



Posted on Sun, Sep. 16, 2007

Group looks across state to develop leaders

BY CHRISTINA M. WOODS
The Wichita Eagle

The question is intentionally broad: "Of all the things we could do to cultivate civic leadership in Kansas, what should we do?"

Answers from six diverse focus groups this month could help organizers of the nonprofit Kansas Leadership Center create initiatives to improve leadership in communities, businesses and institutions across the state.

"Reaching out to Kansans all across the state will give the leadership center the opportunity to hear perspectives that, otherwise, may never have been voiced," said Steve Coen, vice president for administration for the Kansas Health Foundation, which is awarding the leadership center \$30 million over 10 years. "This up-front investment of time and energy is exactly what it will take to establish the leadership center as a credible resource for generations of Kansas leaders."

Center organizers and facilitators with Wichita State University's Self-Help Network have conducted the focus groups, which have zeroed in on rural, urban and racial/ethnic issues, among others.

"It sounded like their intentions are pretty good," said Charles Rivera, a board member for the Wichita Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, who attended a focus group with Hispanics last week. "They're reaching across a lot of ethnic boundaries."

A lack of Hispanic leaders, concerns about access to health care, and higher education were some of the issues the group discussed, Rivera said.

Susan Keim, who lives in Lawrence and is working on a doctorate in public administration at the University of Kansas, participated in a focus group on urban issues. She said she thinks the center's mission could create a national model.

"Nothing like this has ever been done before in the entire country, probably the entire world," she said, "and so they don't take this responsibility lightly and it shows."

Organizers have also interviewed more than 20 professionals in areas from economics to education to medicine.

Ed O'Malley, a former state legislator from Johnson County who is the president and chief executive of the leadership center, said specific initiatives could be announced in early 2008.

O'Malley said Wichitans, unlike other Kansans, are fortunate to have gone through a similar process during Visioneering Wichita, the city's 20-year improvement plan, which kicked off in 2004.

"We are the stewards of an amazing gift that's been given to the people of Kansas but we can't do it on our own," O'Malley said about the importance of gathering input. "We simply hope people are not talked out."

Rep. Oletha Faust-Goudeau, who served with O'Malley in the legislature, said she's confident in his leadership.

"I know he's passionate and willing to listen, learn and help address the need," Faust-Goudeau said.

"I know the program is fairly new, I know it's going to take a while to implement and address the issues... but I'm banking on the leadership center and hopeful for some results."

Organizers say Kansans' cooperative spirit and volunteerism are advantages when trying to grow leaders.

The Corporation for National and Community Service recently released a study that ranked Kansas in the top five states for its volunteerism.

According to the report, a little more than one-fourth of Kansans between ages 16 and 24 are volunteers, slightly more than the national average. About half of people ages 35 to 54 volunteer, compared with a third of adults nationwide. And one-third of those over age 65 in Kansas are volunteers, compared with one-fourth nationwide.

Siobhan Dugan, public affairs specialist for the corporation, said Kansas' \$30 million investment in leadership is telling.

"Certainly the project that's going on in Kansas sounds like it's a very good one that should have long-term results for civic leadership within the state," Dugan said. "We applaud those initiatives."

Reach Christina M. Woods at 316-269-6791 or cwoods@wichitaeagle.com.

© 2007 Wichita Eagle and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansas.com>