



\*\* This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/rural-health-workers-marysville>

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### **Marysville retiree jumps at chance to help residents with health care info and access**

Community health workers are needed in rural areas, Wessel says

*By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service*

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Retirement was fine – for a while – but when Arlene Wessel was asked about helping residents of Marysville with their health care needs, she was more than willing to step up.

Wessel, a retired nursing home administrator, is a community health worker in K-State Research and Extension’s Marshall County office, a post she says capitalizes on her background as a farmer and registered nurse.

“It just seemed like a good fit,” Wessel said. “A lot of people in our community know me, probably from my time with the nursing home, and I can relate to farmers. It just seems like a good fit to be a community health worker in our rural area.”

[The Rural Ag Health Community Health Worker project](#) focuses on sustaining the health and safety of rural Kansans and the agricultural workforce.

The program in Marysville and Marshall County was spurred by financial support from the [K-State 105 program](#), which Kansas State University officials say was established to support economic growth and advancement in Kansas.

K-State 105 leverages the statewide K-State Research and Extension network to deliver the full breadth of the university's collective knowledge and solution-driven innovation to every Kansan, right where they live and work.

Additionally, K-State 105 forges the connections and partnerships that create access to additional expertise within other state institutions and agencies, nonprofits and organizations — all part of an effort to build additional capacities and strengths in each of the 105 counties in the state.

Wessel, who originally volunteered to help Marysville residents with health care information but now works three days a week from the extension office, said her work includes helping older residents sign up for Medicare, which often leads to discussions about other needs.

“Some people need transportation to the doctor, or they didn’t understand the explanation of Medicare benefits that they received,” she said. “Or, they’re concerned about stress and their ability to keep working. Some people have concerns about their elderly parents, or maybe about their own health, hypertension, diabetes, weight loss and other issues.”

Elaine Johannes, the Kansas Health Foundation’s Distinguished Professor of Community Health at Kansas State University, said being an advocate for the community’s residents is the essence of what a community health worker is meant to do.

“They are available to their community,” Johannes said. “Their scope of practice includes community education and community events, and then listening to residents about health-related social needs like access to health insurance, transportation, food and stable housing. Then, community health workers braid services together to address those needs.”

Johannes notes that community health workers have a history in the United States, but mostly in metropolitan areas, “where there’s a large client pool and a lot of health providers.”

“But when we think about the rural frontier and access to health care, that’s a pain point,” she said. “Providers aren’t as readily available. So a community health worker like Arlene is not only able to identify support for people, but she’s also identifying gaps that can be heard by provider systems such as the health department and others.”

Just weeks into her new position, Wessel says there is a great need in rural communities like Marysville.

“There are a lot of people out there that qualify for insurance, but they don’t know it, or they need help to get it,” she said. “Our entire medical system will work better if these people have insurance and have someone to help them get into the medical system. That’s the role of the community health worker. We’re needed. If we don’t get people the care they need, our community’s health outcomes are going to be poor. We can help to close those gaps.”

Community health workers are currently in just a few northeast Kansas counties, but officials hope to expand through the state. Interested persons can check with their [local K-State Research and Extension office](#) for information.

More information about the Rural Ag Health Community Health Worker project is [available online](#). Learn more about K-State 105 at [k-state.edu/105](https://www.k-state.edu/105).

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**FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS:** Links used in this story  
Rural Ag Health Community Health Worker project, <https://www.k-state.edu/105/projects/rural-ag-health-community-health-worker.html>

K-State 105, <https://www.k-state.edu/105>

Kansas Division of Public Health (community health workers), <https://www.kdhe.ks.gov/1770/Community-Health-Workers>

K-State Research and Extension statewide locations, <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations>

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