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## Let's Help program cited as possible model for U.S.

By Phil Anderson  
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Let's Help's Heartland Share program soon could become a national model for government organizations attempting to serve rural communities by linking with nonprofit and faith-based agencies.

Thomas C. Dorr, undersecretary for Rural Development for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said he hoped to get the Heartland Share story to a broad audience of government and nonprofit leaders after a tour Thursday at the Let's Help complex, 200 S. Kansas Ave.

Dorr came away impressed by the large numbers of people served by Let's Help and Heartland Share, both in Topeka and other areas of Kansas, and the smooth distribution process that is in place. He said he would like to see Let's Help's and Heartland Share's work documented in a short film that could be used to show the far-reaching nature of the agency's work.



**Anthony Bush/The Capital-Journal**

Thomas Dorr, undersecretary for Rural Development of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, says the story of Let's Help's Heartland Share program needs to be told nationwide. On Thursday, he toured Let's Help with Colette Murphy, the organization's president and chief executive officer.

"It seems to be an incredibly well-thought-out, well-planned, well-run organization," Dorr said after his tour. "The work they're doing is nothing short of stunning, considering the number of employees and their budget."

Let's Help, which has a \$7 million annual budget, provides emergency services, food, clothing, job training and educational programs to low-income people in Topeka. It also operates Heartland Share, a program that celebrated its 15th anniversary earlier this month.

Heartland Share delivers low-cost boxes of food to volunteers in about 100 Kansas counties in exchange for community service.

The USDA Rural Development office, based in Topeka, and Heartland Share joined forces this month in an effort to bring needed services to rural areas of the state.

The USDA has funding to help rural communities in such areas as child care, affordable housing and infrastructure -- including water and tornado sirens. But the USDA state office lacked the contacts of an organization such as Let's Help and Heartland Share.

Colette Murphy, executive director of Let's Help, said the collaboration between Heartland Share and the USDA started nearly a year ago when the two organizations came together in October for a housing fair to help displaced Gulf Coast-area residents after Hurricane Katrina. Some local residents also were helped after October flooding north of Topeka.

Chuck Banks, state director of the Rural Development office, assisted with the housing fair and quickly saw the opportunity to integrate his organization's statewide mission of helping rural communities with already-existing

contacts Let's Help had established through its Heartland Share program.

Plans now are being made for the USDA and Heartland Share to conduct a series of regional workshops across Kansas to benefit rural areas. The workshops will highlight funding available through the USDA, as well as the Heartland Share program.

"A lot of positive things have come out of a horrible disaster," Murphy said. "We hope to continue helping the community."

Banks said it made sense for an organization such as the USDA Rural Development office to utilize the extensive resources of an agency like Let's Help-Heartland Share.

Additional government funding may be available to Let's Help and Heartland Share or to agencies in rural communities through the USDA, Banks said.

"Innovative things are happening here in Kansas," he said. "This is a great success story that we want to replicate nationally, so more people can benefit."

**Phil Anderson can be reached at (785) 295-1195 or [phil.anderson@cjonline.com](mailto:phil.anderson@cjonline.com).**