

LAWRENCE

# BUSINESS

MAGAZINE

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OUR EVER EVOLVING  
DOWNTOWN  
WITH MASS STREET AT ITS HEART



Laura Klein, owner-Mass Street Fish House



Hospitality workers working their magic at Mass St Fish House

# The Lawrence Restaurant Association:

by Laura Klein, photos by Steven Hertzog and Emily Johnson

The Lawrence Restaurant Association (LRA) is an assembly of commercial restaurant owners, executive chefs and hospitality industry professionals dedicated to the prosperity of Lawrence and Douglas County, Kansas. This collaborative effort aims to uplift hospitality industry workers, our community, the local economy and the environment through various funds, grants and community support programs. The LRA's story is one of grassroots organization and impactful community service, making it a vital component of the local business landscape.

## Origins and Mission

The LRA began as an informal gathering of like-minded individuals in 2017. Recognizing the need for a unified voice and coordinated efforts within the hospitality sector, these meetings gradually evolved into a more structured organization by 2020. The formation of the LRA was driven by a shared vision: to create a supportive network that champions the interests of small businesses and hospitality workers while fostering a thriving, sustainable community.

At its core, the LRA is committed to advocacy, information-sharing and programming that benefits all stakeholders in the hospitality industry. By promoting best practices, offering professional development opportunities and facilitating networking among members, the LRA aims to strengthen the industry's foundation in Douglas County.



# Supporting Our Community and Industry

## *Pandemic Response and Ongoing Support*

One of the LRA's most notable achievements is its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. When the pandemic struck, the LRA quickly organized a school lunch program in collaboration with local businesses. This initiative was a testament to the community's resilience and willingness to support one another during challenging times. The program operated seven days a week, delivering 2,500 meals per day and totaling more than 96,000 meals served. This effort not only addressed immediate food insecurity but also showcased the power of collective action.

In addition to the school lunch program, the LRA established the Hospitality Workers Relief Fund (HWRF) in 2020. This fund was created to provide direct aid to unemployed and underemployed service industry workers affected by the pandemic. Since its inception, the HWRF has distributed over \$260,000 to more than 720 hospitality workers, assisting with essential expenses such as groceries, gas, utilities and housing. The fund's impact extends beyond financial support; it has provided stability and hope to many during uncertain times.

## *Sustaining the Hospitality Workers Relief Fund*

The LRA is committed to maintaining the HWRF beyond the resolution of the pandemic. Recognizing that financial hardships can arise unexpectedly, the fund will continue to offer emergency aid to hospitality workers facing unforeseen challenges. This ongoing commitment ensures that the fund remains a vital safety net for the industry.

In addition to direct financial assistance, the HWRF supports other community causes, such as hunger relief and food waste reduction. The LRA's dedication to these initiatives reflects its broader mission to enhancing the well-being of Douglas County residents.

## Community Partnerships

The LRA's success is bolstered by strong partnerships with local organizations that provide critical services to hospitality workers. Current partners include the Ballard Center, Bert Nash Community Mental Health Center, Centro Hispano Resource Center and Heartland Community Health Center. These organizations receive HWRF grant funds to directly support hospitality workers with child care, health care, counseling and utility and rent assistance. By collaborating with these partners, the LRA ensures that workers have access to comprehensive support services, addressing their diverse needs and promoting overall well-being.

## Annual Programs and Fundraisers

To promote member restaurants and raise funds for the Hospitality Workers Relief Fund, the LRA organizes two key annual events: Lawrence Restaurant Week and the Lawrence Cocktail Trail.

**Lawrence Restaurant Week** is a highly anticipated event that showcases the culinary talents of our member restaurants. This weeklong celebration provides an opportunity for residents and visitors to enjoy special menus and unique dining experiences, highlighting the diverse and vibrant food scene in Lawrence. The event not only boosts business for participating restaurants but also serves as a significant fundraiser for the HWRF, helping to support hospitality workers in need.

**The Lawrence Cocktail Trail** is another popular program that encourages community members to explore the creative cocktail offerings of local bars and restaurants. Participants can enjoy exclusive drinks crafted by our talented local bartenders while supporting a great cause. Proceeds from the Cocktail Trail contribute directly to the HWRF, ensuring that the fund can continue to provide vital assistance to hospitality workers facing financial hardships.

## Future Goals and Vision

Looking ahead, the LRA is focused on expanding its reach and impact within the community. Future goals include increasing membership, enhancing advocacy efforts and developing new programs that address emerging challenges in the hospitality industry. The LRA plans to continue fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose among its members, encouraging collaboration and innovation.

Additionally, the LRA is committed to sustainability and environmental stewardship. By promoting practices that reduce food waste and support local agriculture, the association aims to contribute to a healthier and more sustainable community. These efforts align with the LRA's broader vision of creating a thriving hospitality sector that benefits everyone in Douglas County.

## Advocating for a Diverse Industry

The hospitality industry is the second largest employer in Douglas County, yet it comprises a diverse patchwork of individually owned businesses. The LRA seeks to represent this diverse collective by engaging with city and county officials, providing avenues for our membership to connect and share information, and advocating for our industry and its workforce. By ensuring that the unique needs and perspectives of small businesses are heard, the LRA plays a crucial role in shaping policies that support the growth and sustainability of the local hospitality sector.

The Lawrence Restaurant Association is more than just a professional organization; it aims to be a beacon of support and solidarity for the hospitality industry in Lawrence and Douglas County. From its humble beginnings to its current role as a community leader, the LRA exemplifies the power of collaboration and community spirit. By continuing to advocate for small businesses, support hospitality workers and invest in the local economy and environment, the LRA is helping to shape a brighter future for all. ▲

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A BENEFIT FOR THE LAWRENCE RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION  
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MORE ABOUT THE FUND AND PARTICIPATING ESTABLISHMENTS AT  
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Karen WILLEY

*for Douglas County*

In every decision, Karen will consider: Equity • Economics • Environment



“Problem solving happens best when we approach issues with curiosity, collaboration, and community. I will continue to stand for open civil discourse and will apply my scientific background to result in well-researched, data-driven decisions for Douglas County.”

Karen Willey, PhD is a geographer, entrepreneur, volunteer firefighter, community board member, and mom, running for re-election to Douglas County Commission District 3.

[karenwilleyfordouglascounty.com](http://karenwilleyfordouglascounty.com)

*Paid for by Karen Willey for Douglas County, Derek Kwan, treasurer*





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