

Community Matters Now



A bi-monthly publication for Iowa leaders from Extension and Outreach Community and Economic Development

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS HELP IOWA PUBLIC RADIO FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS WITH NON-TRADITIONAL AUDIENCES

By Mary Weinand | Community Development Specialist

This year, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach's Community and Economic Development (CED) unit facilitated community conversations between Iowa Public Radio (IPR) news staff and Iowans in five communities to help IPR in its effort to develop relationships with underserved audiences.

"We know we have not done the job we'd like to in serving all Iowans, and we are working to do better," said Katherine Perkins, IPR executive producer.

IPR recognized that ISU Extension and Outreach has relationships with numerous and diverse communities across the state. The CED program in particular has fostered relationships with many important partners and non-traditional audiences, such as SALUD! in Storm Lake and 1619 Freedom School in Waterloo.

In fall 2022, a team of CED specialists including Himar Hernández, Omar Padilla, Julie Robison, Aimee Viniard-Weideman, and Mary Weinand met with IPR staff to develop strategies and to identify potential audiences. During the design phase of the project, the team recognized the importance of building trust and relationships and decided to conduct conversations with a small groups of eight to 12 participants and IPR news staff. Locations and the types of communities to involve were discussed (e.g., African American, Latino, small business, faith based).

The two-hour community conversations were conducted from the end of June through September 2023 in Des Moines, Fort Dodge, Storm Lake, Waterloo, and West Liberty. The agenda was designed to promote conversations and participant engagement.



A group of African Americans participated in the community conversation in Des Moines.

Following introductions and a brief overview, the facilitators asked prompt questions such as "When you think of your community, what are you most proud of?" or "What is your community struggling with?" Participants were invited to share their responses and group them into themes. The group shared a meal either before or after the conversation.

CED facilitators met after each session to debrief internally and checked in with IPR team members to ensure that goals were being met.

Although each community was unique, some common themes emerged from the five conversations:

- Concerns about community perception—media representation
- Housing—multifamily, rental
- Cultivating new leaders
- Diversity and inclusion
- Crime or perception of crime
- Cultivating natural amenities
- Community assets—people, history

While recruiting participants was a challenge in some locations, the team facilitated conversations with approximately 60 people, resulting in many positive relationships. IPR had the opportunity to introduce new staff to the communities and developed many story ideas that will lead to continued partnerships.

ONLINE RESOURCES

[LEADING COMMUNITIES
PLACE-BASED LEADERSHIP
PROGRAM](#)

[EXTENSION AND OUTREACH
INDICATORS PROGRAM](#)

[DATA SCIENCE FOR THE
PUBLIC GOOD YOUNG
SCHOLARS PROGRAM](#)

[FOOD, FARM AND
ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT](#)

GREETINGS FROM OUR PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Community Matters Now derives from our Community and Economic Development (CED) group, one of four units that comprise Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Sometimes I wonder if ISU Extension and *Engagement* might be a better name. This edition of our publication reinforces this thought and the sentiment that I often hear from my colleagues.

“Extension” reinforces that land-grant pact that ISU made in its founding: to forever extend its research to the citizens of Iowa. Our work in data analysis and now artificial intelligence harnessed to address community challenges in our food system, infrastructure, and housing exemplifies this pact. Through the Data Science for the Public Good project, our team at CED collaborated with students to extend

cutting-edge research to some of the most vexing challenges facing Iowa communities.

Our work with Iowa Public Radio and the Iowa Small Town Poll highlights CED’s commitment to going beyond one-way outreach to relationships based on engagement. Engaging communities means listening and learning from each other. Unexpected outcomes can surface, decisions to progress often result, and—almost always—relationships emerge that help resolve today’s challenges and provide an array of resources to address tomorrow’s tests. CED is honored to be a resource for Iowa Public Radio and to our colleagues across the university for our engagement work with you, our Iowa communities. Now, I don’t expect a name change anytime soon, but if it does happen, remember that you heard it in *Community Matters Now* first!

To reinforce this commitment to engagement, I am pleased to introduce our newest member of CED, Dr. Scott Samuelson. Scott is an author, scholar, and educator dedicated to making philosophy accessible and relevant to all. He was most recently a teacher at Kirkwood Community College. He will continue his efforts with our CED team, working with us to engage communities throughout the state while also serving as a faculty member in the Department of Philosophy.



Erin Olson-Douglas
Program Director, Iowa State University
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Economic Development

IOWA SMALL TOWN POLL OFFERS INSIGHTS INTO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING

By Esther Crompton | Communications Specialist

Towns across Iowa will soon be participating in the Iowa Small Town Poll. This once-in-a-decade poll is funded by a four-year, \$650,000 grant from USDA and will provide vital insight into rural communities and serve as the impetus for new programming and engagement from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Community and Economic Development (CED).

“The poll provides foundational data to help rural communities make decisions about needs,” said David Peters, a sociology professor and rural sociologist for ISU Extension and Outreach who coordinates the poll. “Not everyone is involved in community groups and speaks up to share their opinions. Asking these questions in a systematic way helps people think about specific community issues.”

The 2024 poll will expand on methods piloted in a smaller survey during the COVID-19 pandemic, with partner organizations in some communities helping with data collection and

translation. The approach is an attempt to give community leaders in especially diverse towns a better chance to hear from underrepresented residents, Peters said.

Using data from the poll, the project team, which includes expertise from Das Biswa, associate professor of community and regional planning and extension specialist, will select 20 towns for follow-up focus groups. The deeper study of those communities will help identify strategies that promote openness to assimilating newcomers, forming the basis of a new program that ISU Extension and Outreach will offer.

“We are doing more than collecting data. We’re using it to serve Iowans,” said Himar Hernández, CED assistant program director. “In 2014, we used the Iowa Small Town Poll data as the impetus for Leading Communities, a six-month program to help community leaders build skills and local connections. A decade later, we will

be using data from the new poll to do something similar,” said Hernández.

The Leading Communities initiative has yielded meaningful impacts across Iowa. “From cultivating enhanced social capital and fostering enduring relationships between public officials and decision-makers to catalyzing developments like childcare centers, attracting niche businesses, and boosting downtown housing—the program’s impact has been palpable,” said Hernández.

“A cornerstone of the Leading Communities program’s success has always been our ability to delve into the data, understand its nuances, and derive actionable insights tailored for each community,” Hernández said. “With this new program, we aspire to further serve Iowa by equipping communities with the tools to interpret data and pinpoint the most effective solutions tailored to their unique challenges.”

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DATA STUDENTS TACKLE PROJECTS RANGING FROM LOCAL FOOD MARKETS & BUSINESS SUPPORT TO AI & HOUSING

By Esther Crompton | Communications Specialist

This summer, [Data Science for the Public Good \(DSPG\) Young Scholars](#) program united eleven eager scholars across Iowa. Immersed in the program, these scholars—seven undergraduates and four graduates—harnessed statistics, computation, and social insights, laying the groundwork to effect change in Iowa communities.

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach's Community and Economic Development (CED) unit has offered DSPG Young Scholars for four years. However, 2023 was the first year that it was conducted primarily in person.

"Opportunities like DSPG, which blend a keen drive to address societal challenges with the nuances of data science, are invaluable learning platforms," said Harun Çelik, a PhD student in history at ISU.

Having participated in the DSPG program twice, Çelik emphasized its holistic approach to data science: "It's taught me that mastering the technical aspects is just half the battle. The true art lies in understanding the rationale behind our work and leveraging our skills to address pressing public concerns."

The DSPG Young Scholars undertook one of three distinct projects while collectively collaborating on a fourth. Two of these initiatives, backed by the [AI Institute for Resilient Agriculture](#) (AIIRA), aimed to address both local agriculture and rural housing.

Guided by Rakesh Shah, CED specialist, and Lisa Bates, CED assistant director and community development specialist, students delved into the "Data-Driven Insights for Local Food Markets" project, aiming to rejuvenate local food markets by using insights to optimize crop distribution. Similarly, with Liesl Eathington, CED research scientist, and Chris Seeger, DSPG program director and professor of landscape architecture, at the helm, students embarked on the "AI-Driven Housing Evaluation for Rural Community Development" initiative. Utilizing web-scraping techniques, they began training an AI model to quickly identify housing conditions and help inform decision-making for rural housing investment and development initiatives. Both projects will be continued during the 2024 DSPG Program.

Reflecting on the experience, Seeger said, "Witnessing our students during DSPG, I saw more than just data management

and coding. It was the teamwork, co-learning of skills, and growth that stood out."

Under the expert guidance of Bailey Hanson, CED GIS and data analyst, students explored local food business support. The [Food, Farm, and Enterprise Development](#) (FFED) unit generously sponsored this third initiative. The project, "Using Data to Inform Decision Making for Rural Grocery Stores," had students actively developing a tool to help provide users with information on opening, inheriting, and operating a grocery store in their preferred rural location.

The final project, Walking Infrastructure Investigation (WINVEST), which all 11 scholars worked on, was led by Seeger and Gary Taylor, professor of community and regional planning. Funded by the Iowa Economic Development Authority's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, this project partnered with the councils of governments (CoGs) to provide on-the-ground data collection to accurately assess and map community infrastructure features to identify multiple projects appropriate for CDBG infrastructure funding. The DSPG team



The DSPG housing team works with research scientist Liesl Eathington.

visited neighborhoods in Grundy Center, New Hampton, and Independence.

"The projects our scholars undertook this summer aren't just academic exercises—they hold the promise of real-world impact. Seeing students work together makes me excited about the future of data-driven solutions in addressing our community challenges. I'm already looking forward to the next DSPG program, where we'll continue to foster this spirit of innovation and community impact," said Seeger.

Links to the project descriptions and final presentations are available on the [DSPG website](#). Additional CED members helping with this year's DSPG program include assistant scientist Sandra Burke and data analyst Jay Maxwell.

UPDATED HEALTH DATA FOR DECISION MAKERS NOW AVAILABLE

By Sandra Oberbroeckling | Program Specialist

In October, the Data and Technology team in Iowa State University Extension and Outreach's Community and Economic Development (CED) unit made the newest version of Health Data for Decision Makers (DDM) reports available on the ISU Extension and Outreach Indicators Program website.

DDMs are brief reports presenting a profile of a county, city, or region's demographic, economic, social, health, or housing characteristics.

This version of health DDMs include recently revised and updated data from more than 15 health-related sources. These data are indicators of the health

status of people in Iowa's counties and can be used for public health planning and action. These reports provide county-level data on selected causes of death and statistics on cancer, heart attacks, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, falls, and disability. These profiles also report on smoking, drinking, obesity, poor health, physical and mental distress, health-care facilities, health-care providers, health insurance coverage, and COVID-19 cases, rates, deaths, and vaccinations. Other socioeconomic indicators show food and housing issues, along with measures of age, education, income, and poverty.

The reports are available for free download on the [Indicators Program publications page](#).

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