

Integrated Voter Engagement in Southeast and Southwest Kansas



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**KANSAS HEALTH
FOUNDATION**

Kansas Appleseed Center for Law and Justice is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization dedicated to the belief that Kansans, working together, can build a more thriving, inclusive and just state.

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What is integrated voter engagement?

Integrated voter engagement (IVE) is an approach to civic participation that goes beyond traditional get-out-the-vote methods and focuses on building power and leadership within communities; engaging community members who are underrepresented yet most impacted by policy issues; and creating year-round, sustainable infrastructures for creating change.*

Southeast and Southwest Kansas communities know their unique strengths and perspectives are integral to what makes Kansas the state it is. Despite this, communities in these regions experience some of the worst statistical indicators for health outcomes in the state, including some of the lowest levels of civic engagement and voter turnout. To address these issues, Kansas Appleseed launched our IVE campaigns in these regions of the state. Our work began in Southeast Kansas in 2017 and in Southwest Kansas in 2019.

Target counties

Southeast Kansas:

Allen County	Montgomery County
Bourbon County	Neosho County
Cherokee County	Wilson County
Crawford County	Woodson County
Labette County	Anderson County

Southwest Kansas:

Finney County
Ford County
Grant County
Seward County
Stevens County

*Source: Kansas Health Foundation Integrated Voter Engagement Initiative: Health Depends on a Vibrant Democracy. Final Evaluation Report produced by Katie Fox and Lilit Hakobyan with Innovation Network. March 2021.



Goals and Tactics

By engaging and empowering potential voters during the past three years – specifically working-class Kansans; immigrants; and Black and Brown voters – Kansas Appleseed sought to:

- Expand political engagement around issues impacted by the election
- Increase representation among community members who are disenfranchised and too often ignored
- Raise people's expectations for what's possible in their communities

To achieve these goals, we utilized the following tactics:

- Relationship building with and among community members
- Working with communities to identify and act on the issues that mattered to them
- Direct mail and digital campaigns
- Online and in-person events, grassroots trainings, and candidate forums
- Text-banking, phone-banking, canvassing, (and more!)

Southeast and Southwest Kansans made their power known at the polls

Kansas Appleseed and community members began by building lists of people impacted by historical disenfranchisement efforts and who may need reminders to vote based on past turnout histories, economic and social data, and geography. This list became the group of folks that we sent postcards, text messages, phone calls, canvassers, and digital messages to encourage voter participation.

**Source: State of Kansas Office of the Secretary of State. Newsletter: The latest from Secretary Schwab. December 3, 2020.*

And it worked! **Southeast and Southwest Kansans' turnout in target communities increased by 12% among both groups in the most recent election in 2020.** Which beats out the 10% ceiling which recent research identifies as the limit which well-funded, high level political campaigns can accomplish. For additional comparison and context, voter turnout statewide increased by 3% between 2016 and 2020; an increase described by the Kansas Secretary of State as “historic” in his post-election audit.*

During the local election cycle in 2019, targeted Southeast Kansas counties increased their voter turnout an average of 9% as compared to the previous election cycle, using similar ‘get out the vote’ (GOTV) methods and tactics as 2020, but with an additional emphasis on local, relational organizing methods.

Southeast Kansas:

Target: 7,703 total voters
Turnout among target audience in 2016: 2,033 (26%)
Turnout among target audience in 2020: 2,945 (38%)
Total increase: 12%

Additionally, **the absolute change in turnout in our GOTV universe is an increase of 47.8%**, (which means that the people we sent mailers, digital reminders, phone calls, and GOTV texts saw a turnout increase of 47.8% between 2016 and 2020).

Southwest Kansas:

Target: 5,687 total voters
Turnout among target audience in 2016: 1,616 (28%)
Turnout among target audience in 2020: 2,286 (40%)
Total increase: 12%

The absolute change is the total number who voted in 2020 minus the total number who voted in 2016. In terms of percentage, it is $(2020 \text{ votes} - 2016 \text{ votes}) / 2016 \text{ votes}$. This is as opposed to relative change, which would factor in newly registered voters.

Layering Relational Tactics with Traditional Engagement

Kansas Appleseed utilized an ‘all of the above’ strategy to provide plenty of opportunities for engagement and to reach as many potential community members as possible. First among them was to incorporate lasting, relationship-based partnerships across the region.

The purpose of these relationships was two-fold: first, to ensure community-led engagement rather than “parachuting” into a region and then evacuating the area immediately after an election cycle. Secondly, to be able to focus efforts on actual community needs, rather than perceived community needs from outside of the region. Building relationships and listening to what grassroots leaders and potential leaders needed to effectively engage in the communities is the cornerstone to our entire integrated voter engagement effort.

As we transitioned to providing GOTV trainings, this meant that we were able to provide more than standardized informational events without input from community members and leaders. Instead, Kansas Appleseed tailored trainings, tactics, resources, and events to what the community communicated its needs to be. For example, instead of hosting a series of trainings and webinars covering the tenets of civic engagement, we provided specific trainings addressing what the community identified as barriers to engagement, such as the steps to file for local office, how to register voters during a pandemic, or foundational information about what roles local elected offices perform. While this commitment expends much more time, effort, and resources, it was vital the success of the IVE programming as we were able to help solve specific, community-based problems rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.



Bilingual mailers and digital ads

In 2019, we experimented with a hyper-targeted campaign including mailers, textbanking, digital ads. The messaging was tailored to how issues important to the community were impacted by elections. We scaled this experiment in 2020. See examples of the imagery we used below.



Messaging:

Elections impact who gets to make decisions about our kids' education, access to nutrition, and beyond. Your vote is a vote for their future.

Las elecciones impactan quien tomara las decisiones sobre la educación y la nutrición de nuestros niños, y mucho más. Tu voto es un voto por su futuro.



Messaging:

There are many reasons to vote. My family, my neighbors, and my state are mine. What are yours?

Hay muchas razones para votar. Mi familia, mis vecinos y mi estado son las mías. ¿Y las tuyas?



Messaging:

My neighbors and my hometown are important to me. Voting is a quick and easy way I can show that I care about my community.

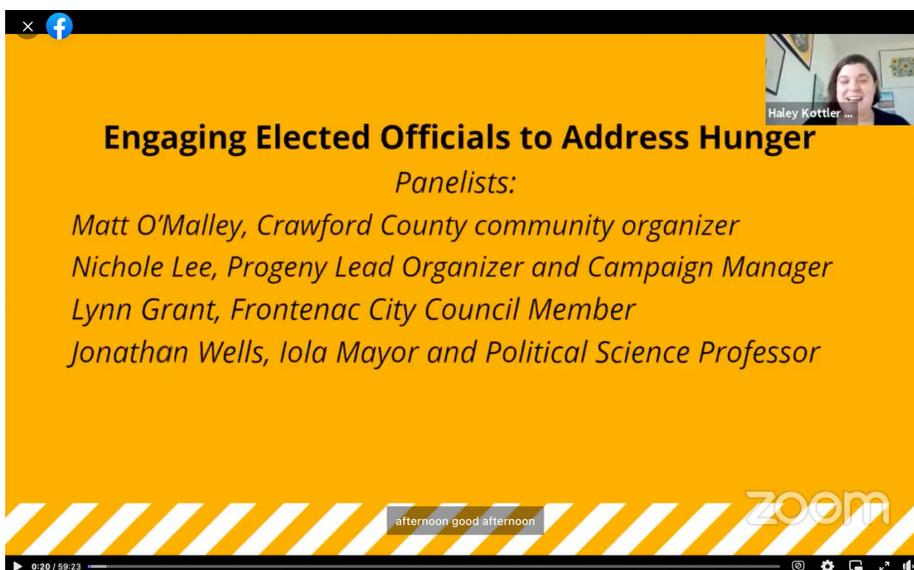
Mis vecinos y mi comunidad son importante para mí. El votar, es una manera fácil y rápida en la que puedo mostrar que me importante lo que pasa en mi comunidad.

Forums, trainings, and meetings

Events such as meetings, forums, and trainings are a large component of integrated voter engagement. Over the years we held trainings on getting on the ballot to registering voters and forums on how issues like hunger, juvenile justice, and more are impacted by elections. Amid COVID-19, we pivoted to online events.



On May 3, 2021, Crawford County Clerk Don Pyle joined us to walk through the steps one must take to get on the ballot.



We were joined by panelists on May 27, 2021 to highlight how hunger is on the ballot. Panelists included:

- Matt O'Malley, Crawford County non-profit/community organizer
- Nichole Lee, Progeny Lead Organizer and Campaign Manager
- Lynn Grant, Frontenac City Council Member
- Jonathan Wells, Lola Mayor and Political Science Professor



Run for office

Our series of nonpartisan trainings on grassroots campaigning was incredibly successful, equipping nine community members who expressed an interest in running for the school board and other local offices for the first time. Trainings were tailored to skills like filing with the county election clerk, ordering campaign materials such as yard signs, knocking on doors in the community, and communicating ideas effectively. In several counties where positions were often appointed rather than elected because of a lack of interest, primaries had to be held due to such an increased number of candidate filings.

Civic engagement—such as running for office—still runs into typical barriers, even with outside help. Costs to run a traditional political campaign, for example, can easily run into thousands of dollars, even at the local level. This is why Kansas Appleseed focused our trainings on grassroots tactics to teach the fundamentals of engaging with other community members with skills that can be transferred to avenues of civic engagement including community organizing.

Other barriers include the unexpected, like global pandemics. During the 2020 cycle, our integrated voter engagement work had to shift to socially distant and online methods. This included some solutions, such as texting voters instead of knocking on their doors or dropping off door hangers with scannable QR codes with useful voter information.

Advocacy actions and issue-based engagement

While voting itself is an integral part of integrated voter engagement, it is not the only way to measure and increase civic health. Non-voting metrics we used during our 2017-2020 voter engagement efforts involved promoting citizen-led advocacy actions. These actions include anything related to civic engagement that was not directly related to voting. Writing a public comment or letter to the editor, going to or organizing a rally, attending a government meeting, sending a message to a policymaker expressing a viewpoint are all important activities that contribute to a community's overall civic health. This elastic tactic became very helpful, making it possible for Kansas Appleseed to respond to the community and its challenges and interests in ways that made sense to the community rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach from the outside. Kansas Appleseed mobilized an average of 1,500 advocacy actions a year in Southeast Kansas alone since 2017.

Advocacy in action example:

In Iola, KS, community members were concerned about utility shut offs during COVID-19, so they advocated with the local municipalities to mitigate harm that was felt most deeply among community members experiencing hardship.

Advocacy in action example:

In Montgomery County, ballot drop boxes were not widely accessible during the 2020 election, so we organized public pressure campaign with community members for ballot box accessibility in Coffeyville, KS.

Conclusion

Civic engagement is vitally important to engaging with our communities to increase justice, health outcomes, and overall civic health.

Using voter data and some of the most advanced tactics and resources available, Kansas Appleseed substantially increased voter turnout and volunteer activism. The ability to use elastic goals and tactics that can conform to changing situations paid huge dividends when unexpected and seemingly unsurmountable challenges occur. While unexpected challenges such as a global pandemic initially made our voter engagement activities look much different than they have in the past, we were able to adapt our tactics to put together a very effective program.

Our integrated voter engagement was successful due to building real, on-the-ground relationships within the community and letting the community itself guide the direction of the campaign.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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