

**THE RURAL INFORMATION CENTER:
INFORMATION NEEDS FOR LOCAL RURAL OFFICIALS**

Patricia La Caille John
Coordinator
Rural Information Center

Although rural America of the 1970s experienced economic growth and vitality, in the 1980s it faced rising unemployment, slow job growth, declining population, and increasing poverty. Beginning in the 1960s the primary dependence of the rural economic base shifted from one of natural resources and agriculture to manufacturing and services. The national rural crisis of the 1980s resulted because of a combination of factors--the decline in farmland values, the increase in agricultural competition, the economic decline in the rural-based mining, timber, and petroleum industries, and the slow recovery after the economic downturn experienced from 1979 to 1982.

Consequently the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) shifted its focus in rural policy to include not only the economic well-being of the farmer but the economic, social, and technical needs of the entire rural community. USDA officials recognized that the economic health of all elements of rural society must be considered in rural policy and that USDA must function as a partner with state and local governments to meet the changing economic needs of rural America.

At the same time rural leaders and officials appointed by the President to the National Council of Rural Development to advise the Secretary of Agriculture on rural development policy were voicing strong concerns about the importance of the capability of rural leaders to be able to access the most current and accurate information at will. The council recommended that USDA establish an information service to provide this function.

Consequently USDA designated its newest information center, the Rural Information Center, with the responsibility to provide information and referral services to local government officials working to maintain the vitality of America's rural areas. RIC's targeted audience is the public responsibility--local, state, and national.

RIC is a joint project of the Extension Service and the National Agricultural Library (NAL). RIC combines the technical, subject-matter expertise of Extension's nationwide educational network with the resources of the largest agricultural library in the free world. RIC staff draw upon NAL's collection resources of books, journals, program manuals, audiovisual materials and access to numerous on-line databases for providing information and retrieval material. RIC is the twelfth specialized information center to be developed at the library in sixteen years. While NAL's experience and information expertise are invaluable to the success of the RIC project, the Extension service provides RIC with program expertise as well as a network to rural outreach, contacts, and information dissemination. The rural information requests RIC has received from its targeted audience of public officials, rural communities, and the Cooperative Extension Service, fall into two basic categories:

First, RIC has received community requests of the urgent crisis category. Rural citizens have a municipal crisis and need information immediately. These inquiries often deal with pressing environmental and rural health impact issues.

Second, RIC has received questions that fall into the category of extension service and community planning programs to provide local government services and promote economic development. RIC provides information and referral contacts allowing decision-makers to know what is available to them. The information and contacts subsequently play a part in impacting the local decision-making process in rural areas.

One of the most involved examples of a crisis request received by RIC came in October 1987, the day after RIC had just acquired an entirely new staff. For this reason the timing was not great, but the request was used as an excellent training exercise because it required both manual and on-line information retrieval searches.

The question came from a district extension community resource development specialist in northeastern Ohio. A group of concerned citizens were seeking information about the proposed building of a toxic waste incinerator in their rural community. They were concerned about the health and environmental impact of locating the incinerator in their community. They also wanted information on guidelines and studies monitoring toxic waste sites

and on the possible application of the Federal Farmland Protection Act. In addition, they requested names of community groups and organizations which dealt with this type of issue so that they could contact them for guidance. The RIC staff provided names of organizations for the citizens to contact, a copy of the Toxic Substance Control Act of 1976, and with help from a congressional information office, a copy of the Federal Farmland Protection Act which was buried in the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981.

The second aspect of the request involved identifying the various concepts comprising the on-line search strategy and the appropriate databases to access in the search. In addition to searching several specialized subject databases from the DIALOG service, we also accessed the LOGIN, or Local Government Information Network database, which contains text records of 50 to 500 words each. LOGIN records contain information on problems encountered by local governments in such areas as economic development, housing, financial management, and services. The records can include case studies, the names and phone numbers of key contact people, and training and resource materials.

The RIC staff was able to provide on-line subject searches on the basic request concepts which included hazardous toxic waste substances, toxic incineration, toxic disposal guidelines and regulations, health and environmental impact, and community and citizen participation. RIC supplies case studies of similar situations encountered by other communities and key contact organizations. To bring this request full circle, a RIC technical information specialist subsequently prepared a reference brief on toxic waste incineration as a result of and subsequent similar requests. By far the largest number of requests received by RIC fall into the second category of users--those community officials, leaders, and organizations preparing grant proposals, reports, studies and planning documents dealing with local government services and economic development programs.

Requests for help with local government services almost always have the same bottom line--funding. Local governments need to know the source of funds, if they qualify for the funds, and how they can get the funds. RIC has received so many funding questions that a RIC subject specialist compiled a list of the top 100 federal funding programs available to rural areas.

RIC has received a wide variety of requests focusing on rural government services. One of the principal requests dealing with the financial problems impacting a community's ability to deliver services came from a Kentucky state extension specialist who called RIC for information to help the citizens of Lebanon, Kentucky. They were wrestling with three local issues:

First, the state of Kentucky had passed a law which no longer allowed juvenile offenders to be housed in the community jail or even in the same building as the jail but had to be located in a separate building. Local officials were worried about the financial impact of the new legislation on their small community and needed to explore alternatives.

Second, they wanted to explore ways to cooperate in a multigovernmental arrangement, agreement, or contract for providing basic local services such as ambulance, animal shelter, and solid waste management disposal services.

And finally, the community was dissatisfied with its cable TV system and wanted to explore means of city ownership or control before the cable contract came up for renewal.

The service issues facing the local government in Lebanon are representative of the type of community inquires being received at RIC. Many local governments are trying to address the varied and increasing service and social needs of their communities while experiencing a diminishing population and tax base. Local government officials and community organizations are seeking information and referral assistance from RIC to prepare grant proposals to help with the essential community services.

In addition to the essential services, local officials are seeking RIC services to help in the preparation of programs, studies, and grant proposals for community services dealing with issues impacting the community's social structure. Some social issues, such as how to deal with homelessness, are resulting in newer financial strains for rural America, while other issues such as increasing high school drop-out rates, medical costs, and care of the elderly continue to place increasing stress on the local finances of rural America.

Other local government inquiries include identifying innovative methods to reward productive municipal employees with non-financial awards in those communities lacking adequate funds for employee awards, funding sources for affordable community housing, and providing land fill alternatives to solid

waste management disposal. Local county councils also seek RIC's assistance to identify funding programs for catastrophic illness insurance and school services.

RIC is seeing an increase in requests focusing on services for the rural youth and elderly. Local communities are looking for programs with proven track records which lower the high school drop-out rate. Georgia extension officials are working on this issue at both the county and state level. RIC has received requests from local communities and extension agents seeking funding sources for teen community centers, schools, rural libraries, and combination multi-purpose structures comprising a library, a community center, and a kitchen sufficient to handle a meals-on-wheels program.

In addition to worrying about providing essential community services and related social help programs, rural governments are equally involved in community economic development efforts. RIC is receiving questions from county planning officials for information identifying the local community factors which affect business decisions in selecting industrial location sites, evaluating the use of impact fees that a municipal government charges a business to develop an area, planning the building of a community nursing home or designing and implementing a developmental park project, locating funds to restore, preserve, and even move historic buildings, creating and retaining jobs, and diversifying off-farm employment and jobs for farmers.

In addition to promoting economic development, local planning officials want to be able to monitor economic trends. Local government planners and extension specialists have requested information on the appropriate economic indicators to use for measuring stress in rural Texas counties and developing software programs to examine productivity indicators in Washington State.

Likewise, information requests from rural citizens via the local extension agent are also economic in nature. Many requests are from budding entrepreneurs needing basic information on how to set up home-based businesses and referrals to local area organizations for financial and technical assistance.

In addition to requests on funding of local government services and community economic development programs, RIC has also received several information requests from the Cooperative Extension Service for developing

training workshops to help with the revitalization of rural communities. The inquiries have varied from identifying funding sources to develop a workshop on the aging to supplying information on the course development for workshops dealing with self esteem, stress, risk management, and insurance liability.

The most ambitious extension workshop project with which RIC has been involved was the preparation of an extensive literature search on local government liability insurance and risk management. This resource list is being used by the Extension Service in the development of courses and course materials to train state extension specialists who in turn will train local officials on site in 24 states in risk management and local government liability. Risk management has become a major issue nationwide because public officials and local governments can be and are being sued for a variety of reasons. The concern over lawsuits and obtaining liability insurance have caused some officials to resign and deterred others from seeking public office.

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation awarded a two-year grant of \$462,000.00 to the USDA Extension Service in the fall of 1987 to mount this national development and training effort. The federal Extension Service feels that this program will aid small jurisdictions lacking staff and materials to build a risk management program and be an integral part of the Cooperative Extension System's national initiative on revitalizing rural America.

It is the goal of RIC, working closely with the Extension Service, to meet rural information requirements by placing the best information available in the hands of public officials and community leaders responsible for implementing rural development programs. The accomplishment of this goal by the RIC staff will play an important role in assisting local officials to make the best informed decisions on rural issues impacting their communities.