



NCRCRD 2025 Grants Awarded

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North Central Region Small Grants

Smartphones, Smart Families: Fostering child and family well-being for rural North Central Region households in a digital age

September 30, 2025

Principal Investigator: Allen Barton, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Co-Principal Investigator:

Bonnie Brewer, Kansas State University

Patrice Powers-Barker, The Ohio State University

Erin Ruggiero, The Ohio State University

Proposal Abstract:

Rapid technological advances have led to pronounced changes throughout society, including within the home. Given this pervasive reach and well-documented effects on individuals' health and well-being, few topics are more germane – and more in need of unbiased, evidence-based resources – than technology use within families. The current project, in response, will provide rural families in the North Central Region (NCR) with timely, practical resources to help navigate household technology use. Specific aims of the project are: (1) to create and disseminate a *Smartphones, Smart Families Survival Kit*, (2) to develop a series of informational resources on pertinent technology-related issues families are facing, and (3) to evaluate the reach and impact of project resources. With smartphone ownership in rural areas now at similar levels as urban areas, the current project provides an important opportunity to develop and disseminate resources to improve the well-being of children, families, and their rural NCR communities.

Award: \$39,941

North Central Region Small Grants

Addressing Household Food Waste in Rural Communities

September 30, 2025

Principal Investigator: Rachel O'Halloran, University of Missouri Extension

Co-Principal Investigators: Carrie Elsen, University of Missouri Extension

Proposal Abstract:

Rural communities have less access to community waste management resources than urban centers, including food waste. Food waste is a significant contributor to landfills throughout the United States paying into environmental and community concerns. The 'Freeze It!' program developed by the University of Missouri Extension provides rural communities with education on household level interventions to limit food waste through family meal management. Limiting household food waste saves consumers money on their grocery budget, reduces strain on solid waste management districts to collect and transport food waste, and supports efficient food systems. By educating rural residents on reducing food waste through family meal management, this project seeks to reduce the volume of food waste produced, support healthy meal habits, and develop sustainable procedures for the 'Freeze It!' program. To deliver 'Freeze It!' additional outcomes data, training for instructors on securing local funds, and the development of program management protocols are needed.

Awarded: \$23,953

North Central Region Small Grants

Financial Caregiving Needs Assessment of Older Adults and Caregivers

September 30, 2025

Principal Investigator: Naomi R. Meinertz, University of Missouri

Co-Principal Investigators: Marco Pantoja, University of Missouri

Proposal Abstract:

Family caregivers often help older adults with their finances in later life (e.g., financial management, applying for Medicaid services). This responsibility limits a caregiver's ability to save for retirement and may exacerbate the negative consequences of caregiving, such as burden and depression, particularly for rural caregivers. Using a survey for caregivers and focus groups for older adults, this mixed method needs assessment aims to (1) identify knowledge gaps about family financial caregiving, (2) recognize whether and how families prepare for financial caregiving, and (3) understand the feasibility of a financial caregiving program in the North Central Region. These needs assessment results will inform the adaptation of the "Finances of Caregiving" program to help prepare families for financial caregiving by acknowledging the role of family relationships in finances. The pilot implementation and evaluation of the program will be supported by an application to the 2026 Rural Health and Safety Education grant.

Award: \$25,000

North Central Region Thematic Working Groups

North Central Region Quality Childcare Network

September 30, 2025

Co-Principal Investigators: Rae Baker The Ohio State University; Aileen Garcia, University of Missouri; and Amy Napoli, University of Nebraska

Project Summary:

Families in rural communities have limited access to quality childcare for their children compared to urban families. Many rural communities are childcare deserts—communities lacking sufficient childcare. Access to high-quality childcare not only impacts families and children but also communities and employers. Quality childcare supports the success of local businesses, parental participation in the workforce, and children’s long-term success. Started in April 2023 with three members and now including 12 members from seven states, the North Central Quality Childcare (NCQC) Network is a cohort of Extension professionals from the North Central Region who are interested in increasing the quantity and quality of childcare opportunities. We plan to provide professional development and networking for Extension professionals on how to increase local access to high-quality childcare. With this grant, we would 1) solidify the presence of the NCQC Networking group, 2) conduct a comprehensive literature review and assessment of how North Central Extension is addressing the need for quality childcare, and 3) provide professional development through webinars and resources to increase the skills and knowledge needed to expand childcare access in rural communities. Establishing a strong networking group will have ongoing benefits in supporting resilient communities that contribute to the well-being of children, families, and all community members, which will have both short- and long-term impacts on workforce development and are well aligned with the 2025 goals and priorities of NCRCD.

The working group is comprised of thirteen Extension professionals from land-grant universities in six states in the North Central region (Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and South Dakota). Each member brings experience and expertise in research and/or outreach focused on childcare and early childhood education.

Awarded: 34,980