, a joint planning board of city agencies works together in alignment to create one legislative agenda. They celebrated their first "Interdependence Day" earlier this year.

Focusing on long-term "destiny drivers" rather than short-term solutions.

View [Hengel's PowerPoint presentation](#).

Deputy Under Secretary for USDA Rural Development Victor Vasquez responded to the presentations. He lauded local community investment but also urged communities to focus on federal, state and local government investments. He seconded the importance of communities developing long-term strategies and of government supporting those strategies rather than focusing on short-term projects.

He echoed the importance of inclusive regional planning. He noted in particular that Indian Nations have been left out of initial visioning and planning—instead of being asked to "join the table," they need to be part of deciding whether there is a table and then setting that table. Finally, he raised three questions for communities to consider in seeking support for their work:

How will we get the work done and achieve tangible results?

What research or data shows that this is a strategic investment of resources?

How do we apply the research to what we want to do?

### **Session Themes**

**Strong collaborations:** Communities cannot go it alone. Inter-local agreements among government agencies are critical to strengthening rural areas.

**Resource sharing:** Revenue mechanisms (such as a one-cent sales tax) can provide funds to support coordinated development, including an office and staff. Another important shared resource is locally based leadership development that includes all segments of the population, including high-school students, workers, immigrants and other often marginalized people. Graduates gain confidence and self-esteem and become active in the community.

**Strong resource capital:** Communities are most successful when all sources of capital (financial, political, human, built and natural) are strong; if some are strong don't forget the need to strengthen the others.

**Data-driven, research-based policy:** Good policy is based on facts and research rather than perception or misinformation. Policy, however, must also be grounded in the experience of communities.

### Issue Break-Out Session: Stewardship of Natural Resources

This break-out session focused on working landscapes—how our use and stewardship of natural resources can lead to successful, sustainable rural development. The session focused on energy independence and efficiency, bioindustrial processing, growing healthy local food, and mitigating climate change through agriculture.



Cheryl Landgren of Milan, Minnesota, population 300, shared the story of how her community wants to curb and gain greater control over rising energy costs. Last year, a local community group, the Milan Movers, hosted a

workshop on the green economy. The idea of a Sustainable Energy Utility (SEU) emerged and took hold, and another community group, the Greater Milan Initiative, agreed to host the first rural, small-town SEU—a community-led nonprofit to promote community-directed energy efficiency and on-site renewable energy production. The SEU will identify funding resources, engage in public education, set up a revolving loan fund, and invest in energy savings as a way to reduce overall community energy consumption and community members' energy costs. Through the loan fund, community members can, for example, borrow money to weatherize their home, and then pay back that loan based upon a percentage of the money they saved from the weatherization, with the rest of the savings remaining with the community member.

The Greater Milan Initiative is working with Dr. Cecilia Martinez and Shalini Gupta of the Center for Earth, Energy, and Democracy at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. They are helping to develop the SEU model in the Midwest for both rural and urban communities, in conjunction with the Center for Energy and Environmental Policy at the University of Delaware. Ultimately, the utility will be community governed and controlled, thereby allowing Milan to control its energy future.

“Why in agriculture do we focus so much on reducing our carbon output, rather than on taking carbon out of the atmosphere?” wondered Martin Kleinschmit, a sustainable

farmer for 20 years. He told the group about his, and nine other Nebraskan farmers', involvement in a three-year test project to sequester carbon in the soil through growing crops with longer root systems and longer growing seasons. Crops absorb carbon from sunlight and put it in the soil.



Microorganisms tie the carbon to the soil for long-term storage. He emphasized that there are more than just climate benefits in building carbon in the soil; these types of crops can help retain water and build the soil for future crop production. The 10 farmers are still using new practices to sequester carbon (such as planting turnips in cornfields).

View [Kleinschmit's PowerPoint presentation](#).

Jacob Limmer shared his perspective as the owner of the [Cottonwood Bistro](#) in Brookings, South Dakota, and the operator of nearby Glacier Till Farm, which provides food for the restaurant. Jacob talked about the challenges of sourcing local foods (usually from multiple farmers with different billing methods), the challenges of farming for local markets, and the need to find off-farm work to keep the farm going. He emphasized the need for improving collective local food distribution systems—which would allow buyers to more easily source local foods and provide larger, more consistent buyers for farmers.

Finally, Linda Meschke of Rural Advantage discussed efforts in Madelia, Minnesota, to use renewable bioindustrial processing to provide a market for new crops outside of the corn and soybean rotation and to meet the community's energy needs. Madelia implemented a public process to set priorities for the new facility and agreed to emphasize community investment, perennial crops, and local (within 25 miles) sourcing and use of energy. The project could bring multiple benefits to the community, including improved water quality, renewable energy, habitat preservation, greater sustainable agriculture and wealth retention.

**Opportunities** discussed in this session included the potential for community production—and ownership—of energy and food, scaling production of energy and food to the size of the community, and exporting innovative ideas from other areas to rural communities.

**Barriers** included the potential resistance of large established systems to local, small-scale solutions and ownership, limited resources to change the way energy and food is delivered, and the need to educate people who are used to the current systems in a new way of thinking.

**Highlights** included the focus on community-driven processes, a change in approach from big solutions to small

solutions, and thinking of “resiliency,” rather than “sustainability,” of soil, food, energy supply and communities.

### Issue Breakout Session: Health of Our People

Steph Larson and Virginia Wolking of the Center for Rural Affairs led a discussion of health care issues facing rural communities and ideas for overcoming them. Brad Gibbons of the Center for Rural Health at the University of North Dakota provided critical demographic and socioeconomic data at the session.

View [Gibbon's PowerPoint presentation](#).

This group discussed the current debates over health care reform and focused especially on the needs of rural communities and ensuring that legislation addressed dental health, mental health, and drug and substance abuse. Participants differentiated health care reform from insurance reform. The group agreed that “just having an insurance card does not equal access.” They focused on access and coverage for all.

***“Just having an insurance card does not equal access.”***

Specific issues for rural areas included:

- Maintaining volunteer ambulance services
- Medicaid
- Providing a safety net for people with low incomes or who are otherwise marginalized
- Providing care for an aging population
- Appropriate reimbursements and incentives that will keep hospitals and providers in rural areas
- Medicare equity for rural facilities

Finally the group discussed the current health care reform effort in Congress and the challenge of melding three different pieces of legislation—one in the House and two in the Senate—into one.

### Key Issues for Rural Health Care Reform

The Center for Rural Affairs offers the following papers:

[Top 10 Rural Issues for Health Care Reform](#)

[Causes and Consequences of the Rural Uninsured and Underinsured](#)

[Mental Health: Overlooked and Disregarded in Rural America](#)

[Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity in Rural America](#)

### Issue Breakout Session: Quality in Education

Panelists at this session began with the premise that the role and place of education in rural settings needs to change dramatically. They focused on rural schools as community development partners. Declining enrollments and population loss make it hard for schools to keep going. Yet schools are a major resource for communities, as are the young people who graduate from them each year. How can education and communities help each other?

Dr. Jim Beddow, a senior consultant at the Rural Learning Center and the former president of Dakota Wesleyan University, discussed the way in which different parts of rural communities work in silos: schools, housing, business development, health care, telecommunications infrastructure and place amenities. Yet these different parts of the community interconnect and affect each other: Government policies impact work opportunities that can retain or bring in families. In turn, families need housing, schools and health care—all of which can draw new businesses and therefore new families. Throughout this entire cycle, an adequate telecommunications infrastructure is vital.

Because these areas all have an impact on each other, they need to work together. This includes the school getting more involved in the community and the community embracing that involvement.



One participant talked about how, in his community, the school was getting involved in housing, and the uproar and resistance that came out of this change.

Rural schools play an integral role for the community at large—as a meeting place, leading employer and/or consumer, etc.—but there is still only limited involvement of faculty and students with the community they live in.

Beddow also urged a strong focus on youth in moving forward with rural development. Research from the [Center for Rural Entrepreneurship](#) shows that young people in rural areas are interested in staying or coming back to their communities but lack the economic opportunity to do so. Focusing on how to meet the interests and needs of those young people, and growing local entrepreneurship, is crucial. Through policy and otherwise, we need to actively incentivize innovation and entrepreneurship.

High-quality schools begin with high-quality leadership and teachers. Dr. Rick Melmer, dean of the School of Education at the University of South Dakota and former secretary of education for the state of South Dakota, focused on connecting new, well-qualified teachers to rural areas, helping stabilize schools and communities, and ensuring good teachers. The School of Education is develop-



ing a Rural Teacher Corps in which they identify students interested in teaching in rural areas. They then target their educational experience around teaching in a rural setting. This is a new experience for the faculty and the department; they need to determine how they connect with the communities their students are heading for and how they build the relationship between new teachers and their communities into their evaluation process.

The department is also working with communities to help them become more intentional about hosting student- and first-year teachers and integrating them into the community, including providing help with finding housing. The focus is on helping communities market themselves to these young teachers. Until now, teachers have been virtually on their own when moving into a small community.

Distance learning needs to be part of the solution for rural education. Dan Guerike, director of the Mid-Central Learning Cooperative in South Dakota, shared how virtual and open learning are transforming rural education. With open enrollment, South Dakota students and their families can now choose to go to a certain school because of the quality of programs; they are not bound to where they live.

The cooperative is using the [Open Courseware Consortium](#) to develop online education that is focused around program rather than place. The consortium provides a multitude of courses, and most of their offerings are free. New models like these will revolutionize rural learning.

Challenges to these new ways of linking school and community include the mindset that school is for education only, rather than as a place to address other issues such as housing and economic development. Spurring innovation can be a clumsy, slow-moving process and it is difficult to recruit and train quality leaders, especially in declining communities.

### The OpenCourseWare Consortium

An OpenCourseWare is a free and open digital publication of high quality educational materials, organized as courses. The OpenCourseWare Consortium is a collaboration of more than 200 higher education institutions and associated organizations from around the world creating a broad and deep body of open educational content using a shared model. The mission of the OpenCourseWare Consortium is to advance education and empower people worldwide through [opencourseware](#).

Find out more at [www.ocwconsortium.org](http://www.ocwconsortium.org)

### Session Themes

Important steps to create positive change include:

Connecting schools with other components of the community such as housing, business development, health care, telecommunications, local government and more.

Connecting with universities and colleges to ensure high-quality teachers work and remain in rural communities

How and where students will be educated—it won't necessarily be in the local high school anymore

Devoting serious attention to how young people can survive and thrive in rural communities today

View the [education session's PowerPoint presentation](#).

### Issue Breakout Session: Rural Broadband

This session focused on the problem of the digital divide—the lack of access to broadband technology in rural areas, and particularly the lack of access among people of color and people with low incomes. amalia deloney, of the Center for Media Justice, moderated.



View [deloney's PowerPoint presentation](#).

Many of those who live in urban areas take for granted the digital access they have in their homes and workplaces. They use their lightning-fast connections for everything from reading the news, looking for jobs, doing work, to keeping in touch with friends.

If rural Americans cannot get online, they cannot get the same access to news, to political tools and information, to health care information, and to conversations that help build more vibrant rural communities.

Beth McConnell from the Media and Democracy Coalition asked the group to think about what we should advocate for in terms of internet policy and access. She made the following points:

There must be universal, open and nondiscriminatory access to high-speed and high-quality broadband.

Mobility, abundance and privacy of broadband should be top priorities. There should be competition among broadband providers and locally owned and operated networks should receive federal support.

Policymakers should seek to leverage to the maximum extent possible the use of resources and assets such as publicly owned spectrum, fiber and right-of-way to achieve the goal of universal broadband internet access.

They must also give people training tools—many underserved people don't use the internet because they don't see what it can do for them.

View [McConnell's PowerPoint presentation](#).

Joshua Breitbart of the People's Production House introduced participants to a Pew Research Center study on ["The Internet and the Recession"](#). The study found that 88 percent of internet users were using it to cope with the economic downturn. However, these electronic services are not available to many who need them most, including people with low incomes, people of color and people in rural areas. Many of those who do not have access know the most about survival skills yet cannot contribute their knowledge to the conversation. Breitbart discussed the importance of the internet as a medium through which people can both listen and speak. Community media is useful for dealing with challenges, building community, investigating issues and holding authority accountable.

Breitbart provided a handout that summarized internet funding opportunities provided by the federal stimulus package. He emphasized the program's usefulness for stimulating community engagement and discussion.

View [Breitbart's funding primer](#).

Edyael Casaperalta of the Center for Rural Strategies discussed the lack of access to broadband technology in rural areas and how her organization is addressing the issue. She emphasized that "access" means more than one thing, including access to:

**Infrastructure:** Many rural communities lack the cables that bring broadband to the communities.

**Hardware:** Computers are expensive and unaffordable to rural residents.

**Language and content:** The content often does not reflect rural communities, or the language spoken in the community, in part because community members are not able to contribute to that content.

**Software:** This can also be expensive and require training to use.

Casaperalta said that the Center for Rural Strategies is helping to gather data on the impact of access to the internet. They also host a rural broadband policy group, which emerged from the national Rural Assembly's research in 2008. Scans at the assembly showed a high level of agreement among participants as to the importance of broadband to ensure adequate health care, economic competitiveness and education.

View [Casaperalta's PowerPoint presentation](#).

Loris Taylor of Native Public Media spoke of their work on the ground with Native peoples. According to an ongoing survey, they found that tribes were often in "saturated" or "locked out" regions that could not get new radio stations. The issue becomes how to get information to and from residents.



It is a misperception, she said, that bridging the digital divide is a waste of money because rural people don't know how to use the technology. In fact, the survey showed that many rural people are digital savvy; the problem is access. "If urban America has the technology and we don't," she asked, "what does it say about democracy in this country?"

View [Taylor's PowerPoint presentation](#).

### Comments

Participants discussed the importance of broadband to rural colleges and telehealth. They expressed concern about the high cost and the lack of choices in rural areas. The issue of access was discussed: much of the existing rural access comes from cell phones because people cannot afford computers in their homes. Regarding community access programs, one participant pointed out that it is not hard to connect schools and libraries, but it is hard keep the hardware up to date.

***"If urban America has the technology and we don't, what does it say about democracy in this country?"***

They saw opportunity in developing a policy position that broadband needs to be part of the service that federal agencies provide, embedded in their work. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development should include broadband in its housing work, as should the Department of Education. The hardware aspect should not be separate from digital literacy.

## Luncheon Plenaries

### First Luncheon Plenary

Randy Parry, president of the Rural Learning Center in South Dakota, introduced his long-time friend Dallas Tonsager, the Under Secretary of Agriculture for USDA Rural Development, as the first luncheon plenary speaker.

While Under Secretary Tonsager began by acknowledging the challenge of facing a deep and difficult recession, he also described the significant tools that USDA Rural Development has to address it: the intense commitment of U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack; a staff of 6,000 around the country; and twice the budget they had last year. Tonsager also acknowledged the “excellent staff” present at the conference: Deputy Under Secretary for USDA Rural Development Victor Vasquez, State Director Elsie Meeks of South Dakota, State Director Colleen Landkamer of Minnesota, State Director Maxine Moul of Nebraska, and State Director William Menner of Iowa. He pointed to tens of thousands of new homes, thousands of new public facilities, a thousand new water systems, and broadband being financed nationwide.



Under Secretary Tonsager outlined seven priorities he had for moving forward. “I want to have a dialogue with you,” he told the audience, and expressed his interest in ideas and “push back” from them. He described those priorities:

1. **Regional Collaboration:** The under secretary wants to find a number of communities, incentivize them to work together for their mutual interest and develop a plan where they start to work together cohesively. He said Deputy Under Secretary Vasquez had been assigned this challenge.

2. **Local Food Systems:** The USDA has a strong belief that building local food systems to serve local communities provides economic opportunity and great value for rural areas. “There is economic opportunity in growing local food for local people,” said Tonsager. Under Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan is particularly interested in this topic.

***“There is economic opportunity in growing local food for local people.”***

3. **Community Development:** Tonsager is interested in how to make current rural development programs more efficient, effective, useful and thoughtful. He wants to explore this area more fully and expressed interest in learning from models such as those coming out of the Rural Learning Center in Miner County.

4. **Energy:** While the biofuels industry is struggling to reduce its carbon footprint, the under secretary wants to continue working on improving corn-based ethanol while transitioning to biomass power and, ultimately, cellulosic biofuels and bioenergy. He is also interested in solar energy. “We have the resources to address these opportunities,” said Tonsager. He argued for an aggressive agenda focused on how biofuels can serve rural America.

5. **Broadband:** Tonsager wants to expand broadband dramatically in rural areas. A first round of resources for this will go to really remote rural areas. He sees broadband expansion as a business opportunity that will create jobs and will look especially closely at places where broadband does not expand automatically. “If broadband expands dramatically in rural America, we know it will create a lot of jobs,” he said. “A lot of what we can do when we fund a project like a health clinic or a school is make sure broadband is part of that.”

6. **Strategic Partners:** It was the job of the USDA's Rural Development department, he said, to find as many rural partners as possible. He cited the national rural electric systems, with 45 million consumers, as an excellent partner to work with on weatherizing homes and putting in heat pumps—to use energy more efficiently, lower the carbon footprint and create jobs.

7. **Access to Capital:** Finally, Tonsager expressed concern regarding the inadequate flow of capital to rural America. He is looking for “sensible, reasonable projects” that would expand the availability of credit, equity investment and venture capital in rural areas.

The under secretary argued for an ongoing business creation process through which rural America will constantly evaluate new economic opportunities. “Being successful in one area does not mean it’s time to stop,” he said, “we must keep going to the next venture and we’ve got to keep adjusting just as the world does.”

In closing, Tonsager described himself as a practical man who liked to “get the deal done.” He asked the audience to help him learn about local efforts to create new businesses. Tonsager said he could be an advocate and provide resources. He asked the audience to consider what they could do to “move the ball forward.” He sees great oppor-

tunity at this time and challenged himself, his staff and everyone to delve deeply into the work of bringing people back to and keeping them in rural America.

### Summary of Questions and Answers

When asked about how to build local food systems, Tonsager referred to the traditional use of revolving loan funds. While production is overseen by the Farm Services Agency, he said Rural Development is interested in marketing and processing. On the subject of agriculture or rural development, Tonsager said that he thought the divide between agriculture and rural development ignored their close connection. Citing growing crops that can be made into energy and local foods, he emphasized, “Really to create wealth a lot of it needs to come from the earth.”

In response to a question regarding resources available through the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP), the under secretary announced that \$15 million was going out that day from the USDA for REAP projects.

### The 7 Priority Areas of USDA Rural Development

Under Secretary of Agriculture for Rural Development Dallas Tonsager outlined his priorities:

1. Improving collaboration between communities within the same region to better leverage resources.
2. Capitalizing on the economic benefits of local food systems.
3. Improving the effectiveness of community development programs already at USDA.
4. Expanding economic opportunity from biofuels and bioenergy, including transitioning towards cellulosic feedstocks.
5. Increasing broadband access to rural communities.
6. Identifying and working with strategic partners on the ground in rural communities.
7. Improving the flow of capital into rural communities to make important investments.

### Second Luncheon Plenary

Danielle Hill, executive director of the Nebraska Housing Developers Association, introduced the next speaker: her colleague of 17 years, Maxine Moul, Nebraska’s State Director of USDA Rural Development.

State Director Moul expressed her pleasure at being around Midwesterners who care passionately about their communities and region. She then introduced the other state directors for USDA Rural Development present at the conference: Elsie Meeks of South Dakota, Colleen Landkamer of Minnesota and William Menner of Iowa.

Moul focused on the fact that Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack’s top priority for the USDA was that rural communities create wealth so they are self-sustaining, repopulating and economically thriving. “For the first time,” Moul pointed out, “rural development is at the top of the agenda for the Department of Agriculture.” She also lauded the number of Midwesterners—President Obama from Illinois, Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack from Iowa and Under Secretary for USDA Rural Development Tonsager from South Dakota.

Moul went on to describe her own background growing up on a diversified farm, working in a small town as a successful entrepreneur and in local government. “I know what it’s like,” she said, “to start a small business and have community support.” From that experience, she worked across Nebraska to build small businesses and jobs that would sustain rural communities through positions in state government and in philanthropy.

She sees regional collaboration, community building and finding strategic partners as key areas of work. Everyone in the room, she commented, was a potential partner with USDA Rural Development. “All of my experience as an entrepreneur, as lieutenant governor, as director of economic development, and then in the nonprofit field,” she said, “was all about getting the tools, getting the resources to the local communities, because I truly believe that is the only way rural development is sustainable in this country.”

***“For the first time, rural development is at the top of the agenda of the Department of Agriculture.”***

Moul ended with two examples of the many projects in which Rural Development was partnering with others to benefit rural businesses and communities:

USDA Rural Development provided a young grocer from Hersey, Nebraska, with a guaranteed loan from a local bank to buy a grocery store in North Platte, Nebraska, in February 2009. At the same time, they decided to give him an energy grant so that he could capture the heat coming off his refrigeration units to heat the store. While the North Platte store is three times the square feet of the Hersey store, it is costing the grocer \$1,000 per month less in utility bills. The grocer has also doubled his projected sales numbers.

Rural Development partnered with 100 people in Scribner, Nebraska, population 971, to invest in a biodiesel plant that is the only soy-based plant in the state. The board is entirely local. They employ 11 people and produce 115 gallons of biodiesel a day. In a town that small, the impact has been huge.

Finally, the state director reminded the audience of the enormous amount of money—\$20 billion in Congressional appropriations and another \$20 billion in stimulus funds—USDA Rural Development needs to get out the door, much of it by December 2010. She noted that this is why staff is working so hard to partner and collaborate with

others. “I challenge you,” she told her listeners, “to give us the best projects and the best ideas for funding.”



She encouraged members of the audience to focus on two to four strategic actions that they could take so that next year they could say that they accomplished specific things from the work they did at the assembly. She urged them to advocate for what they felt was most important, for what they think is best, for the rural Midwest.

### Collective Harvesting of Policy Discussion Sessions

A panel of policymakers and their advisors responded to brief summaries of the opportunities and barriers discussed in the earlier breakout sessions, as well as questions from the audience. Jim Harkness, President of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, welcomed the audience and introduced the moderator, Brian Dabson, Executive Director of the Rural Policy Research Institute and a member of the Steering Committee of the national Rural Assembly.

Dabson recalled the vision of the national assembly as a means by which the voices of rural America—across geographies, disciplines, occupations and perspectives—could find a safe place to discuss the future of rural America and find common cause to make their discussion a reality. He sees this time as a rare moment to achieve something significant, and that time is of the essence. “Let’s keep our eyes on the prize,” he urged, “and not screw it up by bitter wrangling among ourselves.”

Dabson then introduced the panelists:

Victor Vasquez, Deputy Under Secretary for USDA Rural Development

Colleen Landkamer, Minnesota State Director for USDA Rural Development

Toni Merdan, Senior Economic Development Officer for Minnesota Congressman Collin Peterson

Benjamin Ready, Economic Development Advisor for South Dakota Senator John Thune

Members of the earlier issue breakout sessions reported on their group discussions. Deputy Under Secretary Vasquez found the forward-looking approach to education valuable

and encouraged innovation in rural education. He urged people to develop a platform on rural education that would provide a new model. He also recommended messaging the concept of rural in new ways that would attract people and bring people back, such as the message “quality education, quality life.”



State Director Landkamer focused on the importance of broadband access across the nation, comparing it to the Johnson Administration’s campaign to bring electricity to

every home. She echoed that access and internet literacy affected all aspects of life and helped level the playing field for rural communities.

Senior Economic Development Officer Merdan commented that all the issues discussed were intertwined and needed to be addressed for successful community economic development. She noted the importance of renewable energy training and businesses to rural areas and called for entrepreneurship training in high schools. She observed that while the Department of Workforce Development has money to train, many of the new businesses have not been developed yet.

Economic Development Advisor Ready focused on all of the presentations. He sees energy as a large and complex issue. South Dakota needs wind energy, but the state’s relatively small population could not use all the energy, so the state needs the transmission lines to transport it elsewhere. Health care, he said, is the primary issue that comes up in his visits around the state. This includes the need for health care professionals in rural areas and the importance of fixing reimbursement levels so that they are reimbursed at the same rate as in other parts of the country. Another priority for residents is reducing the cost of health care. He noted that school closure leads to more community decline. It is important to have schools involved in the community. However, school funding is based on per student costs, so it is also critical to have jobs that bring families to communities. Finally, he sees a strong need for leadership to be diversified and move to the younger generation as current leaders get older.

In closing the responses, Dabson asked state legislators Bernie Hunhoff from South Dakota and Gary Kubly from Minnesota to provide their responses. Representative Hunhoff shared that he has seen much improvement on Indian reservations because of tribal schools and entrepreneurship. He said the state could be a much bigger player in rural development, but that the legislature needs to see good, concrete ideas that it can support.

Senator Kubby focused on the promise of tax credits in bringing small investors to rural areas, the need to build understanding among different cultures, and the need for more civil discourse among policymakers. He urged rural communities to band together to seek common interests, not necessarily direct benefits.

### Summary of Questions and Answers

Regarding collaboration, the panelists recommended:

- Focusing on values as a common area of agreement
- Revising regulations and policies first, and legislation later
- Building relationships before you need them
- Coming together and figuring out where you want to go and what resources you need, instead of following what money is available
- Creating cooperatives that share resources across a region
- Developing public/private partnerships
- Having all organizations focus on a topic; work together and share limited resources rather than compete

Asked what action they would take if they were a member of the Midwest Rural Assembly, panelists responded:

- Contact legislative staff.** Staff can take issues to their legislator if they are informed.
- Go to state legislature with a consensus message.** As community members, tell congressional leadership what it is you are looking for.
- Break down barriers.** Figure out how to build relationships and work together. Learn from what did and did not work elsewhere.
- Learn by doing.** Establish a project to work on together and bring in partners such as USDA Rural Development.

## DAY 2: MOVING TO ACTION

### Morning Focus: How to Make Our Ideas Happen

Executive Director of the League of Rural Voters Niel Ritchie introduced his brother Mark Ritchie, Secretary of State for Minnesota and founder and former president of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

Ritchie talked about the importance of marrying short-term and long-term goals. He hearkened back to the farm crisis of the 1980s, where there was a short-term need to address foreclosures and farmer suicides, but also a long-term vision to plant the seeds for renewable energy in the form of wind farms and ethanol plants. The 1980s brought

many rural advocates together in shared dedication to finding a solution.



How was that kind of vision and leadership developed? These leaders had a sense of how all these issues were connected. Ritchie shared the story about life on his grandparents' farm and their small business of manufacturing mattresses. Through this experience he developed both an understanding of farm life and small business ownership. His father, in turn, worked at a USDA research facility in Iowa. His dedication to food systems resulted from his witness of starvation in China during World War II.

***“They defined patriotism as love so strong that we need to take care of what we love. [...] If we can demonstrate this type of patriotism, we can help become a healing force for our society.”***

In the mid-1980s Ritchie had the opportunity to work with Governor Rudy Perpich, focusing on what resources were available following the whiplash of that decade's economics. He developed some personal philosophies:

Resources are available in local communities to address current problems.

Government and business need to work with communities to bring about a more productive partnership. “We could get more done if we could connect.”

Policies are important but people make policies. We need to pay attention to voter registration systems—our fundamentals of democracy.

He also realized that some communities suffer from “being sour on” government and that something had happened in the past to create this feeling. He noted that high levels of corruption result in a high violation of trust. Rebuilding has to occur. Leaders need to show, by example, a better way.

In facing current challenges, Ritchie emphasized that government officials are often more accessible and more interested in partnerships than many citizens recognize. He encouraged participants to reach out to government officials and tell them what you need.

Ritchie has learned that almost without exception, Minnesotans share interests. “In nearly every small community in Minnesota, you can find common interests,” said Ritchie. He described meetings with an Indian tribe in northern Minnesota and the Twin Cities' Chamber of Commerce.

“They defined patriotism as love so strong that we need to take care of what we love,” said Ritchie. “We say it and we share the responsibility of taking care of each other. It may be the land, community or family. If we can demonstrate this type of patriotism, we can help become a healing force for our society.”

### Skill-Building Breakout Session: Community Leadership and Change

This session was led by Milan Wall of the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, which trains leaders in visioning, strategic planning, outreach, and communications for small towns. The session broke into small groups and conducted activities. Wall shared the following information with the group:



#### What does leadership really mean?

The definition of leadership has changed dramatically in the last quarter century.

Before, leadership meant knowing all the right answers.

*Today, it means asking the right questions.*

Once, leaders were people who announced decisions they had already made.

*Today, leaders are expected to involve many others in the decision-making process.*

In the past, leaders were pictured as older, white and male.

*Today, leaders are increasingly young as well as old, people of color as well as Caucasians, and women as well as men.*

For leaders of an older generation, some of these changes are difficult to accept. They were accustomed to others looking to them for leadership. Others were accustomed to looking to them for answers. In the community setting, these changes are no less important than they are in the world of business, government or education.

#### It's common to hear leaders described as people of:

**Vision** Today, we mean that leaders will help a community of people picture together what kind of community they all want in the future.

**Wisdom** Today, we mean that leaders will help a community understand the implications of the increasing rapidity of change in the world that surrounds them, and then guide the community through a process of making wise choices that reflect community values and build on local strengths.

Action Today, we mean that leaders will help others feel comfortable in assuming responsibilities for getting things done, in concert with a deliberate plan for action that specifies goals, establishes schedules and evaluates progress.

#### Some Ideas on How Leaders Behave

In the community setting today, leadership is more often a team activity than an individual task. That is not strikingly different from other settings. The so-called Japanese management model, which is built on worker cooperation in a team setting, originated in American management theory and is slowly finding its way into business and government operations throughout the industrialized world. The reason is that people feel better about themselves, make better decisions, remain more loyal to overall objectives and produce better quality products and services when they work in a cooperative atmosphere as part of a team. Each individual has the chance to see how her or his contribution fits into the whole.

Healthy communities operate much the same way.

Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, after studying 90 leaders in business and other enterprises, concluded that these leaders used five “key skills.” In their book, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*, they describe those skills as:

The ability to accept people as they are

The capacity to approach relationships and problems in terms of the present rather than the past

The ability to treat people close to you with the same courteous attention that you extend to strangers

The ability to trust others, even if the risk seems great

The ability to do without constant approval and recognition from others

What's most important about these characteristics is that they go beyond what leaders think and believe, into what leaders say and do. Someone with leadership potential who does not behave like a leader will not be perceived as a leader. People perceived as serving themselves, rather than others, are not leaders.

#### Roles and Responsibilities of Community Leaders

Community leadership is similar to other leadership roles but has unique aspects. It is more public. As it is often not compensated, it comes with fewer tangible rewards. It is subject to greater political pressure. It must satisfy a broader and more diverse constituency.



Thomas Cronin describes what he terms three “stages” of leadership that are relevant to the community setting:

In Act I, the *troublemakers*, who “stir things up” and “get things going”

In Act II, the *movement organizers*, who “set agendas” and “organize others to push causes”

In Act III, the *power brokers*, who exert significant influence through reputation or position

The role and responsibility of community leaders takes on greater complexity in times of volatile and unpredictable change. John P. Kotter, author of *The Leadership Factor*, writes in the *Harvard Business Review* that “management is about coping with complexity,” while leadership “is about coping with change.”

**“Leaders will help others feel comfortable in assuming responsibilities for getting things done.”**

The community leader plays a different role than in the past. In many ways it is more difficult because of the times in which we live. Change is now a constant; modern transportation and communications have transformed a far-flung globe into one highly interdependent marketplace; the patterns of society and economy that once predicted the future no longer work even to explain the present.

In this age, community leaders must assume responsibility for these major roles:

Helping their community, through processes open to citizen participation, articulate and then communicate a vision that most citizens can embrace with enthusiasm.

Matching community needs with available community skills and accessible internal and external resources.

Specifying realistic strategies that can be undertaken to transform today’s vision into tomorrow’s reality.

Finally, people facing the challenge of community leadership should remember that what we’ve learned about leadership in the last quarter century turns the old adage upside down. Leaders are made, not born. That means that leadership can be learned. It’s not something you just have. It is something that many people can acquire.

View [Wall’s PowerPoint presentation](#).

### **Skill-Building Breakout Session: Media Basics and Policy Advocacy**

Steph Larson and Virginia Wolking of the Center for Rural Affairs led this session. They told the group that media can be intimidating, but once you get involved it gets easier and can be really helpful. Media is an ally. Just because the media doesn’t cover your issue doesn’t mean it is an adversary. For reporters the challenge is to generate content, so

you are helping them do their job. Make good relationships with members of the media. When you have a relationship with reporters putting what you want in the paper is much easier.

#### **Media Basics:**

**Editorial/opinion pieces** should provide your contact information, be specific to the paper’s location, and include exactly what you would like done (especially if it’s policy related)—in other words, include an action item.

**Letters to the editor** should be concise and challenge legislators. Additional letters from supporters are very helpful.

**News releases** should have an attention-getting title and include contact information. The lead should be included in the first three sentences. Make sure to include quotes from no more than two people, provide a link to your Web site and include a concise byline about your organization.

**Press advisories** are used to let the media know that some event or report is coming and are to be shared liberally among the media.

In counteracting negative media the best defense in a good offense—announce positive developments, even if they are small. Create press events, and again, build relationships.

In a media relationship, be sure to call and thank the reporter. Respect reporters’ deadlines—know what they are and work with them in mind. Give them as much advance notice as possible.

#### **Policy Advocacy:**



501(c)(3) nonprofits can and should lobby. Lobbying is defined as asking for a specific action on a specific bill. Just meeting to discuss broad ideas is not lobbying. There are

two types of lobbying: direct and grassroots. *Direct lobbying* is when you are talking to your legislator or their staff. *Grassroots lobbying* is when you are encouraging action from the staff.

Legislators can be contacted in various ways:

Call: Prepare, ask for a specific person, be brief and be polite

Email: Personalize email and include just one issue per email

Send a letter: Personalize petitions and auto-send letters

Talk to legislators at events

Establish yourself as an expert



Meet face to face first

Establish yourself as a constituent

You are always the expert on your personal story. Don't be worried that you don't know enough.

### Skill-Building Breakout Session: Building an E-Network Using Social Media

Presenters Mike Knutson and Lindsey Karlson of the Rural Learning Center discussed a number of social media tools, many of them new to the audience. In determining which tools to use, they urged participants to start by identifying their goals, and then make sure the technology matches their goals. Second, they should figure out what tools their intended audience is already using and use a tool with which they are familiar. Third, they needed to invest time in learning the strengths and weaknesses of each type of social media tool.

They recommended the 2009 book [Marketing the Groundswell](#) by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff as a good resource for learning about the strengths and weaknesses of social media tools.

**Viral videos** are a great tool when you have an awareness problem. (Tip: Creating videos is pretty easy today. Creating quality videos that can go viral is much more difficult.)

**Social networks** (such as Facebook) work well when trying to create word-of-mouth campaigns.

**Blogs** are the best tools for dealing with complex issues.

**Community building tools** (such as Ning) should be used when focused on listening to each other rather than listening to one person

Knutson also recommends the presentation [“How to Market Your Event Using Social Media”](#) which identifies the following four categories:

**Community Builders**, including Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter help create communities.

**Content Creators**, including blogs, video and Twitter develop content

**Distribution Channels**, including webinars and twitter help share content

**Linking tools**, including Digg, StumbleUpon, Reddit and Twitter, make it easier to pass along Web links

**Note:** There is no universally accepted definition on how to classify these tools.

For additional information, see:

[“The main types of social media”](#) at open2media

[“How many social media tools should I use”](#) at IEG Marketing

View [Knutson and Karlson's PowerPoint presentation](#).

### Skill-Building Breakout Session: Tools for Understanding and Engaging Your Community

This workshop session was facilitated by Jerry Nagel, executive director of the Meadowlark Institute, and Joe Bartmann, who is also involved with the institute. They made the point that dialogue, which includes both listening and talking, is the primary tool to effect change.

The workshop covered processes for having dialogue through circle conversations, the World Café, and open space processes. Workshop participants were able to experience a circle conversation as they answered two questions: What has the Midwest Rural Assembly been like for you? Why did you attend this session? For more information, see [PeerSpirit Circle](#).

View a [summary of other engagement tools](#).

### The Future of Rural America: The Next Generation

Marcie McLaughlin, Director of Constituent Services at the Rural Policy and Research Institute, welcomed the audience and introduced the panelists for this session:

Nick Olson, Program Organizer, Farm Beginnings Program—Land Stewardship Project, and Manager, Earthrise Farm, Madison, Minnesota

Tami Severson, Housing Coordinator, Rural Learning Center, Howard, South Dakota

Neil Linscheid, Extension Educator, University of Minnesota Extension, Marshall, Minnesota



The panel was energetic, positive and included contributing members of their rural place—whether in a small town or in the farm land that surrounds the community.

Two of the panelists—Linscheid and Olson—came from urban areas and have chosen to live and work in rural areas. As they both demonstrate, many young people and families choose to live in a rural community, knowing that the amenities that they enjoy in the city are just a car ride away. Severson grew up in a small town, left for college, and returned to her hometown to work and raise a family.

She praised the support network the community provided her and her family. Whether in a rural town or a neighborhood in a larger city, they agreed, people want a safe place to raise their kids, a network of friends and family, meaningful employment, and hope for the future.

Priority policy issues for them included access to broadband and access to health care facilities. Cell phone coverage and other key infrastructure items, said Linscheid, are vital to the future well-being of a community and in keeping younger people there. Young people will move to communities that have high-speed internet and cell phone access. With this access, people can live anywhere, so make it easy for them to choose to stay in the community.

### Luncheon Plenary

Jim Kleinschmit, director of the Rural Communities program at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, introduced the first speaker, his colleague and former co-worker, Garat Ibrahim, Minnesota Organizer, Midwest Immigrant Health Project, Center for New Community.

Ibrahim shared some of his personal story, which began on a farm in Somalia. He told a moving story of personal poverty and a hard life. He immigrated to the United States in 2000 and worked with resettlement efforts in Minnesota. He commented that every place is a new culture and every place has a new language. The opportunity to help people when they need help provided him with a different road.



Rural Africans face real challenges in rural communities, which often lack many social services. “We pride ourselves on taking care of each other when times are tough,” he said. “New immigrants face the situation of no food or housing. Who takes care of them?”

Ibrahim cited education as a major policy issue for immigrants. Many immigrants lack education, he continued, and yet the school system requires attendance to age 18, which poses a huge economic burden on their families. Another significant issue is that students are placed in classrooms by their age, not by their education level.

***“We pride ourselves on taking care of each other when times are tough. Immigrants face the situation of no food or housing. Who takes care of them?”***

Housing policy also needs to change, he said. Housing projects are not built for families of 8–10 people, which is

typical for Africans. Policymakers need to take a closer look at the real needs of immigrants. He also emphasized that the community has a major leadership role to play in resolving these problems.

### Second Luncheon Plenary

Randy Parry, Executive Director of the Rural Learning Center, introduced the final speaker, U.S. Congresswoman Stephanie Herseth-Sandlin from South Dakota.

Congresswoman Herseth-Sandlin talked about her passion to preserve South Dakota’s distinctly rural way of life. She emphasized her participation in the 52-member Blue Dog coalition—moderate Democrats who focus on fiscal responsibility, and whose members hail primarily from rural areas. While she recently voted against the health care and climate change bills in the U.S. Congress, she acknowledged the real need to address both issues. These particular bills, she felt, did not address the concerns of rural America. She expressed hope that a bill now in the works would meet those concerns.

On health care, Herseth-Sandlin criticized current Medicare reimbursement rates, and the inclusion of that same rate within a public health care option. She argued for a more equitable reimbursement rate for rural communities. She also emphasized the need to address the loss of primary health care doctors in rural America.



On climate change policy, Herseth-Sandlin emphasized that a climate change bill needs to be married to an energy bill. She talked about how rural issues—both in agriculture and rural utilities—were not considered until the end of the legislative process. And again, she did not view the last-minute additions as adequate for rural communities. She advocates for a bill that ensures regulation by the USDA rather than the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and that includes offsets for agriculture. She also wants the bill to address forestry and biofuels issues.

She spoke highly of the steps forward taken by the stimulus package on rural broadband, which includes \$7.2 billion for broadband deployment loans to rural and other distressed areas. In closing, she called for the USDA to share its expertise with other departments of government.

### Questions and Answers

When asked about a public option for health care, Congresswoman Herseth-Sandlin said she wants a negotiated rate that is competitive with private plans and provides a

level playing field rather than pushing the private plans out of business.

When asked about climate change and higher energy and agriculture costs, Herseth-Sandlin reiterated that the climate change bill needs to be an energy bill. She expressed her view that the energy portfolio needs to be mixed and include fossil fuels and nuclear energy in addition to renewables to be a low-carbon strategy. Regarding commodity-based agriculture and rural development, she sees resources available for both.

### **Afternoon Focus: Action Steps and Commitments**

Danielle Hill, of the Nebraska Housing Association, and Jim Kleinschmit of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy led this session, in which attendees chose topics and joined small groups to focus on specific action. The topics included:

- Microenterprise development for young adults and immigrants
- Rural Philanthropy Growth Act of 2009
- Connect community economic development with education
- Stewardship of natural resources
- Reform healthcare

### **Microenterprise Development for Young Adults and Immigrants**

The group discussed the difficulty immigrants in rural communities have in accessing federal money for microenterprise development, in particular U.S. Small Business Administration dollars. The paperwork is hard to understand and the need to visit an office can be challenging. The group realized that young adults in rural areas face many of the barriers immigrants do, including lack of marketing and financial management skills.

The group decided that information is needed on the funding available for microenterprise in small communities, examples of what is working and what could work, and on how established businesspeople can transfer their business.



They discussed a three-pronged approach that included:

- Understanding all sources of funding for economic development with youth, immigrant communities and economically disadvantaged populations
- Discussing potential for collaborative group that could develop strategies for funding and direction

Consider and incorporate respect for the diversity that exists in our communities. Acknowledge talents and potential contributions, and work to understand how we can all participate and benefit

### **Rural Philanthropy Growth Act of 2009**

This roundtable examined the Rural Philanthropy Growth Act of 2009 endorsed by the Council on Foundations. The act proposes to create a federal income tax credit for charitable gifts to qualified community foundations in economically distressed counties. The gifts would capitalize community-based unrestricted endowment funds to benefit an economically distressed county.

The roundtable participants were highly supportive of a proposal provided through the Heartland Center for Leadership and the Nebraska Community Foundation and made the following suggestions to improve its intent:

- Clarify that the intent of the unrestricted endowment funds proposed is to build capacity.
- Add additional criteria to clarify that the intent is to benefit strategic grantmaking.
- Consider whether the community match requirement of 2:1 might be too strenuous, or consider some type of sliding scale depending on a community's ability to pay.

### **Connect Community Economic Development with Education**

The group agreed that education can play a more active role in community economic development.

They noted the following promising models:

Market research on the Cheyenne River Reservation identifies business opportunities on the reservation, and all reservation schools are introducing entrepreneurship and financial education into K-12 classes via the Four Bands Community Fund. On the Rosebud Reservation, the local community college has taken an active role in helping to increase graduation rates at Todd County High School.

South Dakota allows youth to petition to receive credit for on-the-job training activities in high school and a 2025 Initiative in the Department of Education that will include "Personal Education Plans" to help with career guidance.

Reframe rural conversations on education spending to consider funding for rural as an investment rather than an expense. Such reframing could help curb cuts to classes relevant to developing a sustainable rural economy.

Offer tax breaks, resources or exemptions to families who opt to home-school and involve their children in community economic development efforts.

Build relationships to bridge the generation gap by engaging seniors to mentor youth to help them become future leaders and business owners in the community.

## Stewardship of Natural Resources

The group first shared their interests, which included sustainable and organic agriculture, local food systems, climate change and agriculture, perennial production and use, renewable energy and efficiency, green building, green jobs, and biofuels. They then determined areas of collaboration among their organizations, which included state and federal policy action, research, education and outreach, model projects, and financing. There was general agreement that the focus of their efforts would help communities establish renewable energy and systems to value environmental quality, and identify policy issues, local needs and individual needs.

## Reform Health Care

This group felt rural health care reform must include:

Putting equity in Medicare reimbursement to attract new practitioners to rural areas. Rural hospitals and clinics must receive fair Medicare reimbursement.

Providing affordable insurance options for farmers, ranchers, small business owners and employees in rural areas.

Creating provisions promoting health and wellness in rural areas.

Increasing access to mental health providers in rural areas.

They developed the following next steps:

Health care reform affects everyone. Continue to engage rural people in the health care debate.

Continue dialogue with other rural organizations and encourage them to work for health care reform.

## Conclusion and Evaluation



Participants gained new and useful information and insights that will be useful in their work, met people who could help, and committed to taking action based on what they learned. “I feel that the connections I made will allow me to improve rural America and rural policy,” wrote one participant. The opportunity to interact with many people from different states emerged as a highlight of attendees’ experience, along with the opportunity to hear from and engage with many federal and state government officials.

Participants also lauded the diverse representation and active participation of the group. In the future they wanted even more opportunities to interact and more time to devote to focus on action. Overall, participants found the assembly stimulating and worthwhile, offering something for almost everyone.

***“I feel that the connections I made will allow me to improve rural America and rural policy.”***

Many attendees also committed to continuing to participate as part of the Midwest Rural Assembly network. “Well done,” wrote a participant, “I felt welcomed in, and part of, a groundswell!” The assembly’s steering committee is currently discussing how to build on the momentum and provide means for participants to stay connected and move forward with the policy issues, collaborations and actions that emerged from the gathering. Sharing these proceedings is a first step in that direction.

*If you would like more information, to share your ideas or join the network, please email [midwestruralassembly@iatp.org](mailto:midwestruralassembly@iatp.org) or contact Kerstin Gorham at (612) 870-3429.*

# FEATURED SPEAKERS, HOSTS AND FACILITATORS

## Joseph Bartmann

Joe is married to his high school sweetheart and Daddy to three amazing little girls. He is still growing up in rural South Dakota, and has been there his whole life. Before joining the RLC in 2006, he led a number of local community and economic development organizations in southeastern South Dakota. As Community Outreach Consultant, Joe helps the RLC lead the work of co-discovery with communities outside Miner County, and works on the big and small ideas that can systemically shift rural thinking. Much of Joe's RLC time is spent hosting conversations in communities, listening, writing, thinking and learning. He spends plenty of time seeing the beauty of the northern Great Plains from behind a windshield, while working to reduce his travel impact. He is also one of the "green is good" evangelists in the RLC, and is currently working on green projects around Sioux Falls.



## Dr. Jim Beddow



Jim Beddow is a native of Woonsocket, South Dakota, where he first learned about small town (1,048) community engagement watching his father as mayor. After graduating from the University of South Dakota, he studied agricultural and rural history at the University of Oklahoma where he received a Ph.D. He worked extensively with small communities in his roles of president of Dakota Wesleyan University and president of the Evangelical Lutheran Good Samaritan Society Foundation. He was founding member of The Rural Learning Center Board of Directors in 2002 and currently serves as a Senior Consultant for the Rural Learning Center.

## Joshua Breitbart

Joshua Breitbart is the Policy Director for People's Production House and an adjunct Policy Analyst with the Open Technology Initiative of New America Foundation. He is on the board of Allied Media Projects, which hosts the annual Allied Media Conference in Detroit, Michigan.



## Kathy Callies



Kathy Callies was raised on a farm south of Howard, S.D. Following graduation from Howard High Kathy attended Dakota State University and completed her bachelor's degree in 1983. While pursuing her degree she worked at Dakota State University in the areas of admissions, financial aid and records for a total of 21 years. Kathy has also completed work toward an MBA at the University of South Dakota/Vermillion. In 1998 Kathy came home to work as human resources manager at PBM Packaging, Inc. During that time Kathy volunteered as a member of the Miner County Strategic Planning Committee and served on the charter board of directors for MCCR. In 2001 she joined the MCCR staff as the development director. Since that time MCCR has created 13 new organizations: 11 nonprofits and two for-profit organizations. One of these is Children's Care Corner, a licensed day care center located in Howard, where Kathy serves on the board of directors. Today she works for the Rural Learning Center as the VP for Advancement.

## Edyael Casaperalta



Edyael worked with Rural Strategies in its efforts in the Gulf Coast in the fall and winter of 2006-2007 as a consultant and has recently joined the full-time staff. She has worked with the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, a nonprofit organization dedicated to educational pursuits and community youth leadership, beginning when she was a sophomore at Edcouch-Elsa High School in Elsa, Texas. She was born in Mexico, immigrated to the United States when she was 12 and graduated from E-E HS in 2001. Edyael is one of four founders of the Llano Grande Center's Spanish Language Immersion Institute, and she led several community-based research initiatives in her rural South Texas home town. She received her B.A. from Occidental College in Los Angeles and has just completed a master's program in Latin American Studies at Ohio University in Athens.

## Brian Dabson

Brian Dabson is the president and CEO of the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) and Board Chair of the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship. He is Research Professor at the Harry S. Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri, Columbia where, among other things, he teaches a graduate course in regional development policy. Dabson has over 30 years of experience in public, private and nonprofit sectors on both sides of the Atlantic dedicated to expanding economic opportunity for low-income people and distressed communities. Recognized nationally and internationally for his work on entrepreneurship development, particularly in a rural context, he has given many keynote presentations and consultations across the United States, Europe, Australia and India. He is also a frequent speaker and writer on rural policy and the implications of global forces on rural America. He is a member of the Community Development Advisory Council of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Prior to his current appointment, Dabson was President of CFED (formerly Corporation for Enterprise Development), a Washington, D.C.-based national nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding economic opportunity through asset-building, entrepreneurship, and economic development. He held that position for 13 years. At the same time, he served two terms as President of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Forum on Social Innovations.



## Amalia Deloney



Amalia Deloney is the Media Action Grassroots Network Coordinator with the Center for Media Justice. Formerly a Senior Fellow at the Main Street Project, she has over 14 years of community and cultural organizing, and community education experience with a specific focus on human rights and anti-racism education, cultural rights and the production of knowledge, as well as movement building and anti-racism work. Deloney is a member of the Social Change Grant Committee of the Headwaters Foundation, and a board member of the Headwaters Foundation for Justice. Nationally, she serves on the boards of the Indigenous Women's Network and the Media Democracy Coalition. She is also a community editor for Twin Cities Indy Media focusing on Media Justice. She has a B.A. in urban studies and history from Macalester.

## Kerstin Gorham

Kerstin Gorham joined IATP as a Senior Program Associate in June 2009. For the past 16 years she worked on poverty alleviation and sustainable economic development in the rural Upper Midwest and Pacific Northwest through various positions at the Northwest Area Foundation. Kerstin managed a successful 10-year partnership with Miner County, South Dakota, which turned around 70 years of population decline and revived its economy through new renewable energy industries and organic agriculture. She also assisted nonprofit organizations in strategic planning, leadership development, community engagement, collaboration, communications and evaluation. In 2008 she helped develop and wrote the foundation's new strategic plan. Kerstin has also worked as a writer, researcher and editor in Boston and Minneapolis. She is a coach to the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation's Neighborhood Leadership Program and a graduate of their James P. Shannon Leadership Institute. Kerstin holds a B.A. in history and science from Harvard University and an M.A. in American social and ecological history from Brandeis University.



## Dan Guericke



Dan Guericke holds a Master's degree in school administration and has over 28 years of experience as a teacher and administrator in K-12 education. He is currently director of the Mid-Central Education Cooperative and several related organizations that serve more than 20 school districts across South Dakota. Known as a creative and visionary leader, he created the DIAL Virtual School that provides middle school and high school distance classes using live, two-way, interactive video technology. DIAL also provides a unique ACT Prep Program for high schools students. He has been an active community leader in rural South Dakota.

### Cornelia Butler Flora

Cornelia Butler Flora is the Charles F. Curtiss Distinguished Professor of Agriculture and Life Sciences and Sociology at Iowa State University. She served for 15 years as the Director of the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, covering the 12 Midwestern States. She has been working with and studying community-based natural resource management since the 1970s. In the 21st century, her research, writing and teaching increasingly address community organization for sustainable development. She is on the evaluation team for the Kellogg Foundation's Food and Fitness Initiative in Iowa, a participatory native food research program on the Hopi/Tewa reservation, and a research/outreach team developing immigrants as farmers in sustainable local food systems in rural Iowa. Internationally, her efforts have focused on Latin America and the importance of community natural resource management in adapting to climate change. She is a past president of the Rural Sociological Society, the Society for Food and Human Values, and the Community Development Society. She serves on a number of governing boards, including that of Winrock, International and the Consortium for the Sustainable Development of the Andean Region. She consults with the World Bank, USAID, and UNIFEM on sustainability and food issues. Her recent books include *Communities and Agroecosystems* and *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*, 3rd edition. She is a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.



### David Hengel



Dave is the Director of the Center for Community Stewardship in Bemidji, Minn. The center's goal is to build successful communities by empowering their greatest asset: their leaders. Dave works to build coalitions among the region's key industries and public and non-profit leaders. He is a leader in the areas of community leadership, the innovation economy and how to competitively position regions and communities to thrive in the changing economy. Dave is a founder and director of Bemidji Leads!, which recently was honored by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Alliance for Regional Stewardship with their highest award for its work in reinventing the Bemidji community. He has also started stewardship efforts throughout the Midwest to replicate the Bemidji experience.

In addition to community building and civic leadership development, Dave has focused his efforts on organizational training and development, and community and business strategic planning. Dave was a recent recipient of the State of Minnesota's Vision Award and has been selected as one of Minnesota's "Ten Outstanding Young Minnesotans." Overall, Dave has worked for twenty one years to build successful communities.

### Stephanie Herseth Sandlin

The Honorable Stephanie Herseth Sandlin is South Dakota's at-large Member of Congress. She is the Co-Chair for Administration of the Blue Dog Coalition, a group of moderate Democrats committed to fiscal discipline and strong national security. She also serves on three committees vital to South Dakota's interests: Agriculture, Veterans' Affairs and Natural Resources. She is the Chairwoman of the Veterans' Affairs subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. Additionally, Representative Herseth Sandlin was chosen to serve on the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming in order to represent the views and strengths of rural America in our national energy policy. Representative Herseth Sandlin currently lives in Brookings and is married to former U.S. Representative Max Sandlin who served the First District of Texas from 1997-2005. In December of 2008, Stephanie and Max announced the birth of their first child, Zachary Lars Sandlin. In 2008, Rep. Herseth Sandlin was re-elected to her third full term in the U.S. House of Representatives. She received more than 250,000 votes—over 67 percent of votes cast.



### Danielle Hill



Danielle Hill was hired as the executive director of the Nebraska Housing Developers Association in September, 1997. The association works to champion affordable housing by providing training and technical assistance; managing statewide collaborative housing initiatives and influencing policy through advocacy and awareness. Prior to working for the association, Danielle served as a development consultant for the Nebraska Department of Economic Development. Her areas of focus were affordable housing, tribal development, fair housing and microenterprise.

### Garat Ibrahim

Garat Ibrahim joined the Center for New Community in 2008 as the Minnesota Organizer for the Midwest Immigrant Health Project. He works with Somali refugees and Hispanic immigrants on health and safety issues at their workplaces and in their communities in primarily in Willmar, Minnesota. Prior to starting at the Center, Garat was the Rural Community Organizer for the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. He has also worked as a community organizer for the Lexington Hamline Community Council in Saint Paul for four years. At the Council, Garat worked with neighborhood residents on education, immigration and bridging the gap between law enforcement and the Somali community. Prior to that, Garat worked with Lutheran Social Services for five years to develop partnerships with ethnic groups, employers and service providers to secure affordable housing and employment for refugees. Garat was born in Somalia and has spent nine years in Minnesota. Garat received his B.A. in anthropology from Nairobi University.



### Christy James



Christy James is Director of Community Initiatives for Renewing the Countryside. She has over 17 years of experience conducting workshops, trainings, and facilitating meetings and strategy sessions. Having previously worked with RTC on various projects, including sowing the seeds for and helping to launch Green Routes, Christy brings a depth of experience and enthusiasm for rural revitalization, entrepreneur development and microenterprise business issues to Renewing the Countryside. Previously, she has worked with Minnesota Rural Partners, the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, and as the interim director of the Alliance for Minnesota Microenterprise. Currently she serves on the rural committee of the Association for Enterprise Opportunity and is active in the Minnesota Facilitators Network. In addition to her professional work, Christy is an active volunteer in her community and serves on the board of a high adventure camp that works with at risk youth. She has a passion for traveling off the beaten track and finding unique, quaint and quirky locations. Christy is a silent sports enthusiast and lives in St. Paul, Minn., with her husband Randy, three canoes and a kayak.

### Lindsey Karlson

Lindsey Karlson is a native South Dakotan, born and raised in Madison, South Dakota. She graduated from Augustana College in 2006 with B.A.s in economics and sociology. Shortly after graduation, she began working with the Rural Learning Center. Currently, Lindsey's work involves leading the community outreach and education areas of the organization's work—including development of programs that will be used in the Rural Learning Center's new Conference and Training Center that will be completed in Fall of 2010.



### Jim Kleinschmit



Jim Kleinschmit directs IATP's Rural Communities program, which focuses on strengthening the link between rural economic policy and local, democratic decision-making to aid communities in creating and retaining the wealth that comes from their natural and human resources. Jim grew up milking cows and learning about sustainable agriculture on his family's farm in Nebraska. Before joining IATP in 1995, he worked in the Baltic States and Russia, where he promoted sustainable rural development. At IATP, Jim has worked on a wide array of issues, including sustainable agriculture; water quality and quantity; biofuels, bioenergy and bioplastics; climate change; and rural development strategies. He has an M.A. from the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington-Seattle, and a B.A. from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. In addition to his work at IATP, Jim is a member of several organizational boards and steering committees, including Rural Advantage, the Sustainable Biomaterials Collaborative and the Sustainable Biodiesel Alliance.

### Martin Kleinschmit

Martin Kleinschmit is a Nebraska farmer with 35 years experience as a sustainable farmer (13 as an organic farmer). To effect more change in the sustainable agriculture community, Martin accepted a position with the Center for Rural Affairs Beginning Farmer/Sustainable Agriculture Project in 1993. He designed and managed a three-year Carbon Management Project to learn what factors affect farmers' decision to sequester soil carbon. He is currently involved in a 3-year organic education project to provide NRCS and Extension staff a basic understanding of organic rules and regulations, and to assist farmers/ranchers wanting to transition to organic production. In addition to the carbon sequestration and organic training courses, Martin also has a 3-year history with the National Assessment of Climate Change, Great Plains Region. The climate change training, supported by Martin's involvement with the center's Small Farm Energy Project, gives him the background to speak on renewable energy systems at the farm scale and the importance of addressing carbon sequestration to enhance soil quality to provide soil resilience to future weather extremes. Martin's goal is to make farming more profitable, which leads directly to raising the quality of life of the community, while enhancing the soil quality and environment. He continues to operate his farm and often uses it as a demonstration farm for trying new ideas and techniques for others to observe.



### Mike Knutson



Mike Knutson grew up outside of Hartford, S.D., and graduated from Dakota Wesleyan University. Mike currently heads up the efforts of Rural Transformations, Inc., (RTI) a for-profit venture owned by the Rural Learning Center (RLC) and As It Is, Inc., a technology company in Buffalo, N.Y. RTI is dedicated to developing ways for rural communities and organizations to access and use technology more effectively. Prior to his work with RTI, Mike served as the Economic Development and Housing Coordinator for Miner County Community Revitalization (now the Rural Learning Center) where he helped lead a grassroots effort to strengthen the local economy. He has also taught in rural S.D. high schools and managed a tourism business in South Carolina.

### Cheryl Landgren

Cheryl Landgren moved to the countryside of western Minnesota in 2004 after living in Minneapolis and Albuquerque for 20 years. She served as executive director of the Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater Minneapolis from 1984–2001. She keeps bees and grows garlic on a 15-acre homestead near Milan, Minnesota, and serves on the board of directors of the Greater Milan Initiative.



### Colleen Landkamer



Colleen Landkamer was appointed Minnesota State Director for USDA Rural Development by President Obama on June 29, 2009. She was elected to the Blue Earth County Board of Commissioners in 1988 and has worked tirelessly for the past twenty years representing residents at the local, state, national and international level. Landkamer most recently served as President of the National Association of Counties (NACo) throughout 2006 and 2007 and also served as an executive board member since 2002. Her passion for local government has brought the concerns of counties to the national stage since her involvement in forming the National Association of Counties Rural Action Caucus (RAC) in 1998. Landkamer's enthusiasm for RAC helped take it from an organization of 20 members to several hundred. Landkamer currently chairs the Campaign for Renewed Rural Development made up of 30 public and private entities that are working together to keep rural America strong. She also is a past president of the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC). Landkamer has been a Humphrey Institute Policy Fellow, completed the Senior Executive Program in State and Local Government at Harvard University and was in the 2005 NACo/NYU class. In 2000, American City and County magazine named Landkamer, "County Leader of the Year." Colleen and her husband Jack Landkamer reside in Mankato and have three sons, John, Michael and Patrick.

### Steph Larsen

Steph Larsen is currently a Rural Policy Organizer for the Center for Rural Affairs in northeast Nebraska and works on issues related to health care reform in rural areas. Previously she spent three years in Washington, D.C., working on food security and nutrition issues with the Community Food Security Coalition. She holds an M.S. in geography from her home state of Wisconsin. Steph brings experience in environmental and labor organizing to her work. During the 2008 Farm Bill negotiations, Steph worked to educate both legislators and grassroots constituents about food access and community food security issues. Her work falls at the intersection of policy, grassroots organizing and on-the-ground practice. Steph was born and raised in northwest Wisconsin.



### Jacob Limmer



Jacob Limmer is current chair of Dakota Rural Action, a grassroots family agriculture and conservation group in South Dakota. Limmer grew up in Central South Dakota, and attended Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. He graduated with a degree in biology, with a concentration in environmental science. He returned to South Dakota and worked with his father in a land management business working on prairie restoration and began an organic farm and CSA. After two years as an organizer with Dakota Rural Action, Jacob left to start Cottonwood Coffee in Brookings, S.D. He has since, with his partner Sarah Trone, started Cottonwood Bistro, a restaurant that specializes in serving local, high-quality foods. Jacob still operates Glacial Till Farm, which now produces exclusively for the restaurant.

### Neil Linscheid

Neil Linscheid is an extension educator at the University of Minnesota's Extension Regional Office in Marshall, Minnesota. A native of St. Paul, Minn., Linscheid's career interests turned to rural Minnesota during his college years at the University of Minnesota–Morris. There, he was a research assistant for the Center for Small Towns, and co-authored papers about the intersection of rural Minnesota and the media, business and affordable health care. He has worked for Minnesota Rural Partners as a Rural Policy Intern. Most recently, he was the economic development director for Region Five Development Commission. There, he was responsible for the design, implementation and evaluation of economic development programs and initiatives. He has a Master's of public policy from the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs.



### Dr. Cecilia Martinez



Dr. Cecilia Martinez is currently the Director of the Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy at IATP. She is also a Senior Policy Fellow at the Center for Energy and Environmental Policy, University of Delaware. Her other positions include Associate Professor at Metropolitan State University and Research Director at the American Indian Policy Center. Cecilia has led a variety of projects to address sustainable development at the local and international levels. Her research is focused on the development of energy and environmental strategies that promote equitable and sustainable policies. Cecilia has worked with a range of organizations from local grassroots groups to international organizations engaging in the promotion of sound environmental policy and environmental justice. Among her publications is the co-edited volume *Environmental Justice: Discourses in International Political Economy* which includes some of her work on North American Indigenous peoples and the challenge of forging a common agenda of indigenous rights, justice and sustainability. She received her B.A. from Stanford University and her Ph.D. from the University of Delaware, where she received the Ryden Prize for Best Dissertation in the Social Sciences.

### Beth McConnell

Beth McConnell is Executive Director of the Media and Democracy Coalition. She joined the Coalition staff in May 2007, and works to link together local, state and national organizations around media policy initiatives and provides strategic back-up support to those efforts. Ms. McConnell was the Director of the Pennsylvania Public Interest Research Group (PennPIRG) from 2002 through 2007, where she led the organization to victories including winning the release of patient safety data from hospitals that can save lives, giving consumers tools to protect their personal information from would-be identity thieves, defeating a plan by the IRS that would have allowed the sale of consumers' tax returns, and expanding health care access to tens of thousands of Pennsylvanians. Ms. McConnell began her public interest career in 1993 as a Citizen Outreach Director with the Fund for Public Interest Research, and has extensive experience working with the media, developing strategic campaign plans, training emerging leaders, policy development and analysis, fundraising, crafting effective messages and coalition building.



### Marcie McLaughlin



Marcie McLaughlin is the Director of Constituent Services at the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI). McLaughlin has represented RUPRI in Washington D.C. since 2004. For ten years prior to this position, McLaughlin served as the founding Executive Director of Minnesota Rural Partners, Minnesota's state rural development council. Minnesota Rural Partners (MRP) is a network of federal, state, local and tribal governments, and the private, non-profit and educational sectors. Prior to her tenure as director of MRP, Ms. McLaughlin served as a Renville County Commissioner. Marcie is a board member of Northern Great Plains, Inc., the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, Renewing the Countryside and a former trustee of the Blandin Foundation. She holds a Master's in public administration degree from the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, has an elementary education degree from Southwest State University in Marshall, Minnesota and advanced studies in adult education from Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. Ms. McLaughlin's move to Washington, D.C., continues the experiment in the similarities and differences of rural and urban life.

### Elsie Meeks

Elsie Meeks was appointed by President Obama as South Dakota State Director for USDA Rural Development on July 17, 2009. She is an enrolled member of the Oglala Lakota Tribe, and was recently the CEO/president of First Nations Oweesta Corporation (OWEESTA) a subsidiary of First Nations Development Institute. OWEESTA provides investment capital, technical assistance and training to help Native communities develop community development financial institutions. Meeks has over 20 years experience working for Native community economic development. Prior to her leadership and work at OWEESTA, she was active for 15 years in the development and management of The Lakota Fund, a small business and microenterprise development loan fund on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Meeks has served on and chaired numerous boards, including the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights where she was the first Native American to serve on the commission. Meeks attended Oglala Lakota College for General Studies.



### Dr. Rick Melmer

Rick Melmer is the Dean of the School of Education at the University of South Dakota. Melmer began his duties in November 2008. Prior to his work as an Education Dean, Melmer served as the Secretary of Education for the State of South Dakota from 2003–2008. Dr. Melmer has worked at various levels in the K-12 educational system. He was a classroom teacher for five years, an elementary principal for seven years and worked as a school superintendent for 12 years. He has taught in the graduate programs at several colleges and universities. Melmer, a South Dakota native, holds a B.A. in elementary education and psychology from Dakota Wesleyan University, an M.A. in elementary administration from South Dakota State University, and an Ed.D. in educational administration from the University of Wyoming.



### Toni Merdan



Toni Merdan is the Senior Economic Development Officer for Congressman Collin C. Peterson. For the past 17 years, Toni has worked to facilitate community and economic development in the 35 counties of the 7th District by making sure communities, businesses and individuals are aware of the many resources and tools available to them on behalf of Congressman Peterson. Prior experience includes directing the city of Fergus Falls, Minnesota, economic development activities, business consulting, providing technical assistance to small businesses with the Ottertail County Business Assistance Center and commercial real estate development and finance.

### Linda Meschke

Linda Meschke has over 20 years of experience in developing, leading and managing innovative water quality improvement projects that result in changes on the land. Working with multiple partners, Ms. Meschke has developed, secured funding for and implemented over \$9 million of projects in south central Minnesota. Ms. Meschke's current responsibilities include managing all of Rural Advantage's organizational operations, developing new and innovative projects, securing of all grant funds and coordinating and implementing all funded projects. She developed the concept for the Madelia Model and is leading the effort to bring it to fruition. Coordination with local, state and federal agencies, University of Minnesota, nonprofits, and private partners has been an important component of Rural Advantage's success. The rapport developed with a wide variety of groups, along with the ability to be resourceful, innovative and "one idea ahead" illustrates her ability to be an effective leader, communicator and change agent.



### Maxine Moul



Maxine Moul was appointed by President Barack Obama as Nebraska State Director of USDA Rural Development on June 29, 2009. She previously was Coordinator of EndowNebraska, a coalition of nonprofits, professional advisors and donors seeking to insure the sustainability of Nebraska's charitable organizations by building permanent endowments. Mrs. Moul began her journalism career at the *Sioux City (Iowa) Journal* in 1969. In 1971, she and her husband, Francis, founded Maverick Media, Inc., and purchased the *Syracuse (Nebraska) Journal-Democrat*. Mrs. Moul served as President and Chief Executive Officer from 1983 to 1990, when she was elected Lieutenant Governor of Nebraska with Governor Ben Nelson. She led the administration's rural development efforts and Governor Nelson named her Chairperson of the Nebraska Rural Development Commission. In 1993, Governor Nelson appointed her Director of the Nebraska Department of Economic Development. In 1995, she helped form the Partnership for Rural Nebraska and was a member of the Governance Board, representing the State of Nebraska. She served on the Northern Great Plains Rural Development Commission from 1977–1994 and on the board of Northern Great Plains Inc., working to implement the recommendations of the Commission, from 1997 to 2006. She served as the first chair and then president of the Nebraska Community Foundation, a statewide 501(c)(3) foundation formed in 1993 that includes nearly 200 affiliated community and program funds. She was elected President Emeritus of the Nebraska Community Foundation in August 2003. Mrs. Moul and her husband, Francis, live in Lincoln. Their daughter, Jennifer, died at age 19 in 1985. Their son, Jeff, and his wife, Diane Becket of Rapid City, South Dakota, are the parents of Adia and Annalise.



### Jerry Nagel

Jerry Nagel is a fourth generation North Dakotan. He spent his winters attending school in Bismarck, N.D., and his summers on his grandparent's farm on the edge of Millerton, N.D. (pop. 15). These days played a big role in Jerry's lifelong commitment to rural advocacy. Jerry attended primary and secondary school in Bismarck. He attended Bismarck High School where he assumed that the team name, the Demons, was also a descriptor for how students should behave. Jerry graduated from high school in 1969 and then began a rather long college career adhering to the perspective that schooling should never interfere with his education. Jerry finally received an M.A. in economics from the University of North Dakota in 1984. Currently Jerry serves as the President of the Northern Great Plains Inc., a nonprofit applied research, demonstration and convening organization. NGP Inc. focuses its work on futures study, creating economic opportunity and supporting a healthy environment and vital communities. Jerry provides leadership, strategic direction and management to the five-state collaborative rural development initiative. He works closely with an 18 member Board of Directors representing 5 states and two Canadian provinces and maintains productive communications with local, state and federal officials, rural development organizations and public leaders.



### Nick Olson



Nick Olson is the Program Organizer for the Farm Beginnings Program at Land Stewardship Project in Montevideo, Minn. Farm Beginnings is a Land Stewardship Project initiative that provides opportunities for beginning and transitioning farmers to learn firsthand about values clarification and goal setting, whole farm planning, business plan development, and low-cost, sustainable farming methods. Nick comes to LSP with a background in education, having received a B.A. from St. John's University and his MEd from the University of Minnesota in Duluth. Nick and his wife Joan are co-managers of the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) venture Earthrise Farm in Madison, Minn.

### Randy Parry

Randy Parry is president of the Rural Learning Center in Howard, S.D. He says, "Rural has always been a guiding part of my life. I grew up on a farm near Canistota, South Dakota, where my father taught me the virtues of hard work and responsibility through our family feed business. I earned degrees in education and economics from the University of Sioux Falls, and began teaching in the Howard Public Schools after graduating in 1970. From 1970 to 1995 I taught business and computers in Howard, and also coached boys and girls basketball. From 1995 to 1999, my work in the schools shifted while I served as the Rural Resource Director and Technology Coordinator. In 1999 I retired from teaching to follow my passion for community development work, taking on the position of Executive Director of Miner County Community Revitalization. I have a wonderful, understanding wife, Linda, two children, and five grandchildren. Both of my children are educators in South Dakota, one in Arlington and one in Sioux Falls."



### Benjamin J. Ready



Benjamin J. Ready is the Economic Development Advisor to Senator John Thune. He also serves as one of the Senator's Field Representatives, covering 30 counties in central and eastern South Dakota. Prior to joining Senator Thune's state staff, Ben served as West River Director for the South Dakota Republican Party during the 2004 election cycle. Before returning to South Dakota, he acted as White House Appointee to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) as Special Assistant to the Deputy Administrator in Washington D.C. Preceding his appointment to the SBA, Ben worked on then Congressman John Thune's legislative staff in Washington, D.C. While on Thune's staff, he advised the Congressman on small business, homeland security, resources, emergency response, Native American, science and technology issues. Ben is a native of Martin, S.D. He received his B.A. in political science with a minor in communication at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. His wife Laura is a registered nurse at Sanford Hospital/USD Medical Center, specializing in labor and delivery. Ben and Laura reside in Sioux Falls with their daughters Ella and Ingrid.

### Steven Renderos

Steven Renderos leads Main Street Project's media justice and community building efforts, including the Justice 2.0 training project and its collaborative work with the nationwide Media Action Grassroots Network (MAG-Net). He brings more than five years of community organizing and training experience, and more than eight years of filmmaking and media production experience to the organization. Prior to joining Main Street Project, Renderos served as Project Coordinator of the Minnetonka Media Empowerment Project, an initiative of the Department of Chicano Studies at the University of Minnesota focused on improving the quality and quantity of media coverage and representation of Latinos in Minnesota. He currently serves on the boards of Headwaters Foundation for Justice, Organizing Apprenticeship Project, Alliance for Metropolitan Stability and La Asamblea de Derechos Civiles.



### Mark Ritchie



Mark Ritchie serves as Minnesota's 21st Secretary of State. As Secretary of State, Ritchie partners with township, city, and county officials to organize elections on behalf of Minnesota's nearly 4 million eligible voters. Ritchie also oversees a wide range of services provided by the Office of Secretary of State including business filings, the archiving of official documents, administering the appointments process for state-level commissions, and operating Minnesota's address confidentiality program. As an elected Constitutional Officer he sits on the state Executive Council, the State Board of Investment, and on the board of the Minnesota Historical Society. In the 1980s, Ritchie worked for Governor Rudy Perpich in the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, addressing the economic crisis threatening family farmers and rural communities. From 1988 to 2006, he served as president of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. In 2008 Secretary Ritchie was named the Most Valuable State Official in the United States by *The Nation* magazine and Politician of the Year by *Politics in Minnesota*, the state's leading non-partisan public affairs news service. In 2009, he received the Election Verification Network's national recognition award for his non-partisan leadership throughout the 2008 U.S. Senate race recount.

### Niel Ritchie



Niel Ritchie is Executive Director of the League of Rural Voters. Before joining the LRV, Niel spent 14 years with the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy serving in a variety of roles, including eight years as a national organizer responsible for outreach and networking among U.S. farm and non-farm groups. He has managed statewide and Congressional campaigns in the Midwest, and is the author of numerous articles and op/eds on food, farm, and rural economic policy. Niel currently serves on the boards of Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Jobs NOW Coalition and Main Street Project, and serves on the political committee of Clean Water Action Alliance of Minnesota.

### Maggie Schmalz

Maggie Schmalz was raised in Velva, N.D. In April 2007, she graduated from Concordia College with a B.A. in political science and a double minor in history and Scandinavian studies. During her senior year of college, Maggie had the opportunity to do an internship in Senator Dorgan's Washington, D.C., office. One of her greatest experiences while interning was being able to go down to the Senate floor for four hours and watch the Senators debate and vote on the Farm Bill. After graduating, Maggie continued her internship for the Senator in his Bismarck office. Both experiences allowed Maggie to work with people on a variety of issues that people of North Dakota were facing. Maggie currently works for Northern Great Plains Inc. as a research associate. NGP Inc. focuses its work on futures study, creating economic opportunity, and supporting a healthy environment and vital communities. Working at NGP has let Maggie continue to work with people who feel just as strongly as she does about rural issues in the northern Great Plains.



### Nicole Sedlacek



Nicole Sedlacek is director for the Holt County Economic Development Agency. HCEDA was established in 2007 when neighboring communities in the county chose to work together on community and economic projects. Nicole's passion for community development began in high school when she was asked to serve on her community's Community Foundation board. Nicole serves locally on the board of directors for the O'Neill Community Foundation, O'Neill Rotary Club and Friends of the Library Foundation. She is a member of the Nebraska Economic Developers Association and the Business Retention and Expansion International. She also enjoys spending hours of volunteering in the community through the Lion's Club and O'Neill Chamber of Commerce. Nicole is a graduate of Northeast Community College and is working on her CECd certification through the University of Oklahoma's Economic Development Institute. Nicole and her husband Brian have two daughters, Ally (5) and Emma (3).

### Tami Severson

Tami Severson was born and raised in rural Howard, S.D., on a generations-old family farm. While still in high school, she participated in Miner County's community-based grassroots meetings where she provided support with organizing and recording the meetings as well as providing a voice for the younger population of Miner County. In 2002, Miner County Community Revitalization was expanding, so she joined a team of people working for the future of the very place she treasured growing up. In 2007-08 she began her current occupation as Housing Coordinator with the Rural Learning Center. Tami and her husband, Brent, are raising their two young children Breanna and Austin on their 40-acre farm near Howard. In October, they will add another young rural citizen to their family. She earned a B.S. at Dakota State University majoring in business management and office management/administration.



### Loris Ann Taylor



Loris Ann Taylor (Hopi Tribe) is Executive Director of Native Public Media representing the media interests of Native America through radio, journalism, alternate technologies and platforms, and public policy. Taylor was formerly the General Manager of KUYI-FM-AZ, and co-founded with KNAU public radio the "Indian Country News Bureau," (winner of the UNITY Journalist of Color Award) and produced the children's program "Shooting Stars" and weekly talk show "House Calls" (winner of the Indian Health Service Award). She also instituted the first radio class/curriculum at the Hopi Junior Senior High School. She also served as Associate Director of the Hopi Foundation, the largest 501(c)(3) organization on the Hopi Reservation, and worked to advance the foundation's mission to continually improve the living condition of families on the Reservation. Prior to her work with the Hopi Foundation she was director of the Arizona Indian Gaming Association, representing the interests of Arizona Indian Tribes. She also served as Special Assistant for the Hopi Tribe's Office of General Counsel in the areas of land, water and energy. Taylor currently serves on the boards for the Suicide Prevention Action Network USA, and the Martin Springer Institute. Taylor represented Native American telecommunications priorities and policy interests before the Obama Biden FCC Transition Team in December 2008. Taylor is a recipient of the 2006 *Louis T. Delgado Distinguished Grantmaker Award* from Native Americans in Philanthropy and 2005 *Leadership for a Changing World Award* from the Ford Foundation.

### Dallas Tonsager



On May 18, 2009, Dallas Tonsager took the Oath of Office as Under Secretary for Rural Development. Prior to re-joining USDA, Tonsager served on the board of directors for the Farm Credit System Insurance Corporation and the Farm Credit Administration (FCA), which is responsible for regulating and examining the Farm Credit System. In 1993, then-President Bill Clinton selected Tonsager to serve as USDA South Dakota's state director for Rural Development. Tonsager oversaw a diversified portfolio of housing, business, and infrastructure loans in South Dakota totaling more than \$100 million. In 1999, he was recognized as one of two outstanding state directors. His term concluded in February 2001. After his tenure as state director, Tonsager served as executive director of the South Dakota Value-Added Agriculture Development Center in Huron. He coordinated initiatives to increase the economic value and consumer appeal of agricultural products. From 1988 to 1993, Tonsager served two terms as president of the South Dakota Farmers Union. He also served on the board of National Farmers Union Insurance from 1989 to 1993, and was a member of the advisory board of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission from 1990 to 1993. Tonsager grew up on a dairy farm near Oldham, S.D. He graduated from South Dakota State University with a Bachelor of Science in agriculture in 1976. Tonsager and his wife, Sharon, have two sons.

### Victor Vasquez



Victor Vasquez was appointed by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack as Deputy Under Secretary for USDA Rural Development on May 13, 2009. Vasquez has had more than two decades of experience in community and economic development at the local, state, federal and international levels. His special interest is local decision-making and leadership development. Most recently, Vasquez served as Deputy Assistant Commissioner for the Department of Transitional Assistance for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Previously, Vasquez worked in Washington as the Director for both economic development and Workfirst programs, and he also served with the Department of Defense as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Military Community and Family Policy Office in the Office of the Secretary. Victor spent more than five years working in Rural Development, serving as USDA Assistant Administrator in the Office of Community Development with responsibility for launching the Rural Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Community program. Vasquez received his B.S. degree from the University of Oregon and an MPA from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. He has also pursued coursework toward a PhD in community and economic development from Southern New Hampshire University.

### Milan Wall



Milan Wall, co-director of the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, is a management and communications expert with more than 30 years experience in dealing with the critical issues facing American society and culture. Mr. Wall has been a newspaper reporter and editorial columnist, a university lecturer and a speaker at regional and national conferences on such topics as educational leadership, economic development, and uses of technology in education. Before he helped found the Heartland Center, he was executive vice president of the University of Mid-America, a multi-state consortium that was recognized internationally for its imaginative approaches to adult education. With Dr. Vicki Luther, he is co-author of a number of publications on leadership and community development, including *The Entrepreneurial Community: A Strategic Leadership Approach to Community Survival*, *Clues to Rural Community Survival*, and *Schools as Entrepreneurs: Helping Small Towns Survive*. Previously, he served as editor of the *Nebraska School Leader*, which won three national awards for excellence among state publications on education during his tenure. In 1993, Mr. Wall was honored with the Award of Excellence, the distinguished alumni recognition of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Teachers College.

### Virginia Wolking



Virginia Wolking is a rural policy organizer at the Center for Rural Affairs in Lyons, Neb., (population 963) where she works primarily on issues related to health care reform in rural areas. She holds a B.A. in environmental science and sustainable agriculture from Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, N.C., and supervised the draft horse program at the college. Wolking served as an intern at the White Earth Land Recovery Project, worked on a diversified family farm in northwest Minnesota and researched management of Conservation Reserve Program land in West Polk County, Minn. Prior to coming to the Center for Rural Affairs, Virginia worked on a cattle ranch in northern Wyoming.

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