



Cornhusker Economics

Rural Movers Studies...People Are Moving for Community Attributes and Jobs

Rural resident recruitment is evolving and expanding in its scope. As smaller rural areas continue to depopulate, communities struggle to maintain vital services and businesses. Traditional recruitment efforts have focused on industrial recruitment and attraction. However, with low unemployment rates and a shrinking labor supply, communities find themselves expanding their recruitment efforts to also focus on creative place-making, tourism and offering a welcoming environment for individuals to stay, work and raise their families. Additionally, moving from a local strategy to a regionally-focused effort is creating opportunities for individuals to choose rural locales.

University of Minnesota researchers conducted a Rural Movers Study to determine the motivations of people who moved within one to five years to rural Minnesota communities. Their findings are not unlike earlier research conducted at the University of Nebraska in 2008. The Rural Movers Study showed that 31% of respondents moved due to a job or job offer. However, this was not one of the primary reasons individuals moved. For those individuals who did not move for employment, 76% wanted to find a good environment for raising their children, 67% moved to be closer to relatives, 64% looked for a safe place to live, 64% wanted to take advantage of the slower pace of life, 64% wanted to live in a smaller community and 60% looked for a less congested place to live. These are attributes that many rural communities can provide for its current and prospective residents.

The study also found that only 25% of the new residents were returning to a place they lived before. That means 75% of new residents were new to the community and had no prior affiliation with that community. When asked if they felt the community was welcoming and if they were likely to be living in that community five years from the time of the study, 86% in the respondents who strongly agreed their community was welcoming were likely to live there in five years. Forty-four percent of respondents who did not feel welcomed in the community indicated that they would likely be living in that community five years later. That is a significant change as to whether individuals choose to stay or leave a community due to its community attributes and welcoming environment.

In 2021, Montana State University replicated the Rural Movers Study. Their findings also indicated that quality-of-life factors were more important than employment reasons. Sixty-four percent wanted to find a desirable natural environment, 62% wanted a less congested place to live, 58% wanted a slower pace of life, 58% wanted to live in a smaller community. Conversely, only 20% wanted to find a job that allowed for a better work-life balance and 19% moved to take on a new job. Study participants were also asked how they engaged with the community. Forty-nine percent stated that they exchanged small favors or help to a neighbor, 40% socialized with long-time community residents and 40% met people in public settings to socialize. However, newcomer engagement with civic or community projects was much lower, 11% at-

tended a public meeting to discuss town or school affairs, 15% worked on a community or regional project; 23% volunteered and 23% attended a club or organization meeting.

Like the Minnesota research, Montana returnees were only 22% of the study respondents with 76% indicating that they had no prior associations with the community to which they moved. Additionally, 75% indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that their community was welcoming of new residents and 76% strongly agreed or agreed that five years from the time of the study that they would most likely be living in their community.

These two studies show that new resident recruitment should be expanded beyond a jobs-first strategy or on returnees. Rather it should focus on the assets and attributes of the rural community and its ability to meet the desired needs of a variety of potential newcomers.

In the earlier research conducted by the University of Nebraska, suggested strategies to attract individuals included:

- Create opportunities for newcomers to actively participate in civic and organizational functions.
- Develop networking opportunities for new residents.
- Develop individual job and career opportunities for newcomers.
- Encourage an open-minded community attitude toward new residents and new ideas.
- Have a clear and positive community vision for the future.
- Create opportunities for leadership development.
- Increase housing availability.
- Identify job opportunities (both locally and regionally).
- Increase the availability of services (both locally and regionally).
- Create a safe environment.

Minnesota researchers view strategies on a continuum, from “ad hoc” activities that are organic and conducted by volunteers for welcoming new members to “fully-funded, strategic and multichannel” recruitment programs. These more comprehensive strategies are usually implemented by a community organization, such as the chamber, economic development office, nonprofit, or community foundation. They may include creating a brand for the community or region, websites, printed materials, and private/public collaboration that require

identification of assets, resources, and jobs to accomplish this larger, coordinated effort.

Finally, having both a local and a regional recruitment strategy benefits the surrounding area. According to Nebraska Department of Labor, 42.3% of all Nebraska employed individuals travel more than 20 minutes to get to work, which is a greater distance in rural areas over urban city driving. Forty Nebraska counties employ less than 50% of their working residents while the remaining travel to other counties. Another 13 counties have more residents traveling outside of the county than employed within the county. Thus, regional recruitment efforts maybe essential to providing options for newcomers who are looking for job opportunities in larger communities and yet want to enjoy the small-town living.

To learn more about how your community or county can develop a resident recruitment (and retention) strategy, contact [Rural Prosperity Nebraska](#) Extension Educators about Marketing Hometown America (MHA) and First Impressions programming. MHA is a community engagement effort designed to help communities rediscover their assets and create new strategies to attract individuals to their communities. First Impressions assesses online and physical community assets for attracting tourists and potential newcomers looking to relocate.

References:

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Marilyn Schlake

Nebraska Rural Prosperity Educator
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
402-472-4138
mschlake1@unl.edu