

Open Forum
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on
Library & Information Services

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Testimony of:

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Sixty-four percent of public libraries serve towns or communities with population less than 10,000 according to the National Center for Educational Statistics. Probably about eighty percent serve 25,000 or less.

Over one-fourth of the U.S. population is considered to be living in rural areas, 64,798,000 according to U. S. Census. Their description of rural is, "open countryside

as well as places with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants that are not in the suburbs of large cities."

The majority of these residents do not have what is commonly called "basic library services." Even at that they are confronting a library crisis. Citizens are having to choose between closing a library or a firehouse, between laying off library staff or a policeman, or demobilizing a bookmobile or a garbage truck. This financial crunch is happening to cities, as well.

Often, however, the rural library, if it even exists, is the single source, next to the extension agent, of information and culture in many of America's small communities. Rural areas do not have Boys Clubs, children's museums, YMCA's, community colleges, United Way, Continuing education or lifelong learning centers. The rural public library is the true people's university in small town America.

A picture of small town American libraries would show that few have any technology beyond telephones and typewriters (some are even electric), and that most are in buildings not designed for libraries but occupy handed down post offices, railroad stations, storefronts, etc. Very few have computers, CD-ROM readers, or even microfiche readers and copy machines.

By far the vast majority of these libraries are staffed by individuals who hold no MLS, or even a college degree. Yes, the staff often are well suited to the rural environment, having "grown up" there, but they often fall victim to the prejudices and racism of that generally white upbringing. These persons who probably staff as many as 5,000 of our Nation's libraries (there are 520 libraries in Iowa serving populations

of 10,000 or less) will never attend college or a library science course. Most have never spent a night away from their spouse since they were married. They do deserve, though, enlightenment about library philosophy, programs and management techniques. They need training which outside of a very few states doesn't exist.

Rural American children, according to the "National Study Regarding At-Risk Students," are almost twice as likely to become involved in drugs. They also are more sexually active, more prone to depression, and more likely to be involved in crime than their urban and suburban counterparts, the report reveals. There is a tremendous need for better public libraries and information to rural America for these and other reasons.

The best law libraries in the six rural counties that I work in North Florida are available to only five percent of the total population. Why is that? Because you must be sentenced to a state prison to access those five law libraries in local state institutions, which have been mandated for convicted criminals, but not for the general public.

This conference will be discussing access. The geographic access issue is as real as the needed access for the handicapped, minorities and other underserved groups. Rural children or adults cannot take the bus or metro to the library as can someone in Brooklyn, Watts, or Alexandria. Generally the county library, if it exists, is located in a county seat. Counties, of course, stretch for twenty-thirty or more miles in either direction. It certainly isn't feasible to put contemporary libraries in each town, or four roads crossing to serve the dispersed rural population.

Networking and access currently provide another example of rural libraries' plight. The Suwannee River Regional Library has no local node to access a service, such as Compu-Serve, over its 4,200 square-mile service area. We must pay for long distance charges, as well as Solinet charges, when we want to use the ILL network. Even if we could afford some on-line services such as Dialog, or even the flat monthly charge of Prodigy, the long distance charges to access these services would still be prohibitive under our current financial position.

Administrative and governmental organizational structures in small towns do not have professional grant writers with word processors, etc., to efficiently pursue Federal or private grant funds. We often don't know how to play the "Washington" or state capitol games. Also, most Federal and State funding authorities are centered in cities, and sometimes, but not always, don't know or have forgotten what rural America really is.

In town after town in rural America, professional principals and superintendents, and professional teachers decide what students in classrooms will study. The young students, then, go to the rural public library and are assisted by a high school graduate who got the job because they "love to read." One of the most important parts of the education process is not being facilitated by trained people in those libraries.

Rural citizens are sensitive to urban crisis, but there is a rural crisis, too. We are sensitive to minority, disadvantaged and handicapped needs, too. We are, too, those persons, although more sparsely spread out. We are the Black, the Hispanic,

the Native American, the migrant laborer, the small business person and the illiterate.

Most of us support the emphasis to establish networks that currently mostly only our city brother and sister can "practically" access. We think the leadership of NCLIS, WHCLIS and ALA is steering in the right direction.

In September, 1990, over 230 rural library workers from 27 states met in Omaha to discuss a rural library agenda for the future, thanks to the H. W. Wilson Foundation and the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion University.

The resulting agenda supported educational opportunities for all library workers, the establishment of a network connecting small, rural and urban libraries with affordable costs, that funding be provided to rural libraries to insure "as close as possible" equality of access, and that a title be created in LSCA for the development of rural libraries, as was originally intended in the initial Act; and lastly that rural libraries must become vocal at all levels and be involved in community activities as leaders in their communities.

Please remember the small one or two-person library serving that child, that senior citizen, that small business person and that non-reader. We are one of every four Americans and urge you to remember us in your recommendations and plans.