



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

YOUR RURAL NEWS FOR OVER 45 YEARS | LYONS, NEBRASKA | POPULATION 851 | SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER 2020

## A LIFETIME OF WHAT PAUL OLSON LOVES

BY NICK BERGIN, NICKB@CFRA.ORG, FORMER AND CURRENT CENTER FOR RURAL AFFAIRS STAFF MEMBERS CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ARTICLE

**P**aul Olson suffered a massive heart attack at age 31. “I thought, heck, I’ve got a lifetime ahead of me,” said Paul, now 87 and living in Lincoln, Nebraska. “This is all gravy. This is all a gift. I can do what I believe in. And, I did.”

Paul has committed his life to nurturing and sowing seeds of civil rights, rural education, Great Plains literary and historic studies, and social and environmental justice.

The Center for Rural Affairs recently honored Paul’s lifetime of service to protect our land and water and fight for a vibrant rural America by presenting him with the 2019 Seventh Generation Award.

Born in 1932 to a Lutheran lay pastor and a schoolteacher, Paul lived through the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. His father suffered hearing loss and moved the family to Wisconsin to farm.



Paul Olson served on the Center for Rural Affairs Board for four decades, and was honored with the 2019 Seventh Generation Award. | Photo submitted

“My parents were so absolutely broke from the Dust Bowl,” Paul said. “When they went up there, they had absolutely nothing.”

They rented the farm, cattle, and horses, and farmed for the better part of a decade.

“Area farmers supported a cooperative creamery and feed store,” Paul said. “The town meetings attracted an active crowd. Everybody threw in their two bits. It had

a sense of genuine Jeffersonian democracy.”

Paul developed a love of rural places and people, as well as an appreciation for the financial instability of being a multipurpose farmer.

The Olson family left farming in 1945 when Paul’s father contracted rheumatic fever. For their 10 years of work, his parents got \$2,200 at the auction. They moved to Nebraska where his mother supported the family by teaching in a one-room school near Ithaca.

Paul worked many jobs as a young man—farmhand, construction worker, house painter, and library assistant—before finding his way to academia and the University of Nebraska, where he taught for 50 years beginning in 1957.

Paul remembers meeting the founders of the Center, Marty Strange and Don Ralston, in 1978, at an event called The Prairie Project, which had presentations

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## MIDWEST FARMERS TOP LIST OF FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM RECIPIENTS

BY ANDREA HARTMAN, ANDREAH@CFRA.ORG

**W**hen the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the U.S., farmers and ranchers faced financial challenges because of market prices. However, farmers are resilient, and Ron Spicka is no exception.

A lifelong farmer, Ron’s agricultural roots go back generations.

His 400-acre farm in Saunders County, Nebraska, is a conventional corn and soybeans operation.

In May, the U.S. Department of Agriculture began offering the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) to farmers and ranchers.

Producers who experienced loss

—SEE FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM ON PAGE 5

# EDITOR'S NOTE

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

**A**cross the world, we continue to endure the coronavirus pandemic. Our work at the Center for Rural Affairs has evolved to support rural America through this time. One of the core values continuously on our minds is “CONSCIENCE that balances self-interest with an obligation to the common good and future generations.”

This spring, when faced with the question of pivoting areas of our work, we asked ourselves: will this benefit rural America? How does this affect future genera-

tions? What are the downfalls?

We jumped in to help small businesses affected, because, one by one these entrepreneurs build up our rural communities. We are gathering all the information we can to assist farmers and ranchers who are reeling from having to understand government programs on top of making changes to their operations. These two examples are just a selection of the many activities we have added in these past few months to keep rural America strong.

Throughout the Center’s history, when considering new areas



of work, or even adding employee health insurance benefits, we think about this value. Paul Olson, our Seventh Generation Award winner, talks about this and more in the front page feature.

Other areas of work continue, with conscience and the Center’s other core values, underlying our duty to support rural America.

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# LEGISLATION WOULD EXTEND LOAN FORGIVENESS TO RURAL BUSINESSES PREVIOUSLY LEFT BEHIND

BY TERESA HOFFMAN, TERESA@CFRA.ORG

**M**onths after the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act was signed into law, Congress is considering legislation that would include rural businesses and communities initially left out of the stimulus package.

The Rural Equal Aid (REA) Act, a bipartisan measure introduced on Aug. 6, led by U.S. Rep. Cindy Axne (D-IA), will provide needed relief to entities with loans through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development program. Currently, only businesses with loans through the Small Business Administration are eligible to have the principal, interest, and any as-

sociated fees owed on the covered loans for a six-month period. This has left rural businesses behind.

Under the new proposal, payment relief would extend to businesses with loans through the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program and the Intermediary Relending Program, as well as loans made to public and nonprofit organizations for community facilities, and to businesses, cooperatives, and nonprofits expanding in rural areas.

Johnathan Hladik, policy director for the Center for Rural Affairs, said passage of the REA Act is crucial not only for the business and community entities involved, but also rural America.

“Expanding support to rural businesses will provide parity for rural communities that have been hit hard by the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic,” said Johnathan. “These are the loans that keep main street vibrant, making it possible for small community financial institutions to grow local economies with local dollars.”

Co-sponsors of the House bill include Reps. Blunt Rochester (D-DE), Golden (D-ME), Balderson (R-OH), Scott (R-GA), and Tipton (R-CO). Sens. Tester (D-MT), King (I-ME), Romney (R-UT), Shaheen (D-NH), Coons (D-DE), and Perdue (R-GA) are leading the companion bill in the Senate.

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## PAPER & E-NEWS

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, sign up at the Center’s website, [cfra.org](http://cfra.org), or email us at [info@cfra.org](mailto:info@cfra.org).

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Paul Olson, center, wearing hat, participates in a Center for Rural Affairs Board of Directors meeting. In four decades, he helped bring structure to the board and laid the foundation of the Center's endowment fund, The Granary Foundation. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

## PAUL OLSON, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

on topics such as clean energy and consolidation of family farms. Writer Wendell Berry, another early Center for Rural Affairs supporter, was the keynote speaker.

Marty and Don extended an invitation to join the Center board. Paul had recently started the University of Nebraska Center for Great Plains Studies, a research and outreach program focused on the people, cultures, and natural environment of the Great Plains.

"The Center for Rural Affairs was so controversial at that time, I thought the university would probably fire me for joining that board," Paul said.

The organization ran counter to the central tenets of chemical industrial agriculture.

"The organic farming and sustainable agriculture movements were in their infancy," Paul said. "There was no local food movement. As America increased its reliance on fossil fuels, the Center advocated the exploration of alternative energy sources... You would hear faculty people just ranting about what a terrible thing the Center was and what a danger it was to society."

Paul went to his department chair.

"My chair, bless his heart, said, 'You have complete academic freedom.'"

Paul joined and found the board full of passion, but often lacking in organization. The Center knew what it was against but struggled

"MY RANT, MY OBSESSION, WAS TO REBUILD SMALL TOWNS, AND WITHIN THAT, TO REBUILD RURAL EDUCATION AS A SERVICE TO SMALL TOWNS."  
—PAUL OLSON

to find solutions in the face of major technological and economic shifts toward chemical and corporate agriculture.

"Sometimes I'd come home from board meetings and I'd think, 'Boy, we really thought some good thoughts.' And, then I would say, 'But, what did we do?'" he said

Paul helped bring order to the board and structure. It wasn't always popular, but work got done. That structure helped the Center for Rural Affairs persevere and serve rural America long after so many other mission-driven organizations born in the 1970s and 1980s died out. He also helped lay the foundation of the Center for Rural Affairs' endowment fund, The Granary Foundation.

He served on the Center board for four decades, including many years as board president, playing a crucial role in shaping it into the organization it is today.

"My rant, my obsession, was to rebuild small towns, and within that, to rebuild rural education as a service to small towns," Paul said of his time on the board.

Don remembers the lean beginnings of the organization and that Paul, along with fellow board member Connie Bowen, insisted the Center provide paid health insurance and contributions to a

retirement fund.

"Marty and I, who were responsible for raising the funds to pay for this, rolled our eyes and moaned to ourselves about having to implement these new employment policies on top of our main focus on slaying the corporate farming dragon," Don said. "Paul's empathy toward our staff has served the Center well over time."

Current Center for Rural Affairs Executive Director Brian Depew said Paul provided a gentle, yet powerful, voice in the boardroom.

"He offered both vision and clarity, carefully considered and beautifully articulated," Brian said.

Outside the Center for Rural Affairs, Paul has tirelessly fought for the ideals he believed in. He mediated between University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) students, faculty, and administration during the Vietnam War protests. He co-founded the Project English Center at UNL, co-founded UNL's Nebraska Writing Project Rural Institutes, and served as a long-time board member of Nebraskans for Peace.

Paul left the Center board in March 2019, yet remains a stalwart advocate for social, environmental, and literary missions.

He's doing what he loves.



# AFTER PANDEMIC HITS CLOSE TO HOME, CAFE OWNER CONTEMPLATES CHANGES

BY MOLLY MALONE, MOLLYM@CFRA.ORG

Coffee talk that once revolved around the weather and crops has evolved to include the latest COVID-19 numbers and milling over who got it and how they are doing. When one of the two regular employees at the Left Bank Cafe tested positive, those morning conversations came to a halt.

“Life kind of stops when one of you gets sick,” said Paula Matson, owner of the small cafe.

The establishment roasts its own coffee beans, serves specialty drinks, and seats a maximum of 24 patrons for lunch in the small community of Slayton, in southwest Minnesota.

Ordinarily, Paula would work a few days a week and her staff member worked the other days and pitched in for big orders.

However, when the only other active employee had to quarantine, Paula had to adjust. And, fast.

The 69-year-old business owner did not contract the virus, but suddenly found herself working far more than usual. She reduced cafe hours, with her adult daughter filling in when she wasn't working at her own job, and another regular employee with a new baby came back sooner than expected on a limited schedule.

A large part of the cafe's business is shipping roasted beans across the country. With more people spending time at home these days and trying new coffee, Paula's business has grown. Though a blessing, being down a staff member meant coffee roasting had to be done during off hours. The extra hours had an impact, mostly on her.

“I had a sense of my age,” she



Small businesses like the Left Bank Cafe in Slayton, Minnesota, are weighing their options when it comes to keeping customers safe and flexing services to keep afloat. Owner Paula Matson has switched to takeout only. | Photo by Molly Malone

said.

When the State of Minnesota responded to COVID-19 by not allowing dine-in service, Paula got a taste of what a take-out only operation would look like. Now, she is considering changing the business to remove dine-in service long term.

The model works for the small cafe because it means only one staff member is needed at a time.

Though it will be easier to do takeout only, Paula misses the morning coffee chatter. Tables of regulars would order their coffee and pastry, chat, and laugh, while she prepared food in the kitchen.

“My world was centered when I would hear that out in the dining area,” Paula said.

At the same time, wearing masks doesn't make sense for a cafe.

“How are customers supposed to eat and drink with a mask on?”

she asked. “And, how does everyone stay safe without it?”

Now that the pandemic has hit close to home, customer safety and sustainability of the business are a priority.

Thankfully, the community got behind the cafe from the start. Staff from local businesses call a few days ahead to order 15 to 20 lunches. They rotate businesses to spread the support.

In retrospect, hiring additional part-time staff and training them ahead of time would have eased the pressure on the cafe. None of us know how this pandemic will affect main streets, so the Center for Rural Affairs has developed a checklist to help very small businesses quickly plan for this situation. English and Spanish versions of the “Pandemic Plan Checklist” can be found at [cfra.org/publications](http://cfra.org/publications).

## FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

changes in market or price decrease were eligible to apply for funding. Payment amounts were based on commodity prices, which meant conventional producers, like Ron, received payments closer to the market value of their crops than did organic or grass-fed producers with higher price points.

“It’s been hard for people to make money during this time,” Ron said.

Farmers and ranchers with all types of operations were struggling: ranchers to get their livestock to meat processors, and local foods farmers could no longer sell to schools, farmers markets, and restaurants. For his farm, Ron was concerned about the price drop for corn, which was tied to the decrease in ethanol production. Low soybean demand had been an issue for even longer, beginning when the international pork industry was hit with COVID-19, and continuing when meat processing and demand in the U.S. decreased.

Ron wasn’t alone in his concern. Midwest farmers and ranchers flocked to CFAP, and it shows in the application numbers.

CFAP opened for applications on May 28, with \$16 billion in funding available. Over the course of the first 15 weeks, 541,073 applications were approved for funding. Approval rates have been fairly high for the program. For example, in Nebraska and Iowa, roughly three in four applications were approved for payment.

Though CFAP payments were limited to \$250,000 per person, a single farm was allowed up to three shareholders, raising the limitation to \$750,000. This decision to offer larger payments to operations with more shareholders was clearly designed to help producers with the largest businesses access historically large payments.

As a result, describing the average payment CFAP recipients received can be difficult. While the program averaged \$16,700 nation-



Ron Spicka, a Nebraska conventional corn and soybeans farmer, applied for and received a payment from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Coronavirus Food Assistance Program. The deadline to apply is Sept. 11. | Photo by Andrea Hartman

wide across all categories, livestock and non-specialty producers’ payments averaged approximately \$10,000, while specialty crops producers averaged \$48,000 and dairy producers averaged nearly \$75,000.

High payments for dairy and specialty crop producers might lead one to think the program benefits these producers the most, but this isn’t the case. The application structure made access easier for small livestock and grain producers, resulting in a high number of smaller payments. The application was more difficult for dairy and specialty crop producers, who received far less money from the program overall. As a result, the dairy and specialty crop producers who applied were likely those with large operations and the capacity to devote to the required paperwork. The overwhelming majority of local foods producers were not served by CFAP.

As of Aug. 17, Iowa farmers and ranchers have received the most funding of any state from CFAP for livestock and non-specialty crops. Nebraska was the second

and third highest for livestock and non-specialty crops, respectively.

These numbers are consistent with the strengths of the program, which tilted in favor of grain and livestock producers. As a result, fewer of those producers applied for CFAP funds. As of Aug. 17, applications approved for specialty crops from Iowa and Nebraska were less than 20.

Ron applied for CFAP in July, and was approved shortly after. Though he could sympathize with the different challenges local foods producers face, Ron said that he “couldn’t imagine the payment wasn’t helpful to folks” who received it. Small family farms often operate with narrow profit margins, and have increased financial risk, making CFAP payments helpful in aiding cash flow. As for Ron, he noted the payment for soybeans was especially supportive in light of the U.S.-China trade war.

The deadline to apply for CFAP funding has been extended to Sept. 11. Congress continues to debate further measures to support farmers and ranchers during the pandemic.



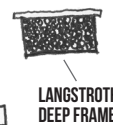
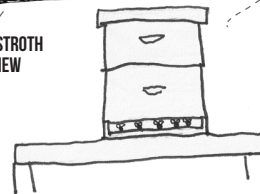
# THE BUZZ about our research!

BY KIRSTIN BAILEY, KIRSTINB@CFRA.ORG

The Center for Rural Affairs recently undertook a project to research different designs of bee hives, their practicality in Nebraska, their weights, and honey production.

The goal of the project is to strengthen the specialty crop industry in the state, and honey is a specialty crop.

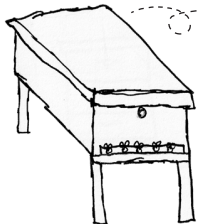
Using the Langstroth hive as our standard, we are trying to find the easiest to handle hive (the least amount of weight lifted) that works best in our climate, and that produces a good amount of honey.



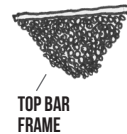
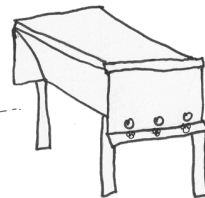
## TRADITIONAL LANGSTROTH HIVE

- > Has not changed much in 100 years.
- > Each box is called a “deep.”
- > Uses 10 frames per deep.
- > Deeps typically house the queen and the brood.
- > Frames are a standard size.
- > Honey “supers” are added above the deeps.
- > Each deep weighs between 40 and 60 pounds depending on time of year.

## LONG LANGSTROTH HIVE

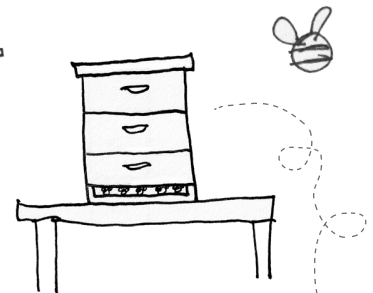


- > Uses Langstroth frames, but the hive is oriented horizontally instead of vertically.
- > No need to lift boxes off the hive to inspect the brood area.
- > Can hold anywhere between 20 to 30 frames depending on how long they are.
- > Some beekeepers will add supers on top, generally in the middle of the hive.



## TOP BAR HIVES

- > Oriented horizontally, with sloped sides.
- > Typically produce cut comb.
- > No need to lift boxes to inspect the hive.
- > Takes bees longer to grow the hive since they have to draw out all of the comb from scratch, rather than having a template or drawn out frames (like in a traditional Langstroth hive).
- > If bars are not spaced correctly, bees will build cross comb that needs removal prior to inspection.

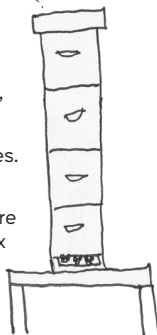


## USING SHALLOWS AS A HIVE

- > A type of honey supers.
- > These are about half as tall as a deep box.
- > Traditionally, shallows go on top of deeps for honey production, but can also be used in place of deeps.
- > Each super can weigh between 30 and 40 pounds. Weight varies between honey storage and brood storage. Brood is lighter than honey.

## NUC HIVE

- > Pronounced “nuke.”
- > Half as wide as a traditional deep, only holding five frames.
- > Uses traditional Langstroth frames.
- > Traditionally, “Nuc” hives are sold in spring to start a colony. They are usually in a plastic, temporary box and consist of five frames. We use more permanent wooden boxes in our research.
- > Can weigh between 20 and 40 pounds, depending on the contents—brood or honey.



# FROM START TO FINISH, THE CENTER SEES MEDICAID EXPANSION THROUGH

BY TRENTON BUHR, TRENTONB@CFRA.ORG

This October marks the culmination of two and a half years of hard work by advocates, partners, and the Center for Rural Affairs to expand Medicaid in Nebraska. In summer 2018, we started by asking Nebraskans to sign the ballot initiative. Now, implementation has finally arrived.

For the communities we work in across Nebraska, this has been an issue which frequently hits home. There are 90,000 or more Nebraskans who are living in the coverage gap, meaning they make too much to qualify for traditional Medicaid and too little for marketplace subsidies. Medicaid expansion is designed to cover this group, making between 100 and 138 percent of the federal poverty level.

A larger share of that population lives in rural Nebraska, which often leaves rural hospitals and clinics feeling the effects of lack of coverage. Although the Affordable Care Act was passed 10 years ago, this group of Nebraskans has still been living without access to health insurance because state officials chose not to expand Medicaid when given the option starting in 2012.

In 2018, the Center sprung into action. We helped gather some of the more than 100,000 signatures that placed expansion onto the November 2018 ballot. After a successful push, Initiative 427 passed, setting in motion the process toward implementation. Now, with implementation on the horizon, rural Nebraskans, as well as small town hospitals and clinics, stand to benefit from expanded access to care, helping keep our rural health care infrastructure intact.

Last spring, Gov. Pete Ricketts announced that the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) would be seeking to alter the Medicaid program for the expansion population. The plan includes two tiers of benefits—basic and prime. Dental, vision, and over-the-counter medication are only available in the prime package. To receive those benefits, enrollees will need to meet a number of requirements.

Sadly, new enrollees will not have access to prime benefits when expansion begins Oct. 1. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services was unable to

approve Nebraska’s Medicaid expansion plan in time.

With the delay, DHHS has decided that until the plan is approved, only the basic benefits package will be available. Those who are 19 to 20 years old, pregnant, or medically frail will still receive prime benefits. We don’t know exactly when the program will be approved, but expect it to occur next spring.

Nebraska will be the 36th state to implement Medicaid expansion come October. Recently, two more states, Oklahoma and Missouri, expanded through a ballot initiative. Six of the 38 expanded states have now used this process. Time and again, we see Americans opting for the benefits of expanded health coverage.

If you, a friend, or family member are currently in the coverage gap, you can enroll anytime through DHHS. Applications are available online at [accessnebraska.ne.gov](http://accessnebraska.ne.gov) or at your local DHHS office. For any questions, contact the Medicaid assistance line at 855.632.7633.

Our work isn’t finished yet. Let’s make sure that everyone who needs coverage gets it.

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## COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

implement risk-reducing behaviors, much of life can go on, even if it must adapt.

Epidemiologists tell us that if we all keep at least 6 feet distance and wear a face covering when we cannot, that these two steps alone

will go a long way toward controlling the spread of COVID-19. This could be the difference between small businesses in our communities surviving or not. This could be the difference between schools being able to stay open or not.

If we reject risk-reducing behavior, we will be stuck right where we find ourselves for much longer.

Your community needs you to adapt. Keep at least 6 feet distance from others. Wear a mask when you cannot. Think of your community. Be safe.



# CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

145 MAIN STREET, PO BOX 136 | LYONS, NE 68038-0136  
CFRA.ORG | INFO@CFRA.ORG

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09/20



## Inside: A lifetime of rural service

Paul Olson commits to small towns and education

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

# A CALL TO COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

**C**ommunity responsibility is an often cited virtue in small towns. It is a value rooted in a commitment to neighbor and community. We witnessed it in barn raisings of past generations and in volunteer fire departments of today.

Rural people pull together for community, often across political differences. We pull together because something needs to get done. We pull together because we have to be able to count on each other in small towns.

Now, as we find ourselves in the throes of an extended pandemic, rural people can live up to the best of rural values by pulling together to take action for community.

The late-July surge in COVID-19

## COVID-19 MAP

Our friends at Daily Yonder have excellent coverage of the coronavirus in rural areas including maps of cases per county. Check out the latest at [dailyyonder.com](http://dailyyonder.com).

cases pushed farther into rural America than we saw earlier in the year. At the end of July, there were 746 so-called “red zone” counties across rural regions of the country. These are counties where the rate of new cases exceeds 100 per 100,000 residents during the prior week.

The map of counties experiencing significant COVID-19 spread is no longer isolated to the coasts or to major urban areas. The rural

South is hit the hardest.

Even as we witness far-reaching community spread, much of the political narrative has centered on individual responsibility. No place is this more present than the debate over wearing a face covering. In our home state of Nebraska, the attorney general has even threatened to sue municipalities that require face coverings.

What if our political leaders called us instead to community responsibility? Absent the call from political leaders, community leaders can fill the gap.

The dichotomy over an open or shut economy is unhelpful. It has driven a wedge between people. The truth is more nuanced. If we

—SEE [COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY](#) ON PAGE 7