



THE UNITED STATES' EXPERIENCE

**TITLE:**  
**PROJECT 17: TOGETHER WE SUCCEED**  
**A LARGE SCALE REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

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**Country:** United States

**Coordinating Institution:** Kansas State University

**Other institutions involved:** Kansas Department of Commerce, US Commerce Economic Development Administration, US Department of Agriculture –Rural Development

**Duration of the experience:** August 2012 to Present

**Webpage:** [www.twsproject17.org](http://www.twsproject17.org)



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**1) Objectives**

The mission of Project 17 is to improve economic conditions in a 17 county region in Southeast Kansas. Traditional economic development activities have historically yielded little progress on improving the region. Therefore, founded with political leadership, a grassroots effort has emerged in which citizens throughout the region have come together to form a broad coalition of over 800 citizens from 17 counties to focus on economic development, health, leadership, and the education/workforce needs in the region. Included under these four umbrellas are objectives and initiatives the project is working on to improve the region's economy. These include: lack of high speed internet services; need to create a more entrepreneurial mindset within the regions citizenry; need to create a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem; the need

for a healthier workforce; combating the high substance abuse occurring in the region; breaking the cycle of generational poverty; helping people understand how to be a leader in their community; promoting Science, Engineering, Math, and Technology education; and linking the needs of businesses to the K-12 and post-secondary schools in the region to ensure that the students whom the education systems are developing are meeting the needs of the regions employers.

## 2) Relevance

Historical economic and health performance indicators in the project region have lagged well behind the rest of the state of Kansas. With the region being predominately rural in nature, there is a high degree of isolation among the communities and also among the region's citizens. Too much effort has been previously spent on competing within the region rather than beyond the region. Project 17 is enabling the region to look beyond itself and where it fits into a larger context, both nationally and globally. By establishing new visions of potential, investing in sparks of creativity and innovation, and linking the region with networks of social and technological connectivity, the region has begun to strive to level the playing field and not accept that just because they have history and are rural that their future is predetermined for them and their future generations. The project is about building ownership over their future rather than abdicating it to others outside the region.

## 3) Concrete Activities and actions

Four work groups and 16 different task teams were formed. Lack of high-speed internet- A regional summit was held bringing together internet service providers, the business community, and the community at-large to discuss how lack of high-speed internet is hindering the region and solutions were brainstormed. Entrepreneurial mindset/ecosystem- Three events are being held in the region that bring entrepreneurs together to talk with each other about ways they may be able to collaborate. Additionally, the entrepreneurial mindset curriculum "Ice House" has been introduced and is being taught in communities to promote entrepreneurial mindset. Need for a healthier workforce- The region conducted a series of meetings to create a health improvement plan for the region around healthy eating, increased physical activity, tobacco cessation. Breaking the cycle of generational poverty- implementing Circles USA model in three communities to reengage the workforce through building social capital to break the cycle. STEM and Innovation- establishing Kansas's first community fabrication lab and educated about the importance of STEM education. Business/Education Linkages- held multiple forums for businesses to discuss their needs with educators, developing a path for open dialogs creating opportunities for students to leave high school with industry recognized credentials.

#### 4) Achievements and results

Achievements to date include the following: Over 800 citizens engaged in one year; creation of 4 work groups, 16 task teams and a “core group” serving like a board of directors; discussions with internet service providers and the State of Kansas have yielded some broadband maps illustrating the lack of internet speed in the region; two new entrepreneurial exchanges are occurring on a regular basis; an entrepreneurial “Un-Conference” will be held this fall; an Innovation Summit was held in the region; an event helping businesses sell products online was held; three new Circles USA sites are being established for workforce reengagement; a new technical education center is being created for K-12 students and underemployed/unemployed adults; received the federal Investing in Manufacturing Community Partnership (IMCP) Designation; establishment of the first community Fabrication Lab in Kansas; created the opportunity for the K-12 education community, the community colleges in the region, and the business community to come together for discussions for the first time; trained 124 leaders to be more effective when they exercise leadership in their community to improve economic conditions; created the first regional health improvement plan for the region to ensure companies have a healthy workforce to draw upon.

#### 5) Lessons learned

The initiative was promoted throughout the region before there was a structure in place to be responsive to public interest. Without initial funding, a dedicated executive director was not in place as initial kick-off meetings were held. Too much time passed to secure startup funding which allowed citizens to disengage and caused more work for the executive director to re-engage them once hired. Additionally, setting a similar base of knowledge is important and not assuming people understand even basic concepts is key for the group to move forward. A strong leader is critical to keep all the moving parts moving together when working on a broad based strategy. It is critical to have someone leading the effort with a diverse background whom is able to be entrepreneurial in leading the effort so they have the knowledge and ability to act as opportunities present themselves that will benefit the region.

## 6) Capacity for the exchange of this experience

We are very interested in sharing our experiences and expertise with others. We have the capability to assist in various ways and would love to visit with anyone interested in a broad based approach to economic development.

Cooperation modality	Cooperation modalities the institution can provide to others	The institution may be able to provide this cooperation to others by
Information Sharing	X	4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter of 2014 – Year 2015
Conference Calls	X	4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter of 2014 – Year 2015
Videoconferences	X	4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter of 2014 – Year 2015
Technical and Experts Visits	X	4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter of 2014 – Year 2015

## 7) Author of this story

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**VIII AMERICAS  
COMPETITIVENESS  
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