

Karen Society of Nebraska Strategic Plan

April 2022



Developed in partnership with
Ingrid Kirst Consulting

Funded by the Community Health Endowment of Lincoln

INTRODUCTION

From September 2021 to January 2022, the leaders of the Karen Society of Nebraska (KSN) - Lincoln office met together regularly to discuss their goals and vision for the future. A comprehensive strategic plan was developed based on a survey of community members, interviews with community leaders, and the collective wisdom of the group.

MISSION AND VALUES OF THE KAREN SOCIETY OF NEBRASKA

Helping refugees and immigrants from Burma to build and sustain a high quality of life and to achieve self-sufficiency in the state of Nebraska.

KSN does this while focusing on their core values of cooperation and self-sufficiency.

HISTORY OF THE KAREN SOCIETY OF NEBRASKA

The Karen (pronounced Ka-REN) are an ethnic group from the mountainous border regions of Burma and Thailand, where they are the second largest ethnic group in each country. They have long been subject to persecution and ethnic cleansing by the Burmese government. Many have been living in refugee camps in Thailand for years before being resettled to Nebraska. Approximately 7,500 Karen live in Nebraska, with an additional 500 refugees from other ethnic groups in Burma living in Nebraska. Of these, about 1,500 live in Lincoln, Nebraska's capital city.

The Karen began resettling in the state of Nebraska in 2006. Limited language skills, cultural differences, and lack of knowledge of local resources were significant challenges for the community. To develop community self-sufficiency, Karen community leaders from Omaha and Lincoln, and English-speaking Nebraska residents, founded the Karen Society of Nebraska in 2008. In 2010, the KSN registered as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. KSN has three offices, serving in Lincoln, Omaha, and Madison. The board of directors is made up of 60% members from the refugee community and 40% native-born Americans.

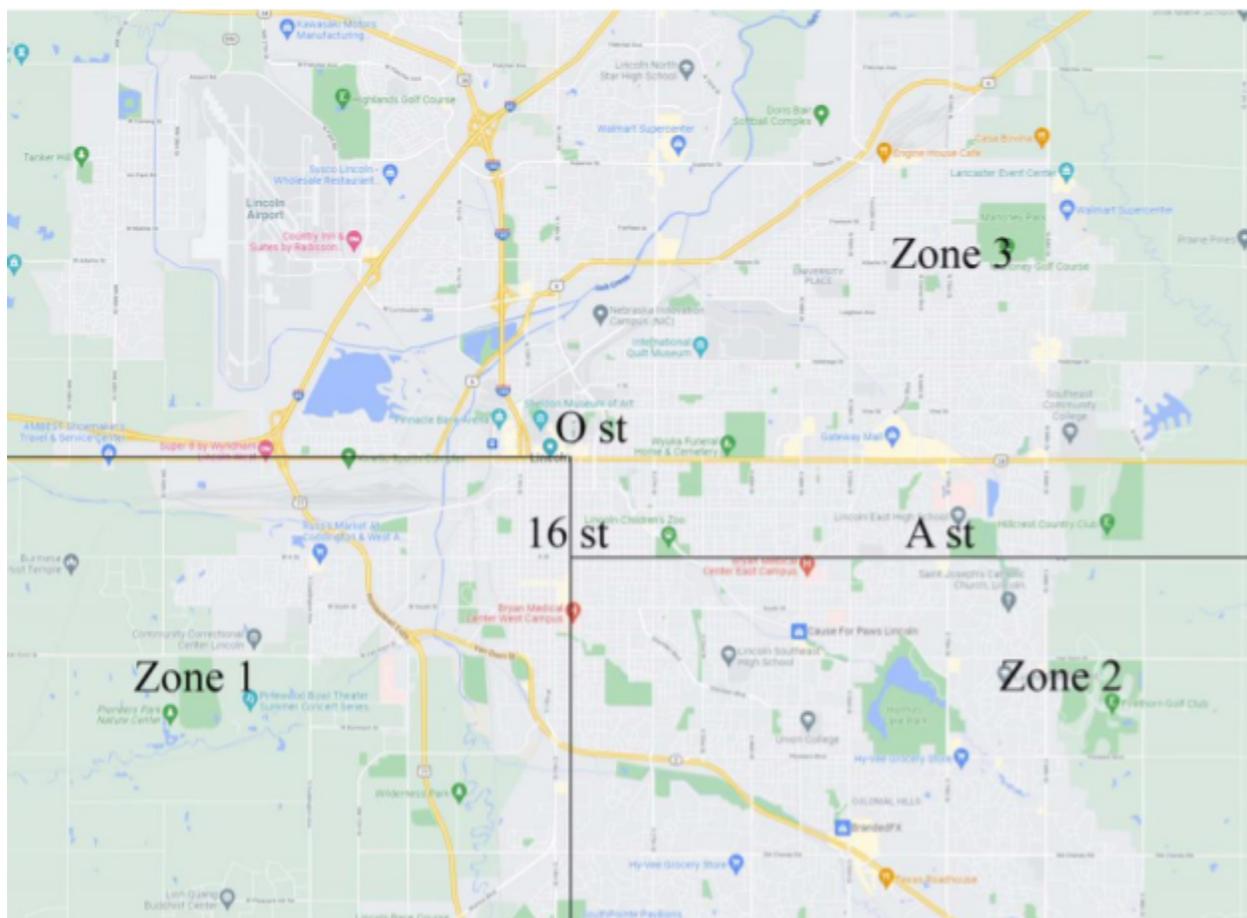
CURRENT STRUCTURE

The KSN offices serve as a meeting point where the community comes together on a regular basis. Community members visit the offices to receive help reading and

understanding their mail, filling out application forms, setting appointments, finding employment, completing immigration paperwork and learning to use a computer. KSN refers clients to employers and agencies as appropriate. KSN is a bridge between the community and local resources.

KSN-Lincoln leaders have divided the city of Lincoln into three geographic zones. Each zone has a zone leader and 500-600 Karen residents. KSN has a system to distribute messages within each zone to reach all Karen people in Lincoln quickly. The map below shows the distribution of the zones.

Zone Map for Karen Society of Nebraska - Lincoln



This report focuses on the work of the KSN-Lincoln office. To date, KSN-Lincoln services have been primarily funded by the Karen themselves with an annual budget of \$30,000. The current office space is donated by a local business. Two part-time staff members and many volunteers contribute significant time and resources. For example, the KSN Executive Director is not currently paid; he estimates he contributes 15 hours per week.

In addition, one volunteer works twenty hours a week during office hours but frequently gets calls at other times. A large portion of her volunteer time involves transporting clients to Omaha for necessary immigration appointments and in Lincoln to medical appointments. She donates all vehicle costs associated with such transportation.

The Executive Committee (EC) of KSN-Lincoln is increasing the number of volunteers in leadership positions. They have a strong committee structure. Each committee is responsible for certain events or operational areas, such as music, sports, security or youth. They are actively recruiting new volunteer members and adding committees to distribute the work. Full details on the committees are listed in the strategic plan goals.

KSN-Lincoln partners with many entities across the community. This includes the City of Lincoln and Lancaster County, local employers, universities, and other nonprofits.

PAST ACHIEVEMENTS

The KSN-Lincoln office helps approximately 800 people (unduplicated count) per year with a wide variety of social services. During a month, they see 80-100 people, and provide 120-150 total services, as many people come more than once. These social services represent the majority of services provided by KSN-Lincoln.

In addition, KSN received high praise from the City of Lincoln for their work to translate and share information on the COVID-19 pandemic. They are also collaborating with the city on spreading information about housing and tenant rights. They played a major role in making sure all Karen people were counted in the 2020 U.S. Census.

KSN-Lincoln provides a number of other services to their community. They have a large, successful after school and summer youth program, Karen language classes, and have produced many health educational videos on a wide range of topics.

KSN holds many events including a large Karen New Year's Celebration, soccer tournaments and other cultural events that attract hundreds of guests and are important sources of income for KSN.

PARTNERSHIPS

KSN-Lincoln clearly recognizes that they can't serve their clients alone with their limited staff and volunteers. They depend on a wide array of social services to fully meet a client's needs. For example, they will refer clients to Legal Aid's UPLIFT Project at the

Asian Center for legal services, the Center for Legal Immigration Assistance (CLIA) for complicated immigration matters, or Lincoln Literacy and SCC for ELL classes. They recently contracted with the Lincoln campus of UNMC's College of Nursing to develop trainings and are working with the city of Lincoln as part of the MyCity Academy.

KSN is also a member of many coalitions including Lincoln's New Americans Task Force, Cause Collective, Nonprofit Association of the Midlands and the Hello Neighbor Network.

KSN has been actively building relationships with local employers so that they can help clients find good jobs. Employers such as TCMCO, Tyson, Farmland, SmartChicken, and JBS all work with KSN on recruiting employees.

KSN continues to increase collaboration in many different areas, although their limited staffing makes this a challenge. Many agencies contact them for recruitment, employment, training and other reasons. In the KSN office, there are many posters and announcements from other agencies.

SURVEY PROCEDURE

In September 2021, five KSN staff and volunteers surveyed 100 Karen adults in the Lincoln community, all of whom have received services from KSN, though not necessarily in the past year. Respondents were selected from the existing KSN database of Karen families in Lincoln and then asked if they would participate. One third of respondents were from each of KSN's three zones in Lincoln. In some cases, two adults in the same household participated. The survey asked a variety of demographic questions, about the needs of the family/household, and for suggestions regarding opportunities for KSN in the future. Each person was interviewed by one of the five trained KSN surveyors, either by phone or in person. One surveyor entered the data into a spreadsheet. Follow-up calls were made to five percent of the people interviewed for quality assurance.

Respondents in the KSN Survey were primarily between the ages of 18 and 45, most have children, and most have been in the US for at least five years. About $\frac{2}{3}$ were women.

The survey did not try to replicate comprehensive surveys recently conducted by other entities but instead focused on the clientele of the Karen Society and their current needs. Below we share results and compare them to two prior surveys. The first is the Karen Refugee Health Report¹ conducted by the Nebraska Department of Health & Human

¹ Accessed at: <https://dhhs.ne.gov/Reports/Karen%20Refugee%20Health%20Report%202020.pdf>

Services, Division of Public Health Office of Health Disparities and Human Services. That data was collected in 2017 and published in 2020. The second is the Lincoln New Americans Task Force (NATF) Immigrant and Refugee Survey Report², from data gathered in 2019 from 500 immigrants and refugees of multiple nationalities in Lincoln.

SURVEY RESULTS

SCHOOLING

The KSN Survey found that 44% of the survey respondents had not attended any school whatsoever. This is significantly higher than the State of Nebraska Karen Refugee Health Report, which found that “approximately 28% of refugees surveyed from Burma reported having no education or only having attended kindergarten”. However, those who had no schooling plus those that had only elementary and middle schooling is the same for both surveys. In addition, the KSN Survey had 38% who marked high school for their education level, although it did not differentiate between those that attended some high school and those that completed it. This corresponds with the 36% from the state health survey when those two categories are combined. Regardless, these statistics show a high need for education for Karen adults in English and other basic skills. In addition, it shows the need for afterschool tutoring for Karen children, as their parents often don’t have the educational knowledge to adequately assist them.

EMPLOYMENT

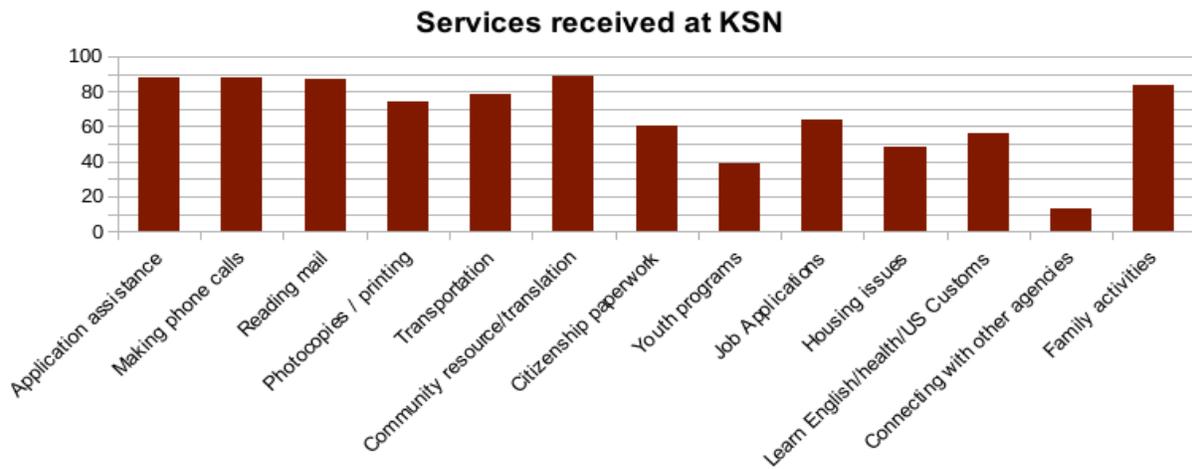
In the KSN Survey, 51% of respondents are not currently working. For those over 60 years old, 100% are not working, and for those 18-60, the unemployment rate is 56%. However, looking at that number by gender, we found that for those 18-60, only 8% of the males are unemployed, and of those, most are recent arrivals, whereas 53% of women are unemployed. The State Health Report found unemployment rates pre-pandemic were much lower overall (15% for men and 21% for women, 18% overall.)

According to KSN, many women are not working because they are responsible for providing care for children in their household. One of KSN’s goals is to create a community childcare center that they can trust, which will support and allow for more women to work outside of the home if desired.

² Accessed at: <https://app.lincoln.ne.gov/city/natf/>

SERVICES RECEIVED

Respondents were asked what services they have received from KSN-Lincoln. More than 80% have had help with various applications, making phone calls, reading mail, and translation/interpretation for community resources. This points to an on-going need for these fundamental services as families navigate complex government and community systems. It also shows a need for education in these areas and in English language education so families can be more self-sufficient and take care of their own needs. Those who have been in the US for more than 10 years show a somewhat diminished need for these services; around 70% have used these services.

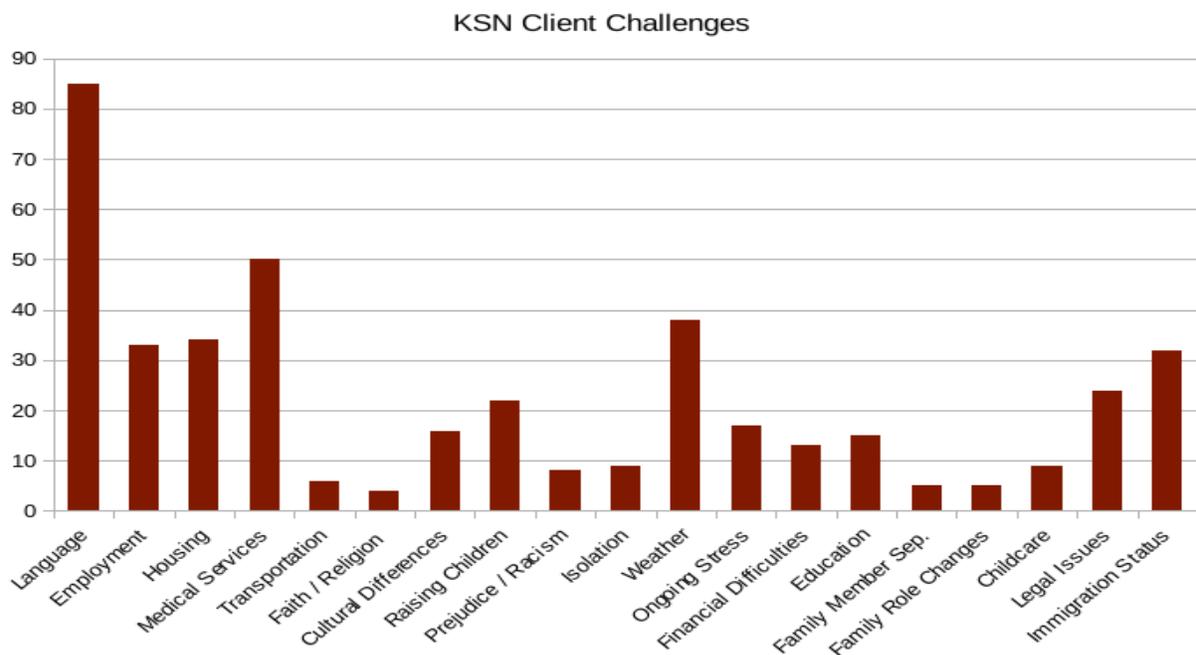


KSN's transportation services have been extremely important for families to go to appointments as more than 78% have used this service. Additionally, 84% of survey respondents have attended family and cultural activities put on by KSN, as maintaining a cultural connection is important to them.

CHALLENGES FOR INDIVIDUALS

Not surprisingly language and communication barriers were by far the biggest concern among respondents, similar to the findings of other surveys. Eighty-five percent marked it as a concern. The need diminished the longer someone has been in the U.S., with those here 10 years or more marking language as a barrier only 54% of the time. A total of 91% indicated they need an interpreter for medical appointments. Other concerns that were frequently cited include immigration status (32%), lack of employment opportunities

(33%), housing issues (34%), and access to medical services (50%). Interestingly, transportation was only mentioned by 6% of people as a challenge despite it being frequently used by KSN clients. This may be because the household has a vehicle or access to a vehicle; however, the women in the household do not have access to the vehicle while the men are at work. In addition, travel to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office in Omaha is a challenge for people, both because of the distance and the challenges of navigating the office procedures there. For KSN, this is a time-consuming service to offer. However, KSN leaders feel strongly that it is important to provide because their clients are more comfortable with a Karen speaking driver and support person during such important and vital interactions.



In the Lincoln NATF Immigrant and Refugee survey, 99% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that English is important to their daily lives and to their long-term goals.

Generally, as people have been in the U.S. longer, their concern about these challenges lessened. For example, 100% of those people here less than two years marked language as a challenge, but only 54% of those who have been here more than ten years did. However, in two areas, rates increased the longer someone was in the U.S. - one was raising children and the other was immigration and citizenship issues.

COVID-19 ISSUES

A specific question on how COVID-19 is impacting respondents found that 21% said it had

no impact. Another 25% said it meant they couldn't go to work for either a short or extended period of time. Others mentioned having to wear a mask, concerns about contracting the virus, and not being able to attend religious services.

PRIORITIES FOR FAMILIES

Individuals were also asked about their personal priorities. Consistent responses included: having a job that supports a family, having affordable, quality health care that you can depend on, being able to ensure your children can succeed / go to college, having a secure and dignified retirement and Social Security benefit, being treated with respect for the work you do/equal opportunity, able to afford buying a home, able to afford to spend more time with family and in your community, and able to preserve heritage and culture for the benefit of the whole society.

PRIORITIES FOR KSN

Fifty percent of respondents indicated that a larger office belonging to KSN is their highest priority. Others mentioned the continuation of help to the community, a daycare, transportation service (especially to Omaha), and Karen language classes for youth.

INTERVIEW SUMMARY

As part of the strategic plan process, nonprofit consultant Ingrid Kirst conducted six in-depth interviews with members of the KSN board. From these interviews, she gained an understanding of KSN and the Karen community, as well as many ideas for future growth. In addition, Ingrid conducted four interviews with local organizations and government entities who have worked with KSN in Lincoln.

Overall, board members agreed that KSN has a strong base of volunteers, both Karen and non-Karen. Multiple people have taken on leadership roles and there is a large group of volunteers willing to help at events. While non-Karen volunteers were a significant presence in the past, they have been actively training Karen to take over their duties and phasing out their involvement. Another strength of KSN is their ability to contact all Karen families in Lincoln rapidly through an established network.

However, KSN's limited funding means there is limited staff time. The office is only open in the afternoons. Staff would like to expand their partnerships with other organizations and attend collaborative meetings, but available funding has limited this. They also recognize that staff have limited time to attend trainings to improve their skills, particularly in human services.

Growing KSN's financial and operational capacity is an area identified by many people interviewed. They would like to secure outside funding to increase staff hours. In turn, this capacity will allow them to apply for, secure, and administer additional funding sources. This is an area the Executive Committee is actively working on.

KSN-Lincoln has been almost entirely funded by the Karen community. They have also received a small amount of grant funding and business sponsorships. Otherwise their income comes from regular events and twice a year fundraising campaigns in which each family is asked to contribute. This community support shows that the people receiving the services value it. Those able to donate may not need KSN's services as much as they once did but they know what it was like when they first arrived and the importance of KSN's services at that time. There is also a strong commitment to keeping the Karen culture alive in Nebraska, which is an further segment of KSN's work.

Additional strengths of KSN include translation and interpretation skills, a very active Facebook page with an impressively large number of followers and educational videos, and experience conducting community surveys.

Three areas identified as significant concerns during interviews were mental health, addiction issues, and truancy in the Karen community. The survey did not address these but KSN leaders mentioned them multiple times. It will take a variety of community resources and partnerships to fully understand and address these issues. One tactic has been the after school tutoring program to address truancy issues. The volunteer KSN Youth Team helps students learn lessons and catch up on their studies.

Outside of KSN, numerous opportunities to expand their existing partnerships are available. Many partnerships that could be grown were identified in the interviews including with local government, local businesses, higher education (particularly for student volunteers), mental health providers, legal services, and with other nonprofit agencies. KSN looks forward to expanding its connections in the community.

However, past partnerships haven't been as effective as they could have been. Many groups and organizations have asked for KSN's help to reach the Karen population. KSN knows it is important to get information out to the Karen but they are rarely compensated for the significant amount of time that goes into maintaining their extensive network and distributing information. KSN-Lincoln is also often asked to provide transportation and interpretation for clients to programs without being compensated. They want their clients to receive the services but KSN-Lincoln staff aren't paid for full-time work and need funding for these extra duties. KSN would like to be an

equal partner from the beginning on such projects. This would benefit both partners as well as be more effective in reaching the Karen families.

A final challenge is that there are many factors outside of KSN and their direct control including their donated office space, the amount of time dealing with government bureaucracy takes when helping clients, and that funders want the most efficient use of their funding. These concerns were top of mind as the group put together their strategies.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Based on the survey and interview results, the KSN-Lincoln Team identified the following points as the most important.

INSIDE KSN	OUTSIDE KSN
<h3>Strengths</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong group of long-time volunteers• Able to get large groups of volunteers for special events• Community connections through social media• Strong community support through donations and events• American volunteers who are training Karen	<h3>Opportunities</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase volunteers, including student volunteers• Stronger connections to the City of Lincoln and Lancaster County• Expand partnerships in the community such as career building, legal services, medical, mental health, alcohol treatment
<h3>Weaknesses</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Part-time staff / only open afternoons• Limited time to attend community meetings - others don't know about their work• Basic financial structure - funders expect more recordkeeping• Potential volunteers don't have time to help	<h3>Threats</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Donated office space - not permanent• Funders want efficient use of money. They prefer to help the most people for the least cost

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

From the environmental scan, the group created a vision of what they want to see in the future of KSN-Lincoln. Four core topics were identified:

- **Education for All Ages of Karen People:** From Karen language and culture classes for children to English classes for seniors, the community has a strong desire to learn more and thereby help themselves.

- **Community-Owned Office Space:** For many in the community, an independent space is a major goal. They would like to have a larger KSN-owned space for cultural events, classes, and community development.
- **Sustaining Supporters:** The team knows that to fund these goals, they need to reach beyond their community for funding to foundations, government sources, and additional private donors.
- **KSN Careers:** As the organization grows, they want to make sure that working for KSN is a full-time career position that provides benefits, professional development, and educational opportunities.

STRATEGIC GOALS

Finally, the team identified five strategic goals based on the needs of KSN and the Karen community in Lincoln:

- Permanent community-owned office space in the next 2 years
- Develop a fundraising plan and yearly plan annually
- Strengthen the volunteer committee structure
- Hire 1-2 full-time staff and add 5-6 regular volunteers
- Learn from each other and from outside resources through additional training

DETAILED ACTION PLAN FOR 2022

- Permanent community-owned office space in the next 2 years
 - Leader: Executive Committee (EC)
 - A. Send fundraising envelopes to buy an office building to Karen individuals, churches and businesses. (April) – (EC)
 - B. One fundraising event, on the ground. (June 25, World Refugee Day Week, Tournaments, will sell food and tickets - led by Sports Team) (Lincoln EC, Zone and ALL committees)
 - C. KSN Facebook income, Media committee will investigate
 - D. Investment income - Social Services team will investigate
- Develop a fundraising plan and yearly plan annually
 - Fundraising for current operations (Coordinator: EC Team)
 - A. One fundraiser (KSN Day to be held in September) - EC, Music Team (bring

in musicians, dancers, fashion show) Will sell food and tickets. (Zone Team and Security Team)

- a. Business sponsors can donate or purchase a booth
 - B. Give to Lincoln Day (Board: James & Susan Kash-Brown, Consultant: Ingrid Kirst)
 - C. Individual sponsor letters (June)(Member supporter, \$20 individual, \$50 families) EC team will print, Zone team will distribute
 - D. Grants to support office activities and youth programs (EC) Will submit 4 applications in 2022
- Strengthen the volunteer committee structure of KSN-Lincoln
 - Details below on each committee's status and tasks:
 - A. Executive Team: (Strong) Core Leadership of KSN-Lincoln
 - B. Zone Team: (Strong) Coordinate messaging and activities within each zone
 - C. Youth Team: (Need to Renew) Youth Development - After School Program, Youth and Family Coach Program, Summer Program, Mentorship Program.
 - D. Community Health Team: (Need to start) Mental Health, Family Relationship and Family Planning
 - E. Social service team: (Strong Team) Work in Office, Employment, Citizenship, Assistance to Karen people
 - F. Cultural Team: (Need to Update) - Presentation, Weaving Circle, Holiday,
 - G. Security Team: (Established) - Security at Events
 - H. Sport Team: (Established) - Coordinate Soccer and Volleyball Tournaments
 - I. Media team: (Need to Update) - Promotion of Events and Activities, Videos
 - J. Education Team: (To be Developed Later) - Karen Culture and Language Education
 - K. Music Team: (Established) - Provide Music for Events and Special Requests
 - Hire 1-2 full-time staff and add 5-6 regular volunteers
 - A. Fundraising and capacity building goals feed into this goal
 - B. Increased fundraising (Give to Lincoln Day, Karen community, grants)
 - C. Plan for sustaining increased staffing
 - D. Explore adding AmeriCorps member (James, KSN ED)
 - E. Student interns (Moo Kah Taw, Board Member)
 - F. Additional staffing will allow KSN to create community partnerships,

participate in collaborative groups (New Americans Task Force and others),
serve additional clients, build capacity

- Learn from each other and from outside resources through additional training
(To support community celebration and engagement)
 - A. Events & Holidays - celebrating both Karen and American holidays
 - B. Review businesses that support KSN Lincoln office and thank them. (Social Services Team)
 - C. Training on presenting on camera, videography, photography and Facebook on KSN TV (Media Team)
 - D. Community health awareness & cultural education – Community Health Team
 - E. Citizenship class video education
 - F. Build collaborations with additional agencies to train staff and refer clients
 - G. Leadership training
 - H. Grants & Fundraising Training (February 2022, Ingrid Kirst)
 - I. Give to Lincoln Day Planning & Training (April 2022, Ingrid Kirst)

The KSN-Lincoln Executive Committee will include a review and revision process of the Strategic Plan at their regular annual review series of meetings held annually in January and February.

The Karen Society of Nebraska wishes to thank the Community Health Endowment of Lincoln for funding the survey and strategic plan. Their support was extremely beneficial in completing this process.