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Small-town survival program gets \$2 million

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LINCOLN - Jan Krotter-Chvala said she's seen rural development programs come and go in her hometown of Atkinson, Neb.

Experts visit, give advice, leave. In the end, not much gets done.

But Krotter-Chvala, an attorney whose family has operated lumberyards in north-central Nebraska for 113 years, said her town now has found a survival strategy that shows promise.

Called HomeTown Competitiveness, the three-year-old, Lincoln-based program is active in seven communities or counties in Nebraska, including Atkinson and Stuart.

The effort recently was chosen to receive a \$2 million grant over three years by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek, Mich. Krotter-Chvala said she hopes that makes HomeTown Competitiveness an even stronger force in helping small towns survive.

"This thing makes all the sense in the world to me," she said. "It teaches us how to do it ourselves, to take ownership of our own future. That's what's different."

HomeTown Competitiveness was one of six grant winners out of 180 applicants selected by the Kellogg Foundation's 75th Anniversary Entrepreneurship Development Systems for Rural America.

The program's previous grants have been in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 range, according to Jeff Yost, president of the Nebraska Community Foundation, one of the chief partners in the HomeTown effort.

The grant will help strengthen existing training programs and provide more aid to areas where it is already active - Atkinson/Stuart, Valley County/Ord, Mullen, Chase and Perkins Counties, Knox County, David City, and O'Neill, Yost said. It also will enable the program to expand to 15 communities statewide, including the Winnebago Indian reservation.

The key to the HomeTown Competitiveness approach, said Yost, is identifying achievable goals and focusing on four strategies to reverse rural decline and build economic opportunity.

The four areas are: building leadership and community capacity, engaging young people, fostering local philanthropy and supporting entrepreneurship.

Krotter-Chvala, a member of the Nebraska Community Foundation board, said it's easier to attract a donation or bequest to your community if you're showing a comprehensive approach that enlists young people.

Hiring an economic development director for the town was a key in helping a local steel plant expand and add 25 jobs, she said. An entrepreneur class has been started at the high school, and a leadership course has produced its first graduates.

"It really seems like the attitude has improved and shifted," Krotter-Chvala said.

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