

Blueprint points path forward for North Dakota's strained local newspapers

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Residents of the three counties where papers no longer exist - Sioux, Dunn and Slope - value papers even more, showing how those losses impact communities.

In those counties, 96% said having a newspaper is important, 87% said they would subscribe to a paper if it existed, and 21% said they would be willing to donate to help fund a newspaper beyond subscribing.

"The absence of papers is really noticed in those communities," Gessele said.

Joy Schoch, publisher of the Dickinson Press, a Forum Communications newspaper, said having data to back up the vital importance of newspapers has been an important outcome from the project.

"It's essential," she said. "It's essential to keep people informed. It makes a healthy community."

The next step in the effort is to pilot several solutions that tap into the deep reservoirs of trust, demand and opportunity while acknowledging the current structural risks many newspapers face.

"This is a vital, trusted, necessary industry that people want and need, and we need to find a way collectively forward that benefits society," Wehrman said.

Translating the value

Currently, 24% of households across the state are reached by a newspaper, but looking deeper at county-level data shows much deeper penetration.

Out of 53 counties, 20 have over 75% of households receiving a local newspaper and 15 more show figures of between 50-75%.

Wehrman said those numbers more accurately reflect the impact newspapers have locally, and losing them means communities lose out.

With the \$199 million in federal Rural Health Transformation funding being rolled out in the coming year, the importance of local newspapers in communicating what programs are available and how the funding can be used in those communities is crucial, Wehrman said.

People need to understand newspapers are "not a public utility," she said. "These are individual businesses that need the support of their local communities in order to continue doing the work people value so highly."

That disconnect between valuing newspapers and being willing to support them through subscriptions or donations is something that needs to be tackled by both the newspapers themselves and the communities they serve if their survival is to continue.

"People aren't seeing newspapers as a business like they see their hardware store as a business, and they may not be aware of their struggles," said Ellen Huber, rural development director for NDAREC.

"We talk a lot about retaining and growing other kinds of businesses in the state, but I don't think anyone has thrown newspapers in that bucket of important, vital businesses, and ones that are worthy of focusing on, retaining and strengthening and growing," Huber said.

The real value of local newspapers needs to be better communicated to the wider public, participants in the initiative said.

"People think it should be free," Schoch said. "I think people forget about us. People forget about it until they really need us."

Piloting real action

The next step for the initiative is taking forward several pilot projects centered on succession planning, exploring new revenue models, providing print and digital samples for the next generation of news consumers, and developing readymade promotions and content that can be adopted statewide.

Whether those have a deep impact or not depends on securing grant funding to take them forward, Wehrman said.

The hope is that these don't become moonshots, but practical, replicable interventions.

One of the most immediate concerns is the succession planning component, since so many independent publishers are close to retirement age.

Currently, while group-owned newspapers show stronger margins and sustainability, independent, family-owned papers are under pressure from owners nearing retirement, the high cost of printing and distribution, and the heavy reliance on revenue from public notices.

Younger journalists are interested in taking over the reins of these papers, but are constrained by a lack of training and the need for financing to sustain operations, the research found.

"Succession planning is something that we need to offer newspapers, because there is an urgent need for newspapers to change hands," Wehrman said.

Another aspect those involved in the initiative hope can gain traction is to meet demands of news consumers, particularly younger Gen Z and Millennial ones, for both digital and print versions of a newspaper.

Offering samples of those to non-subscribers may be one way to boost circulation.

"I think there's a lot of optimism coming out of this about all of the different ways the data gathered for this can be used, and a lot of excitement about the positive momentum going forward," Huber said.

DRN ReadiTech & Ellendale Childcare Center Celebrate Grand Opening

(Continued from page 1)

"We are proud to contribute to the well-being of our community by supporting the establishment of the Ellendale Childcare Center," said Kent Schimke, DRN CEO/General Manager. "This initiative not only benefits families in Ellendale and surrounding areas but also aligns with DRN's mission to enhance the quality of life for our employees and the broader community."

For enrollment information, email Sheila at ellendalechildcare@gmail.com.

About The Nest – Ellendale Childcare Center:

The Nest - Ellendale Childcare Center will tentatively open its doors to families on February 9, 2026. Initial plans were for a February 2 opening, but due to a delay in the state licensing process, it was set back by a week. The Nest reported the following, via Facebook:

"We understand this delay is very unfortunate and appreciate your patience and understanding as we work through the final steps of the licensing process. Our priority is to ensure we are fully licensed and compliant before welcoming children into the center."

Ellendale Childcare Center offers a nurturing environment dedicated to early learning and play-based activities, featuring specialized rooms for infants, toddlers, and Pre-K, as well as a vibrant after-school program.

About DRN:

DRN, headquartered in Ellendale, North Dakota, has provided service to rural southeastern North Dakota for more than 75 years and remains committed to upholding this tradition into the future. As a member-owned broadband cooperative, DRN provides high-quality telecommunications and technology services to our communities. Our mission is to deliver reliable, innovative solutions that enhance the lives of our members.



The Nest is conveniently located on Highway 281 on the south side of town, next to Casey's C-Store. The rooms are well equipped, spacious and inviting, with a warm feeling that contrasts with the winter weather outside (photos by Ken smith)

Academic item

Brookings, S.D. (01/23/2026)-- More than 4,100 students were recognized for their outstanding academic performance over the fall 2025 semester at South Dakota State University and named to the dean's list.

Students on the list include:

- **Trent Tieg of Ellendale**, a student in SDSU's Jerome J. Lohr College of Engineering.
- **Evan Olson of Forbes**, a student in SDSU's College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences.
- **Grace Wolff of Forbes**, a student in SDSU's College of Nursing.

About South Dakota State University:

Founded in 1881, South Dakota State University is the state's Morrill Act land-grant institution as well as its largest, most comprehensive school of higher education. SDSU confers degrees from seven different colleges representing more than 230 majors, minors and specializations. The institution also offers 39 master's degree programs, 17 Ph.D. and two professional programs.

The work of the university is carried out on a residential campus in Brookings, at sites in Sioux Falls, Pierre and Rapid City, and through Extension offices and Agricultural Experiment Station research sites across the state.



Letter to the Editor

The *Leader* welcomes well-written letters to the editor, reflecting various points of view. Submissions under 200-300 words are preferred and are most effective; longer ones may be edited for space and brevity. There is no charge for letters to the editor. Please do not send anonymous letters. Send to dcleader@drtel.net

Recognizing 211 Helpline Day in North Dakota

On February 11, 2026, North Dakota will officially recognize 211 Helpline Day, a meaningful acknowledgment of a service that quietly supports thousands of individuals and families across our state each year.

By dialing 211, North Dakotans can access free, confidential information and referrals for essential needs such as housing assistance, food support, health care, mental health and crisis services, disaster recovery, and other vital community resources. For many, 211 is the first step toward stability during moments of uncertainty.

The 211 Helpline plays a critical role in strengthening our state's health and human services system. Trained and compassionate specialists help people navigate complex systems, identify options, and connect with timely, appropriate support. This work is especially important for seniors, veterans, people with disabilities, rural residents, and families experiencing economic hardship.

During emergencies and natural disasters, 211 also serves as a trusted, centralized resource for accurate information and referrals, supporting residents, service providers, and government partners alike.

Recognizing 211 Helpline Day helps raise awareness of this essential service and reminds us that help is available. It also reflects our shared commitment to looking out for one another and building resilient communities across North Dakota.

When help is needed, support is just a step away, dial 211, text your ZIP code to 898211, or visit myfirstlink.org.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Illich



JREC's 11th Annual Women's Business Conference set for March 10-11

The Jamestown Regional Entrepreneur Center (JREC) will host its ninth Women's Business Conference on March 10 and 11 at the newly renovated and expanded Jamestown Arts Center. This annual event brings together entrepreneurs, professionals, and community members for two days of learning, connection, and inspiration.



JAMESTOWN REGIONAL ENTREPRENEUR CENTER

"This conference is a wonderful example of how our newly expanded Arts Center is already serving the broader community," said Mindi Schmitz, Executive Director of the Arts Center. "We envisioned this space as a place where ideas are shared, connections are built, and people feel inspired—and hosting the Women's Business Conference brings that vision to life in a meaningful way."

The conference will feature many presenters offering insights across a wide range of practical and strategic topics relevant to business owners and organizational leaders. Sessions will explore leadership development, entrepreneurial pathways, organizational effectiveness, community impact, and personal capacity-building, all designed to equip attendees with tools they can apply immediately in their work and businesses. The North Dakota Women's Business Center will be present to help share how they support small business owners throughout the state.

One featured presenter is Amber Blomberg, Caring Foundation and Community Engagement Executive Director for Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Dakota. Her session will share current data on employee health and wellness trends across the state. "Productivity, engagement, and retention are shaped by health factors that extend well beyond traditional medical care," Blomberg said. "With a

local presence and statewide reach, we're able to see those patterns across North Dakota. I'll share what that means for businesses—and simple, actionable ways employers can support healthier teams and stronger communities."

Another featured presenter, Stephanie Blumhagen, Executive Director of FARRMS, shares the following, "FARRMS is dedicated to fostering a thriving and sustainable agricultural landscape in North Dakota. We believe in the power of knowledge, community, and collaboration to support farmers in building successful and resilient businesses. Our approach is rooted in listening to farmers' needs and meeting them where they are. We are honored to be included in the Women's Business Conference. Events like this are invaluable for empowering rural entrepreneurs and strengthening North Dakota's communities."

Community members interested in attending are encouraged to register early. For presenter bios, workshop descriptions, and registration details, visit www.JREC-Center.com/Events. Tickets are \$75 plus tax. Vendor booth space is also available.

For questions, contact Katherine Roth at Katherine.Roth@uj.edu.

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STATE OF NORTH DAKOTA

PROCLAMATION

211 HELPLINE DAY
FEBRUARY 11, 2026

WHEREAS, By dialing 211, residents of North Dakota can receive information and referrals for housing assistance, food support, health care, mental health and crisis services, disaster recovery and other vital community resources; and


WHEREAS, the 211 Helpline plays a critical role in strengthening North Dakota's health and human services system by helping individuals and families navigate complex services and connect with timely, appropriate support; and

WHEREAS, the 211 Helpline serves as a trusted resource for community members, service providers and government partners, particularly during times of crisis, emergencies and natural disasters; and

WHEREAS, trained and compassionate 211 specialists work to promote equitable access to services for all North Dakotans, including seniors, veterans, people with disabilities, rural residents and individuals and families experiencing economic hardships; and

WHEREAS, recognizing 211 Helpline Day increases public awareness of this essential service and encourages North Dakotans to seek help when needed, support one another and strengthen the resilience of communities across the state.

NOW, THEREFORE, as Governor of the State of North Dakota, I do hereby proclaim February 11, 2026, 211 HELPLINE DAY in the State of North Dakota.





Kelly Armstrong
GOVERNOR

ATTEST:

Michael Howe
SECRETARY OF STATE

Landfill Hours Dec. 1 - March 31

Saturdays: 10 am – 4 pm