

Panhandle Description of Community

I. Assessment

A. Define the Community

Geographic Area

The Panhandle of Nebraska consists of the 11 rural and frontier counties in the far west one-third of the state. They include Banner, Box Butte, Cheyenne, Dawes, Deuel, Garden, Kimball, Morrill, Scotts Bluff, Sheridan and Sioux counties and the communities of Harrisburg, Alliance, Hemingford, Sidney, Dalton, Potter, Lodgepole, Chappell, Crawford, Chadron, Marsland, Big Springs, Oshkosh, Lisco, Lewellen, Kimball, Bushnell, Dix, Bridgeport, Bayard, Redington, Henry, Morrill, Mitchell, Scottsbluff, Gering, Minatare, Hay Springs, Rushville, Gordon, Whiteclay and Harrison.

The 14,810 square mile area is bordered by equally remote areas of South Dakota (north), Wyoming (west) and Colorado (south).

Demographic Characteristics

Area	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005	2000
Nebraska	1,796,619	1,781,949	1,769,912	1,760,435	1,751,721	1,711,263
Banner County	647	673	711	730	729	819
Box Butte County	10,891	11,084	11,040	11,012	11,130	12,158
Cheyenne County	9,720	9,871	9,892	9,726	9,938	9,830
Dawes County	8,735	8,692	8,772	8,688	8,791	9,060
Deuel County	1,839	1,873	1,886	1,887	1,932	2,098
Garden County	1,739	1,783	1,843	1,934	1,954	2,292
Kimball County	3,576	3,548	3,609	3,708	3,778	4,089
Morrill County	4,911	4,961	5,002	4,996	5,032	5,440
Scotts Bluff County	36,865	36,625	36,390	36,245	36,289	36,951
Sheridan County	5,264	5,290	5,402	5,478	5,579	6,198
Sioux County	1,281	1,311	1,359	1,369	1,402	1,475
Panhandle	85,468	85,711	85,906	85,773	86,554	90,410

Source: U.S. Census

There are 85,468 persons living in the region (U.S. Census estimates for 2009), down nearly 5,000 individuals from the last census in 2000. More than 43% of the population (36,865) resides in one county.

Racial and ethnic minorities make up 16.2% of the Panhandle residents. Overall, Hispanic Americans account for 12.16% of the area population. In Scotts Bluff County, Hispanic Americans account for 25.2% of the population. The Panhandle has the largest population of Native Americans in Nebraska (2.7 % of the Panhandle). The predominantly Lakota people residing in four Panhandle counties (Box Butte 3.26%, Dawes 4.02%, Scotts Bluff 2.35%, Sheridan 10.99%) are not federally recognized within Nebraska.

It is unknown what percentage of the Hispanic population is Spanish speaking only. The Native American population is almost entirely English speaking. Only a smattering of refugees from other countries settle in the Panhandle.

The arrest rate for all crime in the area (56.4 arrest/1,000 population) was somewhat higher than the overall rate for Nebraska (54.2), but the arrest rate for juveniles (46.7) was much higher than the statewide rate of 33.3.

According to a 2006 study at the Center for Applied Rural Innovation at the University of Nebraska Lincoln, depopulation is still an issue of significant concern in much of America's non-metropolitan Great Plains region. Nebraska has routinely been cited as a prime example of rural depopulation and that phenomenon's effect on social and economic conditions. Between 1950 and 2000, the 43 most rural Nebraska counties saw a decline in total population of 40%, while the state's metropolitan counties doubled in size. Rural depopulation has now reached a point at which the continued viability, and indeed the existence, of many communities and institutions in rural Nebraska are very much in question.

Such data paints an ominous picture of rural Nebraska's future. However, it is a picture that is incomplete. Whether it is the result of market forces, organized development efforts or the tenacity of some communities, counter trends can be identified. This is true even in Nebraska's most rural region; the 11-county western Panhandle.

According to the 2000 Census of Population, the majority of smaller geographic units in rural Nebraska (communities and townships) saw 20% or more of their 2000 population arrive from some other county, state or country during the five preceding years. Moreover, on a percentage basis, those new arrivals were relatively more important to the very rural Panhandle region than they were in other parts of Nebraska. This demonstrates that the movement of population in Nebraska's Panhandle is not one-way. People do indeed move to this very rural Great Plains region. This is encouraging.

NRI grant-funded research from 2007 tells us the new residents bring many assets to the Panhandle region. On average, they are younger and better educated than current Panhandle residents. They are also more likely to have children in their households. Thus, they are contributing to stabilize and in some cases increase the population of the area.

In addition, the majority of the newcomers are in their prime earning years, so they are increasing the labor force in the region. Many new residents possess professional occupation skills and business, management and financial operations skills. Many were also involved in their previous community, thus bringing volunteer and leadership experience to their new location. Some new residents have entrepreneurial backgrounds and have an interest in starting a business in their new community.

New residents come from many different locations, arriving from 38 different states. As expected though, most come from other parts of Nebraska or from the adjacent states of Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota and Kansas. The majority come from larger places, as they had previously resided in a more metropolitan county.

Many were long-term residents in their previous community. While one quarter of the new residents moved here alone, most brought a spouse, partner or children with them. Although a slight majority of new residents had lived in Nebraska before, many new residents moved to the Nebraska Panhandle without any prior experience in the area.

The low, predominately aging, population and the number of adults working multiple jobs results in a significant decrease to limited volunteer resource pool to get things done.

Socio Economic

Panhandle residents are poorer than those living in other parts of Nebraska and the nation. Forty-one percent of area children live in poverty in single-parent homes; 58% of those in poverty in the region live in families with two parents. Nearly 14% of Panhandle residents have incomes at/or below the federally defined poverty level. One of the 11 counties has one of the nation's 10 lowest per capita personal incomes. The proportion of residents living in poverty was generally higher for racial/ethnic minority groups than for whites.

There are no current statistics that can adequately demonstrate the impact of the economic recession on the region. Free and Reduced Lunch rates are generally recognized as an indicator of poverty. However, in many communities in the Panhandle families will not complete forms for FRL due to stigma, perceived lack of community confidentiality and privacy. As a result, there is not only the inability to accurately assess the impact of the recession on children, but school districts are financially impacted by reductions in funding. In at least one community, this factor resulted in a loss of funding for an after school program.

Education

Preschools and child care facilities in the Panhandle vary widely, with some estimates that more than 50% of the daycare homes being unlicensed. There are 73 family child care home I providers, 48 family child care home II providers, 57 child care centers and 16 licensed preschools. Because of the high number of single parents and parents working two jobs, day care is an extremely difficult issue for many in this area.

In the public school system, the Panhandle has 473 students in 16 preschools, 7,497 students in 37 K-6 schools, 2,211 students in 23 grade 7-8 schools and 4,680 students in 21 high schools for a total of 14,861 students. In addition, there are 480 students in private schools in the Panhandle and 327 students who are home-schooled.

The Pine Ridge Job Corps, a no-cost education and vocational training program administered by the U.S. Department of Labor that helps young people ages 16 through 24 get a better job, make more money, and take control of their lives, is also located in the Panhandle, near Chadron. Their enrollment includes 224 students, all of whom are residents at the center. They offer vocational training in union construction trades (carpentry, bricklaying and painting) and non-union trades such as business, warehouse and maintenance.

The Panhandle also has one state college, one community college and offers a vast number of services from the University of Nebraska in the Panhandle. Chadron State College served 2,287 undergraduate students in the 2007-08 term, an increase from both previous years. Enrollment for the current school year has also increased. There were 439 grad students enrolled at CSC in 2007-08.

Western Nebraska Community College has campuses in Scottsbluff, Alliance and Sidney. With 4,083 students enrolled in the fall of 2008, the college offers more than 80 degree and certificate plans.

The University of Nebraska has offices in each of the 11 counties, with one to three educators in each location. In addition, the Panhandle Research & Education Center in Scottsbluff houses 19 faculty with appointments in agriculture and family consumer sciences. Most of the faculty hold joint appointments in research and extension.

Overall, 16.6% of area residents age 25 and older have less than a high school education, compared to 13.4% statewide. The proportion of area residents in this age group that had not completed high school was higher among Hispanic Americans (51.9%), African Americans (31.4%) and Native Americans (30.4%) than it was among whites (14.9%).

Community education programs are implemented by WNCC and other systems in the Panhandle, however prevention training is managed through the Panhandle Partnership's own Training Academy. The academy is a partnership of WNCC, Panhandle Partnership for Health and Human Services, Inc., Panhandle Public Health District and the Rural Nebraska Healthcare Network.

Prevention trainings have included Communities Mobilizing for Change (on Alcohol), community organizing and facilitation.

A complete description of the Training Academy, the impact of the Academy on developing and sustaining coalition capacity, implementation of regional initiatives, development of quality staff resources and community knowledge is contained in the coalition description. A listing of current courses is also contained in the coalition description section about the Academy.

An example of the linkage between the Training Academy and regional approaches to Child Well Being indicators is seen in the implementation of the regional substance use prevention work. The Training Academy offers courses to train organizers from 11 counties in the nationally- recognized evidence-based best practice for Communities Mobilizing for Change (on Alcohol).

Skill sets include community organizing, actions for effecting meaningful change and facilitation. In addition, the regional prevention system for Child Well Being has been enhanced through trainings on substance abuse, developmental assets, Adverse Childhood Experiences, Bridges out of Poverty, a Call to Action on High School Completion, enforcing underage drinking, Love & Logic, federal funds management, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, public information officer training, professional development, school refusal behavior and social responsibility therapy, QPR (Question, Persuade & Refer) suicide prevention gatekeepers, sustainability, stress management (for parents and other caregivers) and individual special events speakers for youth and families.

Child Well Being Indicators and Data

Child Well Being indicator data is provided by the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation as part of the state wide efforts to plan and track for a core set of common data. In addition, the Panhandle compiles and collects additional data from state, federal and local sources. All Child Well Being indicator data are included in a separate document.

Economic

The economic bases for most communities in western Nebraska are agriculture or the railroad, with limited manufacturing and retail programs. One in three Nebraska jobs is tied to agriculture. In the past year, the demand for agricultural products and the continued growth of this industry helped limit the effects of the national economic slowdown in our communities.

However, while agriculture has enjoyed a recent upswing in commodity prices, the number of farmers supporting families on off-farm jobs and two family members working full time continues to increase.

K-12 schools are also major employers in the smaller towns. In recent times, the economy has hit manufacturing and the railroad especially hard, with one community experiencing layoffs of 15-20% of railroad employees overnight. Railroad layoffs prompted by the recession have brought people, some from as far away as California and New Mexico, to Nebraska rail hubs in Alliance and North Platte as union workers claim jobs held by people with less seniority.

Unemployment rates for Nebraska are generally lower than the national trends. However in many greater Nebraska communities people work more than one part time job. In one county, 60% of the high school students indicated they would like to live in the county as adults if they could have an adequate income.

Many communities are working on comprehensive economic development efforts. Entrepreneurship and small businesses are very important in the Panhandle counties. Various local and state efforts promote entrepreneurship in high schools and among adults, working on Main Street and in home, farm and ranch-based businesses.

Other migration trends are being noted and tracked within counties. New census data is anticipated to confirm and provide further details. Some counties are seeing an increase in land sales to non-residents. For example, Garden County has 60% non-resident land owners.

Some counties also note that during the past decades the number of farm and ranch families has decreased. Within the same county, there is also an increase of very-low income families moving into the area due to the low cost of housing. At the same time, there are people with significant resources who are either buying land as investments or who are moving into the area.

Major Historical Events and Forces

Western Nebraska is formed, body and soul, by the ag community and the railroads. The frontiers of rural Nebraska saw towns miles apart and existing primarily along the railroad line. Those trends continue today, with the smallest communities continuing to become smaller as many of the younger population move to larger cities in eastern Nebraska and other states.

Rural communities band together to develop programs and funding opportunities through coalitions such as the Panhandle Partnership and the development of the Panhandle Public Health District. The eight local hospitals work together on many projects. Specialists from the regional hospital and another larger hospital in Rapid City, So. Dak., visit many of the local hospitals on a regular schedule to see patients near their homes.

Unfortunately for the local economies, patients and shoppers continue to travel outside their community to see physicians and make larger purchases. Small, independent businesses have suffered the "ghost town" syndrome for years.

Despite the gloom and doom forecasts for the economy, health and human services agencies continue to work well together, developing assessments, building capacity, sharing training and making plans to assist the young people in their communities and the older individuals they serve.

In the decade since the last census, the Panhandle has seen a nearly 10% drop in population. Every county in the Panhandle has lost population.

Political Factors

Local and regional political leaders struggle to continue services in a dwindling population and even more quickly shrinking economy. Regional boards of directors, such as Panhandle Public Health District, Region I Office of Human Development and Behavioral Health Authority, Western Area Office on Aging, Panhandle Area Development District and the Panhandle Partnership, take leadership roles in cooperative efforts to develop programs to assist children and families in health and human services.

There are many opportunities for community members to learn about and participate in various aspects of Child Well Being. Often participation is based on a current issue or event in a community. There was broad community participation for the regional assessment and planning for alcohol use in 2008-09. Components of Child Well Being currently receiving high interest include youth suicide prevention and adolescent pregnancy. As with many regional initiatives such efforts often begin with a high energy county group and then evolve to region wide efforts. Community leaders, including those elected, appointed, faith-based and leading by example, step up when they see a need for children's well being to be protected.