

CONNECTIONS

Spring 2026

Greater Nebraska is Betting on Its Own Future

Communities across Nebraska are taking ownership of the future. Through the Nebraska Community Foundation network, hometowns are proving that lasting success isn't built on short-term fixes, but on long-term vision anchored by unrestricted endowments that can be used to start something new, save something important, or adapt to the future. This annually recurring discretionary capital will impact our hometowns in extraordinary ways, especially if affiliated fund leaders have the courage to grant it strategically to create a margin of excellence in their homeplace. In 2012 there were only two affiliated funds in our network that had an unrestricted endowment of \$1 million. Today, we have 29! Unrestricted endowment values have quadrupled in the past decade, now totaling \$89 million.

Unrestricted endowments are expressions of trust, pride, and belief in the potential of each place. And as more communities experience the ripple effects of these permanent resources, one thing has become clear: when neighbors come together with a shared purpose, the results can be transformational.

Nebraska Community Foundation's Homegrown Challenge initiative is supercharging endowment-building efforts and turning ambition into momentum. When the program launched, no one could have predicted the energy it would generate. Yet just a few years later, NCF staff are already preparing a fifth cohort of volunteers eager to step up and grow their community's future.



Osmond has only been part of the NCF network since 2019 but is already well on its way to building a robust unrestricted endowment, thanks in part to the Dr. David & Lelia Johnson Family Community Challenge which will grow assets by \$450,000 when volunteers successfully meet their goal.

In most cases, a "Homegrown" challenger, bold enough to believe in their community's generosity, commits a \$100,000 initial gift. Nebraska Community Foundation then offers an additional incentive of \$50,000 should the community raise \$300,000. The result is a \$450,000 investment in the community's unrestricted endowment. There it becomes something even more powerful: a permanent resource that grows and gives back year after year.

Throughout the Homegrown Challenge, communities participate in training and peer learning opportunities. NCF staff work alongside volunteers to share best practices in fundraising, while cohorts gather regularly to exchange ideas, celebrate successes, and tackle challenges together.

Many affiliated funds have exceeded their Homegrown Challenge goals

ahead of schedule including Boone County Foundation Fund, Calamus Area Community Fund, Leigh Legacy Fund, Stuart Community Foundation Fund, and Wayne Area Legacy Fund, successfully growing their unrestricted endowments by a minimum of \$450,000. Meanwhile Bertrand, Brown County, Clarkson, Nebraska City, Seward County, Shickley, and Osmond are all in the public phase of their campaigns, actively promoting the opportunity and inviting gifts of all sizes as they prepare to cross the finish line. Nine others are in the early stages of their campaign but are already demonstrating the kind of enthusiasm, skills, and courage it takes to reach such an ambitious goal. ■


NEBRASKA COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION

CONNECT TO NCF

What is Common Courage?



Jeff Yost, NCF President and CEO

Have you ever thought of community development work as brave or courageous? If not, allow me to convince you.

This year NCF's annual theme is **Common Courage**. If you've attended our Annual Celebration and Training, you know we love weaving our theme into every part of the day. In recent years, though, we've gone a step further by stretching that theme far beyond a single event in November and embedding it into the many gatherings, trainings, and conversations we host throughout the year. From now until November, you'll hear us talking a lot about Common Courage—what it means and where it shows up in our communities.

Courage isn't a personality trait reserved for a few bold individuals. It's a practice. It can be developed,

strengthened, and shared. A person—or a community—can grow more courageous with intention and effort. And we all know courage is easier found when someone has your back. Taking a bold step alone is difficult. Taking that step together reveals the true strength and resilience of a community.

A courageous community is willing to experiment and take risks. It refuses to accept the status quo. It goes beyond what people expect and does the right thing—even when it faces resistance.

And that's where the "common" part comes in.

Here in Nebraska, we care deeply about our places. When someone is in need, our hometowns come together to help. That kind of thing may be rare elsewhere, but here, it's what you'd expect.

When I look across the NCF network, I see communities with Common Courage everywhere. I see it in Valley County's bold, collective vision to build an arts and entrepreneurial ecosystem and in

Leigh's multigenerational leadership. I see it in the many hometowns that have made early childhood development central to their work—going far beyond what is typical for rural communities. We've witnessed it at every peer learning session convened across Greater Nebraska this spring in the hundreds of volunteers who have gathered to listen and learn from one another and in the dozens of hometowns that have said yes to a Homegrown Challenge. We see it in our NCF Hometown Interns—more than 100 fearless young people who have taken a deeper look at their communities, challenged conventional wisdom, and shared their valuable insights with the generations before them. And most certainly we see it in central and western Nebraska as neighbors care for one another while dangerous wildfires rage.

Common Courage is a critical ingredient for a brighter future, and right now, we need it more than ever. ■



2026 ANNUAL CELEBRATION

KEARNEY, NE | NOVEMBER 12, 2026

All across Nebraska, neighbors are stepping up and communities are standing together. It's collective action—a common courage—that creates lasting change.

Nebraskans know a community's size does not dictate its dreams. They're choosing hope, generosity, and abundance. Everything we need is right here. **We are the ones we've been waiting for!**

On November 12, hundreds of ambitious Nebraskans will convene in Kearney. This year we honor the shared courage that fuels local leadership, strengthens our hometowns, and shapes a brighter future for all Nebraskans. Join us for powerful stories, meaningful connection, peer-to-peer learning, and a celebration of what's possible when courage is something we hold in common. For details, visit www.nebcommfound.org/celebrate ■

NCF Team Updates



ZAC ROBERTS is NCF's new Director of Accounting and will supervise accounting staff, ensure the effectiveness of accounting systems, and train staff members and volunteers in accounting processes. He has two decades of experience in accounting and financial analysis. Most recently, he was the Chief Financial Officer at Nebraska Hematology Oncology.



HANNAH MILLER of Shickley and **NATALIE ROBERTS** of McCook joined NCF as Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Fellows, new roles that will support and unleash the gifts of the 2026 cohort of Hometown Interns. Both are former Hometown Interns, giving them unique insights that will help as they foster ABCD education and create avenues for learning and engagement for new and returning interns, community-based affiliated funds, and Greater Nebraska youth. Hannah, a junior at UNL, spent two summers as a Hometown Intern with the Shickley Community Foundation Fund. McCook Community Foundation Fund hired Natalie Roberts, also a junior at UNL, as a summer 2025 Hometown Intern. This fellowship was made possible in part by the support of a private foundation. ■



Nebraska Wildfire Recovery Fund

IN RESPONSE TO THE CATASTROPHIC AND HISTORIC WILDFIRES in the central and western parts of the state, Nebraska Community Foundation established the Nebraska Wildfire Recovery Fund.

The Fund aims to provide financial support to Nebraska communities impacted by the 2026 wildfires which may include grants to 501(c)(3) nonprofits and governmental entities providing direct support to affected individuals and families, safety equipment, and investments in emergency management infrastructure to build community resilience and preparedness for the future.



Scan to donate

NCF proudly works with 266 communities across the state including many in areas impacted by the spring fires. We are accredited by Community Foundations National Standards for our commitment to rigorous, sector-driven best practices that exceed federal and state requirements to demonstrate accountability and excellence to communities, policymakers, and the public.

Over the last three decades, NCF has utilized its robust network of volunteers, now 1,500 strong, to respond to numerous disasters in recent memory including the COVID-19 pandemic and the floods of 2019. ■

WELCOME NEW BOARD MEMBERS

CHUCK HASSEBROOK of Lincoln



recently joined NCF's statewide board of directors. Hassebrook is Director of the Biochar Policy Project of the National Center

for Appropriate Technology and works with Sandhills Energy in renewable energy development. He previously served 36 years with the Center for Rural Affairs of Lyons, Nebraska, including 17 years as its Executive Director.

NCF Board of Directors

Chuck Hibberd of Lincoln, *Chair*
Cindy Huff of McCook, *Vice Chair*
Kurt Kruse of Albion, *Secretary*
Kiel VanderVeen of Nebraska City, *Treasurer*
Pam Abbott of Ogallala, *Immediate Past Chair*

AT-LARGE MEMBERS

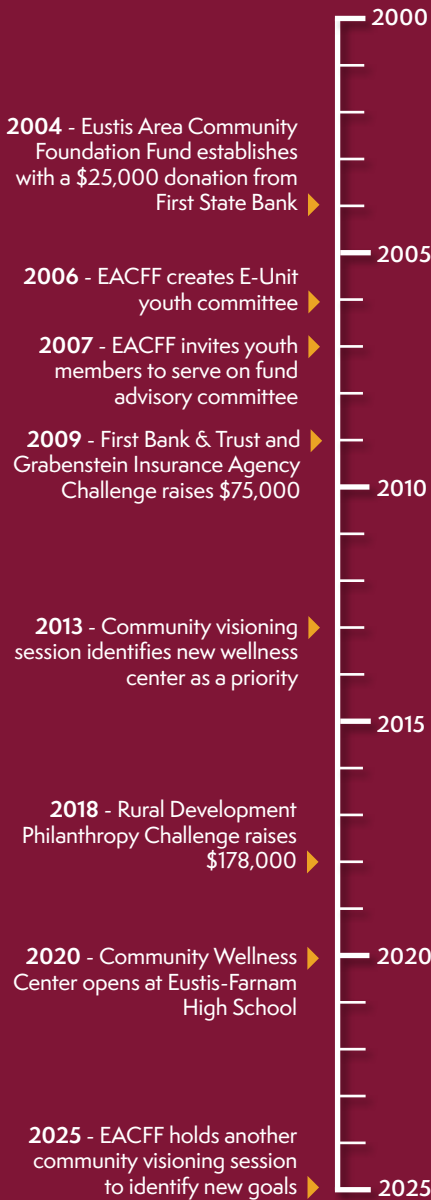
Ann Bruntz of Friend
Kim Engel of Scottsbluff
Jeff Gerhart of Elkhorn
Bev Hansen of Bertrand
Chuck Hassebrook of Lincoln
Megan Helberg of Taylor
Karina Perez of Columbus
Tyler Pribbeno of Imperial
Beth Roelfs of Diller
Nicole Sedlacek of O'Neill
Sarah Sinnett of Sidney
Lisa Smith of Lincoln
James Welniak of Taylor

President and CEO, Jeffrey G Yost

Find a full list of our honorary members at
www.nebcommfound.org/about/board-of-directors

CONNECT TO SUCCESS

Timeline of PROGRESS



TOTAL ASSETS:

\$1.1 Million

UNRESTRICTED ENDOWMENT:

\$935,000



\$1.1 Million
REINVESTED

Investing in Youth in Eustis



Eustis Area Community Foundation Fund consistently awards grants to organizations and efforts that improve the quality of life for young people in the community, from their E-Unit youth committee to Kinder Haus Childcare Center.

For more than 20 years, the Eustis Area Community Foundation Fund (EACFF) has been prioritizing grantmaking that enriches the lives of residents young and old. Since joining the NCF network in 2004, intergenerational cooperation has been a hallmark of EACFF's work—and it's evident in the projects and programs they've supported over the years.

One of the biggest testaments to that cooperative spirit is the Community Wellness Center, a state-of-the-art gym located in Eustis-Farnam High School that opened in 2020. Residents voiced the

desire for a wellness center during a 2014 community visioning session hosted by EACFF and NCF. After multiple years and \$700,000 raised, the center became a reality. It didn't just bring a cutting-edge facility to town—it connected older generations to younger residents. The center is open to everyone in the community, from students to seniors.

The fund advisory committee has also awarded grants for Kinder Haus Childcare Center, a new scoreboard at the football field, local beef in schools, scholarships, swimming pool upgrades, and more. The fund's youth group, E-Unit, provides input and ideas for many projects—EACFF was one of the first affiliated funds to include a youth committee in their volunteer leadership structure.

One of E-Unit's recent projects was collaborating with EACFF and NCF on a survey of local high school students, which found that most had a positive impression of their hometown. More than 80% of the students said there's no negative stigma associated with returning to Eustis, and many reported being very involved in the community through school groups, athletics, church organizations, and nonprofits.

The survey had a lot of good news, but FAC members did notice a call to action within all the data. Less than 40% of the students said they felt they played a role in the community. That figure inspired EACFF to act quickly, and they invited students to attend an in-person listening session where they could share their ideas to improve Eustis with adults in the community.

Among those great ideas were more housing, new restaurants, expanded entertainment options, improvements to the school, and a drive-in movie theater.

"We had great attendance, participation, and interaction. The students came up with lots of great ideas for current and future projects," said Dustin Fischer, EACFF Advisory Committee member. "I think as a fund, we can partner with the students to achieve at least one project in the next 12 months." ■

Building Rock County's Bright Future

A year ago, hundreds gathered in Bassett to celebrate the grand opening of a new community center designed to make Rock County a destination for all varieties of events. Against a backdrop of dueling pianos, the collected revelers enjoyed a prime rib dinner while they admired their community's newest amenity.

For many, the evening marked the culmination of more than a decade's worth of community conversations, planning, fundraising, and construction—with a pandemic thrown into the mix as well. Rock County Community Fund (RCCF), established in 2014, was around for most of the adventure. Serious discussions about constructing a building to supplement the existing Legion Club began after respondents of a 2012 survey listed a new community center as a priority. When RCCF affiliated with NCF a couple years later, volunteers reviewed the survey and formed a committee to dive into what opportunities existed to help bring that dream to life.

This committee traveled across the state, visiting nine different communities to tour their facilities and learn how each town achieved their community center goals—from having productive conversations with residents that may oppose such a large project to understanding available funding opportunities. Peers in the NCF network helped RCCF's advisory committee better prepare for the process. RCCF began raising funds for the community center project in 2016 and soon after started applying for grants. In 2020, however, many granting organizations shifted their priorities to alleviating hardships created or amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

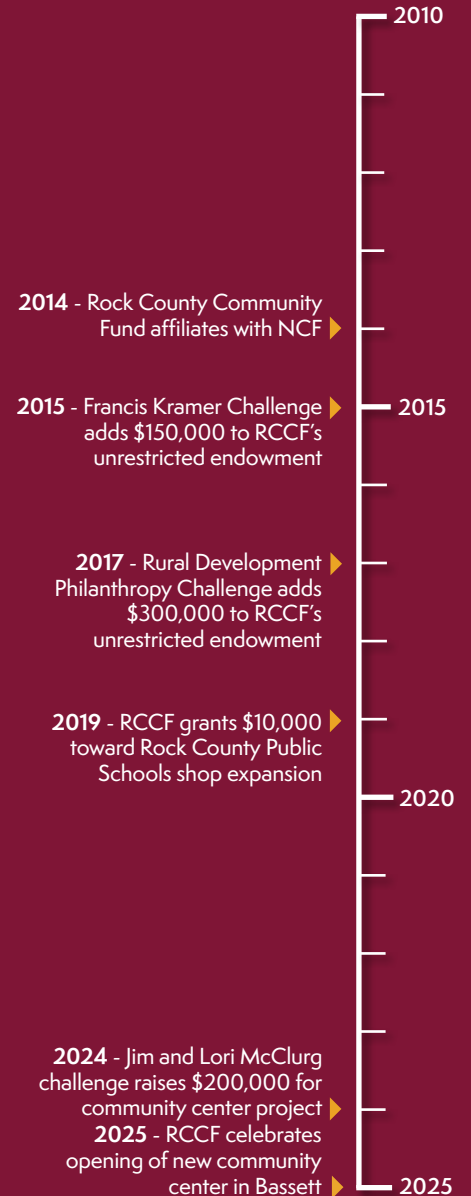
Undeterred, RCCF turned its focus to local fundraising, asking individuals and families to contribute. The fund advisory committee also issued a \$250,000 challenge in 2021, which the community met in less than a year. To help the project cross the finish line, Jim and Lori McClurg issued a challenge of their own in 2024—if the community raised \$100,000, the couple would match it for a total of \$200,000. Overall, RCCF raised \$1 million for the project.

The Rock County Community Center is one example of how a community organized around and committed to a shared goal can achieve major success. Throughout the 13-year journey to construct the facility, community members took turns leading the way toward an even brighter future for Rock County. ■

Rock County Community Fund, seen below hosting the Nebraska Community Foundation Board of Directors for one of its quarterly meetings, realized its community building dream in 2025.



Timeline of PROGRESS



TOTAL ASSETS:

\$1.2 Million

UNRESTRICTED ENDOWMENT:

\$1.1 Million



\$1 Million
REINVESTED



The Golden Husk, an historic theater in Ord, holds an important role in community life throughout the Loup Valley Region. Last year was the theater's 10th anniversary.

VALLEY COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FUND and its partners throughout the Loup Valley recognized The Golden Husk Theatre's 10th anniversary in 2025. To this day, the theater remains dedicated to shining a light on local talent and creativity, continuing its mission to cultivate community pride, culture, and belonging.

The theater's role in the region has grown so much in the last decade, it's hard to imagine it slowing down. These days, it's not uncommon for more than 80 people to audition for community theater roles—the first ever production only courted 18.



Scan for full story

"Bringing the theater to life with local talent of all ages is truly exhilarating," said Dahn Hagge, director of the Valley

Performing Arts Theater board and an Ord native. "The Golden Husk provides a vibrant platform for discovering creative gifts and building deeper connections among neighbors. It's more than just a performance venue—it's a gathering space for celebrating our shared stories and spirit." ■

ELK CREEK COMMUNITY FUND

(ECCF) celebrated the opening of a new fire hall and community building last December, a major benefit to the town of Elk Creek and surrounding area. The fund advisory committee raised approximately \$140,000 for the community center, and the local fire district raised the funds for the fire hall portion—4,800 square feet for fire and rescue vehicles, equipment, and more.

The project began as a joint effort by the fire district and village board, who then approached ECCF about possibly funding some of the construction costs. It was a big test for ECCF, which had just joined the NCF network in 2024.

"We wanted to make sure that Elk Creek Community Fund had a good working relationship with the town board," said Fund Chair Jake Robison. "That will help us better utilize our resources to improve our community." ■

The community of Elk Creek completed a new fire hall and community building last year, made possible with support from the Elk Creek Community Fund.



BIG SPRINGS COMMUNITY FUND

is proud to have assisted in bringing a new shelter to the park. The project was a long time coming for the community, which they celebrated with a ribbon cutting last year. The fund advisory committee was excited to revamp the space by tearing down the old structure and replacing it with a new metal shelter with double the footprint. The project also brought new picnic tables and trash cans to the park. ■



The Brown County Community Foundation Fund Advisory Committee poses for a photo at its 30th anniversary celebration last fall.

BROWN COUNTY COMMUNITY

FOUNDATION FUND (BCCFF) held a big bash in honor of its 30th anniversary as part of the NCF network, inviting friends near and far to reflect on the fund's achievements and dream about its future. BCCFF has invested in all aspects of community life over the last three decades, such as significant grants to the Ainsworth Child Development Center and the Sandhills Care Center along with supporting park improvements, fairgrounds updates, and local fire and rescue services. The fund also met the Building Community Capacity Challenge in 2014 that added \$750,000 to its unrestricted endowment and is currently working towards a Homegrown Challenge that will add another \$450,000. Their endowment now totals \$2.1 million. ■

Volunteer members of the Big Springs Community Fund celebrate a new park shelter with a ribbon cutting last year.



Honoring Hometown Legacies

NEBRASKA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION'S Hometown Legacy Society is our way to celebrate and say thank you to donors with future gift provisions through estate plans that benefit our Nebraska communities. By documenting a gift in 2025, the following have joined the hundreds of generous Nebraskans who have made a planned gift to benefit their community. You can find a full listing of our Legacy Society members at <https://nebcommfound.giftlegacy.com>

McKenzie Behrendt, *Ravenna*
Dennis Berry, *McCook*
Gary and Deb Brester, *Howells*
David and Ann Bruntz, *Friend*
Marcia Bryant, *Plattsmouth*
Adam Cerv, *Clarkson*
John (Jack) and Virginia Clark, *McCook*
Brenda (Engel) Ekstrom, *Pueblo, CO*
John and Liz Ford, *Bertrand*

Chris Goertz, *Brule*
Gavin and Shelly Gralheer, *Pender*
Chris Grundmayer, *Petersburg*
Erin and Chris Jelinek, *Atkinson*
Jan A. Larson and Connie Holmes Larson,
Cedar Park, TX
Trent and Nevada Mastny, *Clarkson*
Nancy Hubert Miller, *McCook*
Keith and Kathy Nienhueser, *Sidney*

Family of Lauren Sheridan
Clay and Jaci Siemsen, *Belleville, KS*
Sarah and Alex Sinnett, *Sidney*
Joe and Susan Strahm, *Pender*
Blaine and Tessa Stinson, *Palisade*
Tyler and Charlotte Tietjen, *Byron*
Jean Wilcox, *McCook*
Doug and Pam Young, *Albion*

Homegrown Generosity

AS HIGHLIGHTED IN OUR COVER STORY, challenge grants remain one of the most powerful tools for significantly growing a community's unrestricted endowment. Across Nebraska, generous individuals, couples, and families are stepping forward to answer the call—serving as lead donors and setting a lasting example of what it means to love your hometown.

CLARKSON



Randy and Mitzi Vavrina

Established just two years ago, the Clarkson Future Fund has already raised \$1 million, in large part thanks to a Homegrown Challenge issued by John and Ruth O'Neal, Doernemann Construction, and Randy and Mitzi Vavrina. "I grew up here, graduated from school here, raised my family here, and made my living here. It is now time to repay what Clarkson has given Mitzi and me. The Clarkson Future Fund is the absolute best way to make this happen," said Randy.

BERTRAND



Gary and Marlene Dahlgren

Marlene and the late Gary Dahlgren believed deeply in the strength of small towns—especially Bertrand, the community they proudly called home their entire lives. Today, the Bertrand Area Community Fund is nearing its \$450,000 goal, fueled by the Dahlgrens' generous lead gift of \$100,000. Their lifelong careers in agriculture not only shaped their work ethic but also deepened their commitment to sustaining rural communities and giving back to the place that gave them so much.

NEBRASKA CITY



Bill and Betty Davis Family

Bill and Betty Davis were originally newcomers to Nebraska City, but it quickly became home. Both were passionately involved in community service work of all kinds, a value they instilled in their children early on. Inspired by their parents' example, their family made a \$100,000 lead gift in their honor. The Gratitude Challenge ensures that Bill and Betty's commitment to Nebraska City Community Foundation Fund's mission of welcoming and investing in people will be felt forever. ■

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CFNS

**ACCREDITED
FOUNDATION**



CONNECTIONS

Spring 2026

Inside this issue:

- Betting on hometown success
- Eustis invests in youth
- Building the future in Rock County
- Updates from across the network

PHOTO: Attendees of the 2025 Annual Celebration and Training in La Vista take a pause from a busy day of peer learning to pamper Dewey, a therapy dog from Pups with a Purpose.

