

**RURAL INFORMATION NEEDS
AS SEEN BY:**

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Since the title of this session is "Rural Information Needs as seen by ...," I plan to share what I see as some factors vital for meeting the informational needs of rural families. In extension work I deal with farm families, nonfarm rural families, the low income, rural elderly, small town families, and the small town elite families. For this topic I have a special interest in low income families because in many ways they have the most needs but probably will be left behind in the information explosion.

Hennon and Brubaker (1988) talk about family rurality-urbanity. Three components make up this family rurality-urbanity. The first dimension is the physical and socioeconomic criteria. Rural and urban are placed on a continuum and locations along this line based on population size, population density, distance to urbanized centers, economic base, type of housing, land use, transportation access to urban areas, number of retail outlets, social services, and recreational opportunities. A vertical component is the access to and use of modern technology. This places communities on a vertical continuum based on their knowledge and use of technologies related to communication, medical and health developments, data and word processing, and industrial innovations. Some families in rural areas have more access to technology i.e., satellite dishes, video recorders, agricultural production advances, computers, microwaves, etc. The third dimension on this three dimensional diagram is the meaning domain. This subjective component taps the world view, values, customs, rituals, attitudes. I think we often ignore this component with providing information. Certain patterns are considered more coasopolitan and others are considered rural. For example, self-worth defined through ownership of land is a rural value. End points on any of these three dimensions do not imply positive or negative values. (Hennon and Brubaker, 1988, p. 6) This

diagram has much to contribute to a study of the information needs of rural families.

Families in rural communities are quite diverse and this makes generalizations difficult. The rural families in the South differ from rural families in Appalachia who differ from rural families in the west. Research has indicated some of the following demographics of rural families as compared to urban families. There is a higher ratio of males to females, incomes generally are lower, proportionately more families live in poverty, women are less likely to work outside the home, rural people have less education and a larger proportion of the population is elderly. (Johnson & Beegle, 1982) Scanzoni and Arnett found the most important characteristics which distinguish rural and urban people are education and degree of gender role traditionalism. These researchers found that there are many similarities between urban and rural people, but rural people are less well education than urban people and rural people are more traditional than urban persons on both dimensions of male behaviors, the father and husband roles. (Scanzoni & Arnett, 1988, p. 276)

Traditional values in rural communities do influence what information people are willing to accept and use. For example, in a money management class I was told that *women should not be working and this was a religious issue. The only reason women work is to buy microwave ovens and other things. This individual believes it is the role of women to be dependent on men and that men should be the providers for the household.* In a group of six people, three agreed with these statements. In fact, one of the women said even though her husband was disabled periodically and they were late in paying many bills, they did not believe it was right for her to work.

Another traditional value for some populations within rural communities is independence and self-sufficiency. I see a need in very rural parts of this county for rural families to be aware of the services and agencies that are available to them. The Area Agency on Aging has transportation available to elderly citizens for visiting the doctor or getting groceries. They also provide assistance to elderly families who have members who need care in the home. However, some rural homemakers viewed this as welfare and did not want to participate in anything that was "welfare," even though they desperately needed

help. Their children had left the county, their spouses had died, they could barely see, but by golly they weren't going to use this transportation service.

There is a difference between needs and wants. A family may want to know something but may not necessarily need it. On the other hand, a family may need information but not want it. To me this seems to be a major barrier in providing information. In many ways identifying needs may be the easy part; while making the delivery, reaching the people who need information, and helping them use information are the hard parts. Perhaps, first we need to examine the existing values and determine ways goals can be reach within the values or work to change the values.

As stated earlier Scanzoni and Arnett's study a distinguishing factor between urban and rural families was educational levels. Rural areas have lower levels of education than do urban areas and this factors plays a large role in distinguishing between rural and urban families. I find bright children leaving rural communities while poor and elderly stay, consequently, a poor base exists for economic development. In Clarion County 36.3% of the people over the age of 25 have not graduated from high school. (Riverview Intermediate Unit, 1988) This raises the question of how capable is this part of the population to even read information that is to be presented. This low value for education may also imply a low value for wanting information.

Rural poor often need all kinds of information. In our federally funded Expanded Food and Nutrition Program our nutrition advisor is working with a family that does not have indoor plumbing. The only toilet is located in one of the bedrooms. There is no bathroom or shower. Drinking water is obtained from local springs and receives no treatment for bacteria contamination. This water sits around in gallon jars until it is used. Information on sanitation is needed. Because rural areas lack zoning, no one will determine that this house is unfit for renting.

The mother of this family is one of thirteen children. Her father died of Huntington's Disease. This is an inherited disease where children have a fifty-fifty chance of inheriting the gene which carries the disease. She has inherited the gene and will eventually lose control of the nerves, requiring that she be confined to a wheelchair. She and her husband have two lovely children. They live on public assistance. The boy has either a psychological

or physical condition where he is unable to control his bowel movements. There are tremendous needs for health as well as nutritional information for this family. (The boy's bowel problem may be related to fiber intake.) However, moral and ethical issues also are involved in the health information.

Quality education is a must if rural communities are to break the cycle of poverty. This next family has two parents, both of whom were in special education in high school. They live on public assistance and the odds jobs that dad gets around town. The baby was identified by the doctor, neighbors, and the grandparents as a child that was starving and consequently was removed from the home by Children and Youth Services. The extension office was called because of our federally funded Expanded Foods and Nutrition Education Program as well as our information on Family Strengths dealing with parenting. The case worker from C & Y Services indicated that the situation was not intentional, but rather ignorance on the part of the parents. This couple had lived with the mother's parents until three months earlier.

In the course of our visits to the home we saw: garbage piled outside the trailer, food from breakfast and lunch left uncovered on the table in late afternoon, fly strips (which had been supplied by the nutrition advisor) covered with flies and numerous flies swarming around the baby which had coughed up and neither parent made a move to clean up the mess. The mother was able to read directions but seems unable to know how to follow directions in mixing the baby's formula. When asked what the baby was eating for supper, the mother responded proudly that she was crumbling chocolate cake and mixing it with the baby's formula.

Meanwhile, the child 18 month old had not learned to speak any words and was still using a baby bottle. (One of the big problems with preschool children is the loss of teeth from babies being put to bed with milk in their bottles.) The trailer had no bright colors for stimulation, the beds had no sheets. In all the times we visited the parents rarely spoke to the children. The mother would leave at 11:00 p.m. in search of more exciting activities often taking the children with her. There were no set times for feeding, bedtime, etc. Information was needed on all aspects of parenting and child development. The parent's own needs took priority over any needs of the children. This total lack of regard concerning raising children is frightening.

It produces children who lack trust, security, love, and a positive self-concept. Many families need information on child development, communication skills, and other family education but don't realize enough to even seek help. The attitude that one does what one parents did is generally accepted. The fact that parenting skills can be improved is not valued. On the other hand, families who know they need information resist attending programs where other people they know may think that they need help.

Other attitudes extension has encountered are:

- * "Your just trying to stir up trouble" when information is presented about environment issues such as radon in the home or the need for water quality.
- * "I've drunk it all my life" when it is indicated that spring water may be contaminated with bacteria.
- * "If it was good enough for me, it is good enough for my child" when trying to make changes in the ways people raise children or encouraging quality education.

Rural America has poverty, isolation, inadequate services, and inequality. Thus, when problems do exist, they can remain hidden and private. Clarion County has many families living in cars or tents, but not many residents even know this exists. Because of the isolation, poverty, and lack of services, the need for information is great.

Most of us would agree that the ultimate goal of providing information is for the information to be used to make changes in people's lives. That is, information is not useful if it sits somewhere untouched. As providers of information to rural areas it is important that we understand what families are like. The amount of information provided and the framework of the person receiving the information influences its use. It seems to me that often we start feeding information without really understanding the rural attitudes and perceptions of those we are trying to reach.

In summary, information needs for rural families include not only cognitive information but attention to the attitudes of the rural population. In order for information delivery systems to be effective, they must consider the nature of the rural community and person. Rural families, in my view, need information about parenting, nutrition, water quality, family living, family economics,

environment issues, health care, services available, job skills, money management, communication techniques, housing standards, and processes for making changes in government regulations. Most of these needs are reflected in the National initiatives for the Cooperative Extension Service presented by Mr. Fowler. Family and economic well-being include family financial instability, children at risk, vulnerable youth, family disruption and dislocation, responsibility for dependent elderly. The national initiative for improving nutrition, diet and health includes dietary practices related to lifestyle factors and health as well as confidence in the safety, quality, and composition of food supply. (USDA, 1988)

As we provide information to rural communities, it is important that we consider whose needs we are trying to meet. Methods of delivery are another link in reaching the people most in need of information. Also significant is the acceptance and use of new technologies as well as the current values and beliefs that families in the communities hold. These last two factors will influence how information ultimately is used.

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**RURAL INFORMATION NEEDS
AS SEEN BY:**

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Adlai Stevenson, a number of years back was giving a talk in an auditorium. He was walking along with a friend, and he wasn't too well prepared. He turned to the friend and said, "I can hardly wait to hear what I have to say." I am in that situation also. I have heard a lot this morning about industrial development. It is a very crucial thing of interest to me. About a month ago, I was at home eating dinner, a rare occasion. My wife and I were talking. I said, "Bernie Vavrek has asked me to be at the rural leadership meeting at the Holiday Inn. I think it has to do with libraries. I can't imagine why he would want me there?" My wife, being a city girl, said "I don't know anyone more rural than you are!" And that is true.

Two miles south of here on route 68 is the Weaver family farm. I was raised in this county, in the thirties, on the family farm. There were seven children. It was a way of life. We didn't have electricity until 1948. That might explain the size of the family. In those days, that's all we knew. We farmed. We would go to Clarion. That was a rare treat to go to Clarion on a Saturday--maybe once a month. We would go to church every Sunday. That is what we knew, in that era, in that time.

I would like to go back--back to the eighteen hundreds. I would like to tell you a little bit about the history of this area. Clarion County, Northwestern Pennsylvania, helped feed the crucible of this United States. Naturally, the crucible was Pittsburgh. We sent iron ore; we sent lumber; we sent limestone; we sent coal by the Clarion River to the Allegheny River to Pittsburgh. This area was very prevalent in those days. That's what made this country and this area grow--the lumber, coal, limestone, and so on.

In 1900, that's what we still did. In 1900, we had 2200 farms in Clarion County--2200 family farms. We had limestone mines and coal mines and glass factories. I have to tell you the truth, in 1960 we still had that. The farms

started to decrease. We still had the glass factories, and we still had the brick factories, the clay, and so on. I think the reason the farms started to decrease is many parents worked hard to educate their kids, and the kids went away to school. They found out there was an awful easier way to make a living than farming.

The area has changed. In recent years our manufacturing sources are drying up. The glass industry—we use to have four glass factories in Clarion County. We have one right now. The coal business was the backbone of our economy of the 70s. We had probably about 30 coal mining firms in Clarion County in that era. We are down to about five. C and K was the largest producer of coal in the 70s—up to 6 million tons a year. We're down to 2 1/2 million tons.

So we have been hard hit in those areas. You may say, "well, why hasn't something been done to bring more industry in? Well, you have to look at the history of our area. I remember Interstate 80 when it opened here in 1968. To one of our county commissioners, I was commenting about what a nice thing it was. He said, "Well, you know people don't seem to understand it. We're taking a swath right through the heartland of Clarion County, 360 feet wide. Look at all the farmland we are losing. Particularly, all the tax base we're losing." Little did he realize that the tax base would be greatly increased and enhanced by the five interchanges that were put along the interstate. You can't condemn the gentleman for that. That's the way he thought.

Advancement has come slow to the rural area. Sometimes, as you grow older, you're a little more conservative. The interstate system had helped our area a lot.

One of the other things that has helped our area and kept our economy kind of solid is the Clarion University. Back in 1957, we probably had about 600 students here. We now have 6,000 students. As a matter of fact, it's the biggest payroll in Clarion County. It's somewhere around \$25 million. So not only the payroll but the expertise of these people, like Professor Vavrek, help our community. It's a real plus for us. We are mighty glad to have them. We are very fortunate to have them.

As far as looking at industrial development from a government standpoint, it wasn't until 1980 that the government, the county commissioners, decided

that we needed to do something a little more positive. And in that year, they established an industrial development authority. They hired a director and it's been moving forward ever since.

The reason that I'm here to speak today is that I'm a member of PEDFA Board of Directors. It's newly formed financing plan for the industrial development of Pennsylvania. I have packets out on the counter if you would like to take one, you're welcome to it. What it does is kind of replaces the IR, Industrial Revenue Bond and Mortgage program, that has been in effect for many years. As a matter of fact, Pennsylvania has been one of the benefactors of that. Because of recent tax changes, that's no longer a feasible program.

Governor Casey, David Wright said, has established this program to finance industry throughout the Commonwealth. One of the other things the Governor has done, that David (Wright said, is Pennvest, which is a very important thing for rural Pennsylvania, because sewage, water are real problems in Western Pennsylvania. I think that we have the tools to do things. We have been a little slow in moving forward, but I think we are going to have to go out and recruit industry. We can do that. We now have the tools to do that.