



ISAC Excellence in Action Award Nomination Form



The Excellence in Action Award program is a competitive awards program that seeks to identify and recognize innovative county government employees, programs, and ISAC affiliates. Please encourage all county departments to apply.

CRITERIA

- Programs nominated must be **innovative** and do one or more of the following:
 - Offer a new service to county residents, fill gaps in the availability of existing services, or tap new revenue sources.
 - Improve the administration or enhance the cost effectiveness of an existing county government program.
 - Upgrade the working conditions or level of training for county employees.
 - Enhance the level of citizen participation in, or the understanding of, government programs.
 - Provide information that facilitates effective public policy making.
 - Promote intergovernmental cooperation and coordination in addressing shared problems.
 - Provide a model from which other counties or affiliates may learn.
- Nominated individuals must demonstrate exemplary service to citizens or staff or stakeholders.

JUDGING

CoSTAR will rate each application based on the following seven attributes: creativity, innovation, cost savings, replication, leadership, increased efficiency, cooperation with others, and perseverance.

GUIDELINES

- Nominated programs must have become operational after January 1, 2017.
- Individual nominations should reflect the individual actions of the last 24 months.
- Nominations should be made using the application form below.
- A narrative of the county program or individual's action must be included. (three-page limit)

AWARD PRESENTATION

Awards will be presented during the 2018 ISAC Annual Conference General Session on August 22 in Des Moines. Winners will also be recognized on the ISAC website and in a news release sent to statewide media. When appropriate, an ISAC staff member will also attend the board of supervisors meeting to present the award.

QUESTIONS

Contact Robin Harlow, ISAC's Innovation and Research Manager at 515.369.7006 or rharlow@iowacounties.org.

NOMINATION FORM

- Attach a narrative of the county improvement/project/program/individual (three-page limit).
- Return all nominations by **May 4, 2018 (postmarked date)** to:
Iowa State Association of Counties
Attn: Robin Harlow
5500 Westown Parkway, Suite 190
West Des Moines, IA 50266.
- OR email your application form (containing all the information on the form below) to Robin Harlow.

Please fill out each field completely.

Please indicate nomination type: Individual Program

Name of individual/program: GROW: Johnson County County or affiliate: Johnson County

Name of nominator: Donna Brooks Title: Grants Assistant

Nominator's phone: 319-688-8012 Nominator's email: dbrooks@co.johnson.ia.us

Iowa State Association of Counties Excellence in Action Award

Nomination Narrative for *Grow: Johnson County*

May 1, 2018

In 1855, the Johnson County Board of Supervisors decided to procure 160 acres of land on the edge of Iowa City as a “poor farm” to provide systematic care to the underprivileged and mentally ill. Midwestern county poor farms in the mid-19th century grew out of a larger social movement striving to provide more dignified and humane treatment for the poor and “insane.” The farm was self-supporting and the labor of the residents, which was based on individual capabilities, helped compensate the county for their room, board, and healthcare. In Iowa, care for the poor has been seen as a basic responsibility of county government from the earliest period of Iowa’s statehood.

Today, Johnson County Historic Poor Farm and Asylum District, listed in the National Register of Historic places since September 2014, is one of the few remaining relatively intact examples of the county farm model established in the 19th century. It remains in agricultural production. Last year, nearly 30k pounds of organic fruits and vegetables were grown on the Johnson County Poor Farm and donated to 15 area food pantries, shelters, and crisis centers via *Grow: Johnson County* and a network of partner organizations and volunteers. It’s become an admirable full-circle system.

Feeding America, a U.S. hunger-relief organization, has estimated that 1 in 7 Johnson County residents is in need of food assistance. This alarming statistic prompted the Johnson County Board of Supervisors to create a hunger task force in 2014. Over the next 16 months, more than 60 community members, state and local elected officials, educators, and farmers participated in various committees to help identify gaps and solutions addressing hunger in Johnson County.

In 2015, the Johnson County Board of Supervisors asked the community to submit proposals for food-related projects that could potentially take place at the Johnson County Poor Farm. As a response,

leaders from the local food system joined forces to piece together the vision for *Grow: Johnson County* and present it to the county. The Board of Supervisors expressed unanimous support for the project and offered *Grow: Johnson County* a five-year lease on two acres of land to start. The county offered some seed money, as well as access to water, to ensure that *Grow: Johnson County* had the means necessary to flourish.

Grow: Johnson County is now an established hunger-relief and educational farm program in its third year of food production. Designed to improve access to healthy food for our area's most vulnerable residents and equip aspiring growers with organic food production skills, they've expanded their operations to utilize four acres of land at the Johnson County Poor Farm and provide hands-on gardening experience for community members of all ages and backgrounds. Their mission is rooted in the belief that not just food, but *good food* is a human right. After surveying the guests at a dozen local hunger-relief agencies, *Grow: Johnson County* plans their crops and caters to agencies' needs by growing the foods highest in demand, including sweet potatoes, onions, okra, beets, jalapeños, and watermelon.

Grow: Johnson County partners with several area nonprofit organizations, including a local food rescue organization called *Table to Table*, which sends a fleet of volunteers to pick up freshly harvested produce and transport it to places like The Crisis Center, Shelter House, The Free Lunch Program, Meals on Wheels, and food pantries in Coralville, North Liberty, Hills, Tiffin, and even at the University of Iowa.

During the summer months at mobile pantry events, *Field to Family*, an organization dedicated to creating a more local, healthy, and sustainable regional food system, partners with an area chef to provide cooking demonstrations, recipes, and food sampling using produce grown on the Johnson County Poor Farm. This unique partnership has increased food stability, educated the community, and enhanced access to fresh, healthy, and local produce.

Another partnership in *Grow: Johnson County's* impressive network is with Johnson County Social Services. Through the Johnson County Youth Empowered to Serve Program, low-income and at-

risk youth are provided meaningful summer work experiences through placements in community-based sectors, which allow young people to explore vocational interests, develop positive work habits, and enhance interpersonal development and community connections. In the summer of 2017, *Grow: Johnson County* provided three program participants with eight-week apprenticeships at the Johnson County Poor Farm.

Grow: Johnson County also actively works with youth in the Linn County Detention Center, the Four Oaks Emergency Shelter, and local alternative schools to establish community gardens. Education Director Scott Koepke introduces and reinforces lessons and associated physical activities in gardening, soil science, food waste management, local foods, and life skills—primarily self-respect and patience.

“Children in detention centers and alternative schools are often close to either giving up on themselves or have struggled with family dynamics that are giving up on them,” said Koepke. “This adolescent stage of development is a critical crossroads. The garden bridge can help create a healing path for these kids and their communities. Seeds sometimes don’t germinate in the first year, but may lie dormant for many years before emerging. This is why I must—we must—continue to sow the lessons of nurturance.”

Grow: Johnson County is a great point of pride for Johnson County officials and residents. We nominate this organization for the Iowa State Association of Counties’ Excellence in Action Award for their service to county residents, the gap they’ve filled in hunger-relief issues with sustainable solutions, their community involvement and volunteerism—which boasts a 2017 impact of 400+ individuals engaged, and their innovative model that could be applied to the remaining 98 Iowa Counties.