



**MAXIMIZE
NWMO**

Dream big and grow together.

NEWS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MEDIA CONTACT:

Monday, February 16, 2026

Christel Gollnick, Maximize NWMO Director

together@maximizenwmo.org | 816.588.2730 (mobile)

2025 Survey Reveals Northwest Missouri Challenges and Strengths

Maximize NWMO Launches “Make It Home” Campaign in Response

ST. JOSEPH, Mo., February 16, 2026 — Maximize NWMO has released findings from its 2025 Alumni & Resident Survey, along with a five-year comparison to 2020 data about living, learning, working, and playing in the 18-county region. The full report is available at <https://maximizenwmo.org/alumni-resident-survey>.

The results highlight both challenges and opportunities – and reinforce a clear message: thriving communities are built intentionally.

Volunteer support for community development efforts increased across most categories since 2020. Residents expressed willingness to support new businesses and emphasized the importance of strong youth organizations and leadership. At the same time, one in four respondents indicated they are considering a move in the next few years, and the regional population declined by 0.9% overall since 2020. Some counties experienced double-digit losses, while others saw modest gains.

Job growth reached 1.6% over five years – positive movement, but trailing Missouri’s 9% growth during the same period.

Despite these challenges, one indicator moved in a promising direction: sense of belonging increased by three percentage points.

“Preventing further population loss is critical for our region’s future,” said Christel Gollnick, Director of Maximize NWMO. “One percent may not seem like much, but over time it compounds. The encouraging news is that belonging is on the rise. When people feel they matter, are connected, and have access to what they need, they are more likely to stay – and invite others to join them. That’s something every one of us can influence.”

The survey drew 1,082 responses from individuals who grew up and stayed in northwest Missouri, left and returned, moved to the region without prior ties, or left and have not returned. Analyzing responses by these groups – as well as by four subregions – helps identify both shared priorities across the region and unique local dynamics.

- more -

Page 2 – 2025 Survey

“Understanding the perspectives of stayers, returners, newcomers, and leavers gives us a fuller picture of where we’re strong and where we can grow,” said Steve Wenger, Maximize NWMO Navigation Team Member. “Partnering with MU’s Exceed team ensures objective analysis and connects our region to broader research that informs practical next steps.”

In response to the findings, the regional Communications CollaborACTION Team launched a new community-building campaign on Valentine’s Day: “**Make it Home: Live Local, Love Local,**” on Valentine’s Day. The campaign includes a free “101 Ways to Build Community” poster, available at <https://maximizenwmo.org/make-it-home> and shared via Maximize NWMO’s Facebook page. A new post will be shared each week for the next 101 weeks.

The initiative reflects lessons learned since 2020 about the deeply interconnected nature of economic vitality, health, education, social connections, housing, and the built and natural environments. The future of northwest Missouri will not be determined by outside forces alone – it will be shaped by neighbors who choose to invest in where they live.

Small, everyday actions – welcoming and involving a newcomer, supporting local businesses, mentoring a young person, serving on a board – create momentum over time. The region’s strength has always been its people. By choosing to live local and love local, residents can help ensure northwest Missouri remains not just a place to live, but a place to call home.

The path forward is not about one large solution, but many people taking meaningful steps together and answering, “What can we do better together than on our own?”

Maximize NWMO serves the 18-county region by providing administrative, communications, data access, and coaching support in systems thinking and community wealth building for individuals, communities, and the region. The initiative’s Navigation Team supports and coaches leaders and communities who want to ***dream big, decide wisely, and maximize the region’s potential by growing together.*** Maximize NWMO is the regional vitality initiative of The Community Foundation of Northwest Missouri, primarily serving the 18 counties of Andrew, Atchison, Buchanan, Caldwell, Clinton, Daviess, DeKalb, Gentry, Grundy, Harrison, Holt, Linn, Livingston, Mercer, Nodaway, Putnam, Sullivan, and Worth. It has been made possible over the last decade through partnerships with Communities of Resilience & Excellence (formerly Communities of Excellence 2026), Patterson Family Foundation,

the United States Department of Agriculture – Rural Development (USDA-RD), University of Missouri Extension, Missouri Department of Economic Development, and several other donors. www.maximizenwmo.org and together@maximizenwmo.org.

###