
The Rural Information Center Assists Local Communities*

PATRICIA LACAILLE JOHN

ABSTRACT

THE INFORMATION GAP BETWEEN rural and urban areas became a growing concern to rural citizens during the farm crisis of the mid-1980s. Local officials and community leaders expressed to their congressional representatives their fear that this gap would continue to expand, and rural areas would not have ready access to the information resources necessary to help stimulate their depressed economies unless Congress addressed the problem. Therefore, in April 1987, Congress approached the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to propose that it establish a rural assistance information clearinghouse. The USDA readily agreed, and the result was the creation of the Rural Information Center (RIC) as a nationwide information provider to rural officials and communities. This article focuses on RIC's services, information requests, and partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1960s, the primary economic base in rural America shifted from natural resources and agriculture to manufacturing and services. Despite this shift, the rural areas of the 1970s experienced economic and population growth. For the first time in decades, the economies of nonmetropolitan counties grew faster than urban areas. However, the scenario of the 1980s differed greatly. Much of rural America found itself facing rising unemployment, declining population, and increasing poverty. The rural economic crisis of the mid-1980s resulted from a combination of factors—the decline in farmland values; the in-

Patricia LaCaille John, Rural Information Center, National Agricultural Library, 10301 Baltimore Boulevard, Beltsville, MD 20705-2351

LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 44, No. 1, Summer 1995, pp. 152-75

*This article is exempt from U.S. Copyright

crease in global agricultural competition; the economic decline in the rural-based mining, timber, and petroleum industries; and the slow recovery after the economic recession of the early 1980s.

Government officials at all levels became acutely aware that, in spite of the spirit of independence and self-sufficiency considered synonymous with rural America, in many areas, the spirit was in critical need of economic revitalization. Consequently, the USDA began shifting the focus of its rural development policy to include not only the economic well-being of the farmer but also 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 development policy. On May 19, 1987, USDA Deputy Secretary Peter Myers testified before the House Agriculture Committee:

So, while keeping the farmer ever in mind, the "people's department" must now turn its attention to the farmers' neighbors—to Main Street, U.S.A.; those neighbors that buy the farmers' products and sell him most of the materials needed to produce them. Their financial health is influenced by the farmers' economic well-being. So all of the help we have been giving to farmers is also important to rural communities, generally.

Farming is the dominant economic activity in many parts of rural America, and we want to continue to nurse it back to health. However, all parties with an interest in the future of rural America have to look at strategies that will diversify the rural economy. Planning officials at all levels of government, plus private industry, must look for economic activities that fit in the rural community... (pp. 2-3)

All interested parties need to look at the basic elements that make a rural society work and at alternative means of providing these elements: the public facilities such as water systems, the availability of venture capital, education, transportation and healthcare....

The most important role will be that of the people—making their decisions, allocating their resources, using their own ingenuity, and setting their own horizons. The Federal Government will be an active and willing associate, working with the people and their local institutions, both public and private. (H. R. 2026, 100th Cong. 1st Sess. (1987))

GRASSROOTS AND CONGRESSIONAL MANDATE

During the farm crisis, the National Advisory Council on Rural Development voiced strong concerns about the capability of rural leaders to access the most current and accurate information at will. The thirty-member council, comprised of rural leaders and officials appointed by the President to advise the Secretary of Agriculture on rural development policy, was worried about information access for rural areas. One of the main concerns expressed by members of the council was that, in this information era, it is essential for rural America to have the same access to information and information-related technologies and resources as urban America. Unfortunately, information technologies were not

reaching rural areas as quickly as urban areas. Therefore, the council recommended that the USDA establish an information service to provide this function.

In the meantime, other rural officials and citizens were voicing their concerns about the information gap in rural America to congressional members. As a result, in April 1987, Congress proposed in House Resolution 2026 that the USDA establish a National Rural Assistance Information Clearinghouse at the National Agricultural Library (NAL) located in Beltsville, Maryland. The purpose of the clearinghouse would be to:

provide and distribute information and data to any industry, organization, or Federal, State, or local government entity, on request, about Federal, State, and local programs and services, and programs and services operated by private nonprofit organizations or institutions, under which individuals residing in, or organizations and State and local government entities operating in, a rural area...may be eligible for any kind of assistance, including, but not limited to, job training, education, health care, economic development assistance, and emotional and financial counseling. (H. R. 2026, 1987, Title II, § 202[b])

The clearinghouse would provide officials and leaders of small rural communities with rapid and direct access to current information on funding programs. The service would link local officials with the appropriate federal program or funding source and eliminate the often difficult and time-consuming effort required to track down this information.

On May 19, 1987, the month following this congressional proposal, in testimony before the Conservation, Credit and Rural Development Subcommittee of the House Agriculture Committee, Deputy Secretary Peter Myers announced USDA's Six-point Rural Regenerative Initiative outlining the department's new plan to address the problems of rural Main Street. Myers (1987) informed Congress that the third-point was USDA's commitment that:

an information clearinghouse will be established at the National Agricultural Library with an 800 telephone number. Rural community officials will be able to get up-to-date information about Federal programs available to them in a single phone call and will be referred to the appropriate agency for follow-up. (p. 9)

The six-point initiative emphasized information and areas in which the accessibility and delivery of current information are essential—education and training, technical assistance, and research—and, equally important, close department coordination, a factor critical to the success of the entire plan (Vautour, 1987, pp. 29-32; Lyng & Vautour, 1988, pp. 7-8). The initiative stressed “the importance of getting the most effective use of existing resources in assisting economically depressed rural communities in their revitalization effort” (Lyng & Vautour, 1988, p. 7).

USDA JOINT AGENCY PROJECT

In response to USDA's commitment, Congress agreed to fund the clearinghouse as a line item in the NAL budget. However, the clearinghouse concept soon broadened as more USDA officials and agencies, namely NAL and the USDA Extension Service (ES), became involved in the planning process. Within two months, the idea, which had originally started out in Congress as an inventory clearinghouse of funding program information, was evolving into a full-fledged information center (Lyng & Vautour, 1989, p. 23). During RIC's initial evolution, an important theme emerged: Congress, USDA, and rural citizens all agreed on the importance of rural leaders being able to access information at will and the need to establish an information service to provide this function. The Rural Information Center emerged out of a need being voiced from several directions.

On September 3, 1987, Deputy Secretary Peter Myers officially opened the Rural Information Center, a joint agency service of NAL and ES, with two telephoned requests from local officials in Missouri and Georgia. The resulting and continuing cooperation between NAL and ES allows RIC to combine the technical subject-matter expertise of ES's nationwide Cooperative Extension Service (CES) of county extension agents and state subject specialists with the information resources of a national library of more than 2 million volumes emphasizing agriculture and rural information resources—an invaluable and natural merger. Of equal importance was the decision to locate RIC at NAL as one of ten specialized information centers at the library. While NAL's experience and information expertise are invaluable to the success of the RIC project, the CES educational network provides RIC with program expertise as well as a network to rural outreach, contacts, and information dissemination (Frank & John, 1989, pp. 40-43).

USDA initially envisioned that the Rural Information Center would provide rural community officials and citizens with up-to-date information through the CES staff at county extension offices nationwide "serving as the local point of contact across Rural America" (Lyng & Vautour, 1988, p. 7). CES, partially supported by federal funding, provides RIC with a national network of RIC State Extension Coordinators. All fifty states and Guam are participating in the RIC program. The majority of the state coordinators are community development state-level extension specialists located at land grant universities. These coordinators call in requests to RIC which they have received from local officials, tribal officials, community leaders, organizations, county extension agents, or rural citizens. RIC staff responds by sending the requested information to the state coordinator for further analysis, interpretation, and consultation with the requesting official or organization. By 1994, however, 19 percent of RIC's requests came directly from local and tribal officials,

community development organizations, and county extension agents seeking information assistance. Only 4 percent of the center's requests came from state extension specialists.

INFORMATION ASSISTANCE FOR RURAL AREAS

The Rural Information Center is staffed by librarians and technical information specialists with advanced degrees in one or more specialized subject areas, such as social, biological, information, or health sciences. The staff's varied subject backgrounds allow it to research and customize the requested information to best meet the client needs. The center's goal is to meet rural information requirements by placing the best and most timely information available in the hands of public officials and community leaders responsible for making informed decisions and implementing community programs (Nakazawa & John, 1993, pp. 62-65).

The staff provide answers to questions, supply statistical data, provide information about software—usually health or business related—identify economic development videos and software, provide referral information on organizations and subject experts when appropriate, and provide specialized computer searches from both bibliographic and nonbibliographic databases, furnishing full-text information whenever available. The information package may also include, from the NAL collection, pertinent articles, statistical tables, maps illustrating various aspects of rural demographics, or copies of related legislation.

The RIC staff uses several online vendor services to respond to the varied requests received, requests covering the entire range of the subject spectrum. The databases cover subjects ranging from congressional bills to environmental issues to business information to health care and rural educational issues. These online databases contain bibliographic records, case studies, funding programs, numeric data, and full-text sources from newsletters, journals, directories, and other information services.

The center uses the services of well-established online database vendors such as DIALOG, which provides access to NAL's database, AGRICOLA, and LEXIS/NEXIS. RIC also uses NEWSNET, offering full-text coverage of business newsletters; LOGIN, the Local Government Information Network containing case studies and project contacts of interest to local officials; and the Federal Assistance Programs Retrieval System (FAPRS), providing full-text access to the more than 1,300 federal assistance loans, grants, and technical assistance programs of more than fifty agencies.

Rural Information Center staff make NAL collection development recommendations on titles dealing with issues in rural America. In addition, RIC maintains an extensive reference collection covering all rural

topics. Furthermore, RIC ensures that these titles are indexed in AGRICOLA, which provides access to more than 3 million bibliographic records in the NAL collection. RIC's efforts since 1987 greatly enhanced AGRICOLA's content of important rural information publications.

The RIC staff also produces bibliographies, special reference briefs, and other information products focusing on rural issues such as funding assistance, small business development, education, health assistance services, agricultural and farm safety, affordable housing, alternative solid waste disposal, arts programs, financial management, and tourism. RIC currently offers over forty unique publications.

COOPERATIVE INFORMATION EFFORTS

The Rural Information Center staff networks extensively with experts, agencies, and information sources throughout the federal government, enabling the staff to identify and locate unpublished information from reports or statistical data and technical information from federal experts. Thus, a request to RIC links the client to the vast federal information network.

In addition, the Rural Information Center works directly with other federal agencies to improve not only its information products but also those of other departments as well. The Small Business Administration (SBA) and their national Service Corps of Retired Executives Association (SCORE) participated with RIC in a small business information pilot study in which SCORE and RIC identified user information needs. As a result of the pilot study, an information packet of SBA and RIC materials was assembled that RIC distributes to clients seeking general small business and/or funding information (Madigan & Vautour, 1991, pp. 7, 10).

In 1994, at the request of the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), the Rural Information Center participated as the beta test site for a complete system redesign of GSA's online database, FAPRS, which, as previously mentioned, provides full-text access to all federal loans, grants, and technical assistance programs. GSA staff worked with RIC staff on site to resolve problems and include system changes to accommodate specific RIC requirements before implementing the new version. FAPRS and RIC staff cooperate closely and, because FAPRS is not an information service, it refers funding requests to RIC for assistance.

FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP COMBINES TWO CONGRESSIONAL MANDATES

A federal cooperative effort that greatly enhanced the Rural Information Center's information delivery capabilities is a joint effort between USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Congress mandated, in the *Social Security Act of 1987*, that the DHHS's new Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP) establish a national rural health

information clearinghouse service to collect and disseminate rural health care information, including information on health care delivery services, research findings, personnel, policy, financing, and the health status of rural citizens (Lyng & Vautour, 1988, pp. 12-13).

The office works with other federal agencies, states, national organizations, foundations, and private sector organizations in seeking solutions to health care issues and problems in rural communities. ORHP also advises the Secretary of DHHS, Congress, and other federal agencies on the status of national rural health issues. The office administers rural health grant programs, including telemedicine projects, and "plans to expand its commitment to fostering telemedicine networks in rural areas" through increased funding (Hines, 1994, p. 24). In addition, ORHP provides partial funding to the State Offices of Rural Health (SORHs), with a membership of all fifty states, which serves as the primary link to the states for dissemination of rural health care information. ORHP also provides financial support to the National Rural Health Association (NRHA) for the preparation of publications, including the *Journal of Rural Health*. The center works closely with NRHA and networks extensively with the SORHs.

The Office of Rural Health Policy staff has used RIC since it offered its services nationally in October 1988. In September 1989, ORHP approached RIC with a proposal to incorporate the Department of Health and Human Services' rural health center clearinghouse congressional mandate with RIC. The joint effort would prevent duplicating federal rural program efforts. ORHP would also be able to use CES's nationwide network to disseminate rural health information to local communities and locate the health information clearinghouse at a national library.

NAL and DHHS signed a three-year interagency agreement in February 1990 in which NAL agreed to establish, by that October, a rural health information service that would function as a specialized subject component of RIC. This agreement effectively combined the national level responsibilities of two congressionally mandated rural information clearinghouses (Madigan & Vautour, 1991, pp. 7, 10).

In October 1990 the Rural Information Center opened the Rural Information Center Health Service (RICHS). As a result of both the agreement with the Office of Rural Health Policy and a recommendation of President Bush's Working Group on Rural Development, the Rural Information Center acquired an 800 telephone number (1-800-633-7701) to provide easy access for rural officials, communities, organizations, and individuals seeking information on rural issues (President's Economic Policy Council, 1990, p. 17). Under this interagency agreement, DHHS transferred nearly \$1 million to RIC to implement and operate RICHS during fiscal years 1991 to 1992 (John, 1994, pp. 39-45). The RICHS service is so successful that both agencies renewed the agreement in 1993 for an additional five years in which DHHS will transfer more than \$2 million in support of the program.

INFORMATION MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

While questions about rural areas reflect many of the social and economic issues of the more populated urban areas—rising poverty and unemployment, homelessness, drug abuse, to list a few—rural areas also deal with unique problems due to vast distances, remoteness, and relative isolation.

Many local governments find themselves facing the problems of meeting varied and increasing community service and social needs while also experiencing a diminishing population and tax base and a growing elderly population. The Rural Information Center receives many questions from local officials and community organizations seeking information to assist in strategic planning for essential community services and community development. The information that RIC supplies subsequently plays a role in impacting the local decision-making process in rural communities (President's Council on Rural America, 1992, pp. 4, 17).

The Rural Information Center provides important information assistance to many officials, communities, and citizens. Experiences in New Mexico, Vermont, and Idaho exemplify RIC's contribution.

Improved Health Service for a Frontier Hospital

A New Mexico county extension agent discovered, through first-hand experience, that his hospital's thirty-six-year-old x-ray machine did not produce legible x-rays. Seeking funding assistance for this frontier hospital, he called New Mexico's Rural Information Center State Extension Service Coordinator who put him in touch with RIC.

The Rural Information Center supplied him with information about grant-seeking strategies and application procedures and identified a federal grant program for which the hospital potentially could qualify. The county agent used these resources for the text and for justification of a grant request to the New Mexico state legislature which approved a \$260,000 hospital grant. Simultaneously, the agent pursued the federal grant. Five months after approval of the state grant, the agent received a \$215,000 federal hospital grant.

With these two grants, the hospital purchased a variety of hospital equipment, including some for intensive care and surgery, to replace equipment that was more than forty years old. The funds allowed the staff to update their medical facilities and provide improved health care to an isolated rural community located over 150 miles from the nearest urban hospital.

New Markets for a New Mexico Mining Company

A New Mexico mining company asked a regional development organization to assist in the identification of potential markets for zeolite. The mine had several million tons of zeolite. However, the commercial

use of zeolite is still in its infancy. The company knew about only two markets and needed to identify additional ones before it could ensure a profit to expand the zeolite mining operation.

The development organization contacted RIC for new market information. RIC provided a literature search and articles that helped in identifying six new markets including kitty litter, aquarium filtration systems, and supplements for chicken and cattle feed. With this information, the development organization initiated contacts that resulted in determining that potential uses for the product existed justifying the company's decision to proceed with developing a formal market plan.

This information assisted the mining company in retaining twelve existing company jobs in the county and generated annual sales of \$500,000. An unexpected benefit of this project was that the New Mexico State University and the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology initiated research in the areas of zeolite for heavy metal pickup from contaminated oils and soils.

Technical Assistance for a Vermont Entrepreneur

A Vermont county extension service agent contacted the Rural Information Center when a handicapped small-business client, seeking a USDA Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grant, needed the names of electrical contractors who built small variable-speed direct-current motors the businessman needed for his specialized wheel chair invention. The businessman had hit a dead end in obtaining this information, without which he could not complete his grant application.

The Rural Information Center identified an appropriate contact organization and placed a call to a motor manufacturing association to obtain the name of a contact person. The contact provided the names of seven East Coast companies and agreed to act as a referral contact and provide technical assistance. The businessman obtained a Small Business Innovation Research development grant of \$45,000 in the first phase of the SBIR grant process and later obtained additional funding under the second phase.

Idaho Job Retraining Program for Homeless Veterans

An Idaho regional development consortium requested information and funding sources to develop a homeless veterans job program. The Rural Information Center supplied information on the reintegration of homeless veterans into the work force and identified a Rural Demonstration Project funded by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Idaho consortium applied for the project and was one of six successful applicants nationwide. The project, funded for \$180,000 over a period of two years, supports one full-time staff member and other support services. It also provides outreach to homeless veterans, assesses veterans' vocational strengths and weaknesses, and expects to place nearly 50 percent of those involved in the program in jobs.

RURAL INFORMATION: WHO NEEDS WHAT?

Request Volume

The Rural Information Center first expanded its services nationwide beginning in October 1988 and in October 1990 implemented the new toll-free phone service and RICHS. After RIC provided these two services for a year, its information requests jumped 110 percent. During the seven years RIC has offered its service, the number of requests increased 321 percent and publication requests jumped 288 percent.

Clientele

The Rural Information Center processes requests from clients from all walks of life—starting with the President of the United States, White House staff, congressional committees, U.S. senators and representatives, cabinet-level department secretaries, state governors and legislators, and major newspapers and network news shows. Although these high-level, and often urgent, requests make work at the center stimulating, they do not constitute RIC's major users—just the most prominent ones.

Affiliations

Before the implementation of the Rural Information Center Health Service, the Rural Information Center's major clientele was the Cooperative Extension Service (CES), averaging 31 percent of RIC's total annual usage between fiscal years 1989 and 1991. However, after RICHS had been operating for three years, RIC's major clientele became health care professionals, organizations, and state and local health officials—which comprised 20 percent of RIC's FY 1992 usage, 25 percent in 1993, and 34 percent in 1994. Other than a corresponding decrease in CES's annual usage, the rest of RIC's clientele's annual usage remains constant. RIC's FY 1994 breakdown of results is as follows:

- Health care professionals, state and local health offices, organizations, etc. 34%
- Individuals 12%
- Community organizations 9%
- Universities and other educational institutions 8%
- Businesses 8%
- State and county extension service 6%
- USDA officials 6%
- Local officials 5%
- Libraries 3%
- Congress 2%
- Federal officials (non-USDA) 2%
- State officials 2%

- Tribal officials 1%
- Public interest groups 1%
- Foreign officials 1%

Geographic Locations

All fifty states use the Rural Information Center annually. From FY 1988 to 1992, the largest number of requests came from the District of Columbia with annual usage ranging from 7 to 14 percent while Maryland ranked second with 6 to 9 percent annual usage. The high request volume generated from these two jurisdictions corresponds directly to the large number of federal rural program officials, congressional staff, and national community and nonprofit organizations located in the immediate Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Texas, however, has always been close behind—in third place from FY 1989 to 1991, second in 1992 and 1993, and first in 1994. Texas' high use is a direct reflection of the strong statewide rural development program available to its citizens. Between FY 1989 and 1992, only four other states were major RIC users—those states comprising at least four or more percent of RIC's total FY annual requests: Virginia in 1989 and 1991, Colorado in 1990, Missouri in 1991, and North Carolina in 1992.

In FY 1993, the total number of states ranking as major users expanded, and this trend continued in 1994. In FY 1993, Washington, DC remained the Rural Information Center's number one user for the fifth straight year—followed by Texas and Maryland, but three new major users also appeared: Illinois, Pennsylvania, and California. For the first time, RIC's major users included states from the East to the West Coast. This trend continued in FY 1994 when Texas rose to first place, followed in order by Maryland, Pennsylvania, Washington, DC, California, and Arkansas.

Foreign and territorial usage is also rising. Between FY 1989 and 1994, the number of requests received from U.S. territories increased 100 percent while foreign requests increased 240 percent.

Subject Analysis

The Rural Information Center collects request statistics on subjects divided into twelve major categories. The twelve categories include four that fall under the broader rural development category, including community development, small business development, tourism development, and agribusiness. The other categories are health, education, environment, social issues, government, housing, labor, and transportation.

From FY 1988 to FY 1992, rural development requests constituted the largest category of questions received—ranging from 36 percent in 1992 to 71 percent in 1990. However, since 1993, health requests account for the largest category, comprising 38 percent in 1993 and 50 percent in 1994. The remaining seven categories account for about 20 percent of RIC's annual requests.

Due to the Rural Information Center's greatly expanded service in FY 1991 with the implementation of RICHS and toll-free telephone access, health requests jumped from 5 to 28 percent of the total volume, and RIC's total request volume jumped 110 percent in 1991.

Therefore, FY 1990 (see Figure 1) is the best year to illustrate the breakdown of rural development subject requests. The Rural Information Center was totally USDA funded, and the focus was on providing rural development information. By contrast, the present expanded service, which USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services jointly fund, emphasizes both rural development and health information (see Figure 2).

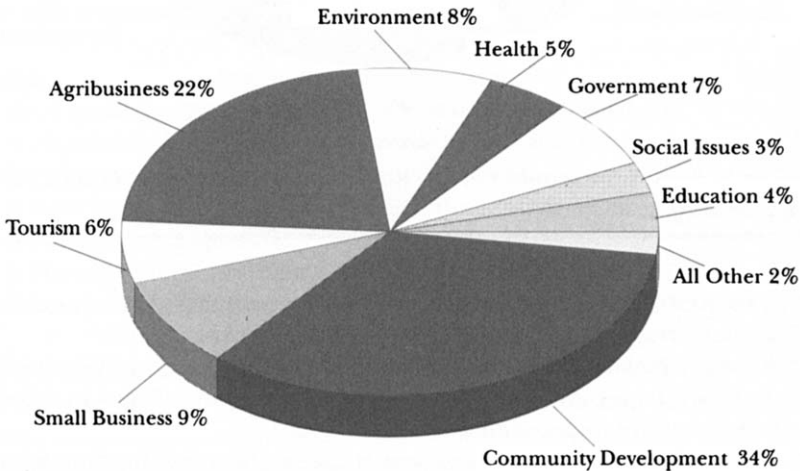


Figure 1: Rural Information Center FY 1990 Subject Requests

Subject Categories

Community Development. In addition to general economic development information, local officials and communities also contact the Rural Information Center for case studies, project models, feasibility studies, strategic planning documents, proposal and grant writing guidelines, and funding program sources. Community officials must manage existing resources and plan new activities to stimulate their economies and create and retain jobs. Representative RIC requestors include:

- An extension agent who needs information and case studies on multicomunity collaborative efforts.

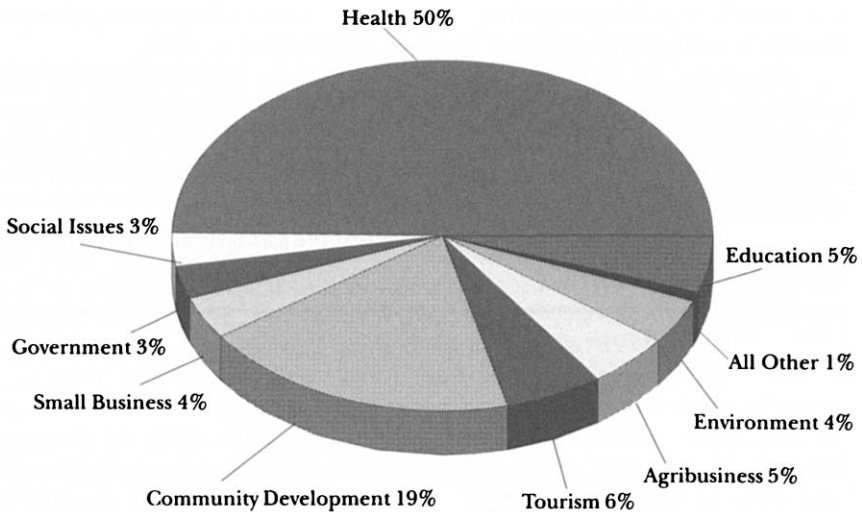


Figure 2. Rural Information Center/Rural Information Center Health Service FY 1994 Subject Requests

- A local official who wants information on community assessment techniques, strategic planning, and grant writing procedures.
- A local official who desires information on rural economic development strategies and funding sources for Alaskan villages in need of infrastructure improvements.
- A chamber of commerce that needs case studies and funding sources for historic preservation and downtown revitalization projects.
- An economic development organization that seeks information on the economic development benefits of prisons and the incentives to attract them to rural communities.

Small Business Development. Local communities seek information and funding sources on attracting, locating, expanding, and retaining new businesses and industries. They also request information on business licensing, industrial regulations, and other legislation affecting business and industry. Local entrepreneurs seek funding sources and information on various economic aspects, such as business start-ups and incubators, planning guidelines, product research, and patent information. Representative Rural Information Center requestors include:

- An individual who looks for information on developing a business plan and starting a home-based business.

- A business that seeks information on locating a high technology operation in a rural area.
- An extension agent who wants success stories on business attraction and retention.
- A Native American community that requires information on researching and developing new cultural products for today's market.

Tourism Development. Many rural communities request information on tourism promotion ideas to attract visitors and help stimulate the local economy. Some communities are lucky enough to already have scenic natural resources and historic areas to attract tourists but may need funding sources and promotion information. Less fortunate communities may need information on developing the actual tourist attraction whether it be a museum, tourist train, amusement park, or festival. Representative RIC requestors include:

- A tourism committee that seeks information on tourism marketing in rural areas.
- A chamber of commerce that looks for restoration information and funding sources for a local historic train station.
- A local tourism council that needs information on establishing a museum and heritage park.
- A county official who wants information on rural eco-tourism.
- A community that desires information on strategic tourism planning.

Agribusiness. Businesses, industries, and entrepreneurs seek information on value-added products and on processing agricultural and natural resource commodities. Farmers also seek information varying from farm management to sources of income diversification such as alternative crops and livestock to establishing a local cooperative or farmer's market. Representative Rural Information Center requestors include:

- An extension agent who wants information on software for agricultural management.
- A nonprofit cooperative that seeks funding sources to develop a cotton textile mill.
- Community farmers who request information on establishing an agricultural cooperative.
- A state extension specialist who needs information on value-added agricultural products and their prospective market outlooks.
- A forest product business group that requests information on how to set up a revolving loan fund or credit union for a regional group of forest product businesses.

Health. The Rural Information Center receives requests in most areas of health, including the status of specific categories of rural citizens—infants, Native Americans, seniors, African Americans, Hispanics, etc. It also receives requests on the recruitment and retention of health personnel and on the application of telecommunications and hospital networks. Other requests concern information on a variety of topics such as health education, child care, agricultural safety and health, mental health, substance abuse, emergency medical service, and health care facilities. The Rural Information Center Health Service does not handle clinical medicine questions and refers these to the National Library of Medicine or the appropriate health information clearinghouse. Representative requestors include:

- A state official who requests information on recruitment models for allied health personnel in rural areas.
- A health care professional who wants information and sources for licensing requirements for nurse practitioners and physician's assistants in medically underserved areas.
- A rural health research institute that needs information on the administration of federally-qualified rural health clinics.
- A hospital administrator who wants information on reasons for rural hospital closures, statistics, and options for diversification.
- A university professor who needs information on the use of telemedicine and telediagnosics for rural health care and on telecommunications for physician training and degreed nursing programs.
- A nonprofit organization that desires information on funding sources for assisting the elderly with purchasing medications.

Education. Rural communities want the same educational opportunities for their children and citizens as are available in urban areas. They seek information about providing public school programs that lower the high school dropout rate and reduce youth alcohol and drug abuse, about obtaining funds to purchase computers for the classroom, about entering into partnerships with local businesses to provide youth training opportunities, and about using new telecommunication technology to enhance the curriculum of public schools and continuing education programs through distance education. Representative requestors include:

- A rural school that needs funding sources to establish a kindergarten program.
- A community organization that wants funding sources for developing model youth leadership, citizenship, and entrepreneurship programs.
- A rural library that requests information on migrant literacy issues and programs.

- A college librarian who seeks funding sources for an Internet node for a public school/college partnership program.
- A school administrator who wants information on the use of distance learning in rural high schools.

Environment. Rural officials seek information on various environmental issues—many of which have both an environmental and economic impact on their community. They need information on legislation, environmental regulations and compliance, natural resource management, wildlife management, water quality issues, recycling programs, and solid and hazardous waste disposal, to list a few. Representative requestors include:

- A community organization that needs information on asbestos removal from an old building.
- A local government that requests funding sources for upgrading a small community water system.
- A rural business that wants funding sources for government testing costs to comply with the Clean Water Act.
- An economic development organization that requires information on costs of trash collection in rural areas.

Government. Rural officials find themselves involved in strategic planning and budget management processes in an effort to stretch their communities' resources further. They look for creative ways to provide the most basic community services, such as police and fire protection, public utilities, community programs, and facilities. Representative requestors include:

- A rural official who wants funding sources to implement a community 911 emergency computer system.
- A state economic planner who needs information on leadership development and training for rural communities.
- A local government that requests information on youth crime prevention programs.
- An extension agent who requires information on community options if the local telephone provider disrupts or discontinues service.

Housing. Small communities, like their urban counterparts, face the often costly problem of providing affordable public housing for low-income citizens. As more and more elderly move to rural areas, local governments must also provide housing to meet the special needs of this as well as other special populations. Representative requestors include:

- A rural hotel owner who needs funding sources for renovating a hotel for elderly housing.

- A county extension agent who wants information on how to set up a home owners' cooperative for low-income families in a rural community.
- A local official who requests funding sources for rehabilitated housing for the handicapped.
- A local official who seeks information on the economic impact of developing an elderly housing project in the community.

Labor. Rural communities may face a struggling local economy, a corresponding high unemployment rate, and the continual problem of generating new jobs—some of which may require retraining for the local unemployed. Rural areas also encounter the economic impact of industrial plant relocations, dislocated workers, and military base closures. Representative requestors include:

- A local official who needs information on case studies and strategies to stimulate job growth after an Army ammunition plant closed.
- A nonprofit organization that requests private funding sources for job replacement and training and information on federal job training programs.
- A county extension agent who wants information on the labor market opportunities for youth in rural communities.
- A rural development group that desires information on the reintegration of homeless veterans into the work force.

Social Issues. Rural communities, like their urban counterparts, are constantly encountering changing and increasing social needs for their citizens. More recent social issues, such as how to deal with rising poverty and homelessness, youth alcohol and drug abuse, child abuse, battered women, and elderly care and services require new and often costly programs. These new services place additional financial stress on small communities that usually have a correspondingly small tax base. Representative requestors include:

- A philanthropic organization that wants information on rural poverty and hunger.
- A local official who requests information on funding sources for programs for drug-free youth groups.
- A community ministries group that needs funding sources for the homeless and a children's homeless shelter.
- A social worker who seeks information on the availability of battered women's services in rural areas.

Transportation. Elements that characterize many rural areas—vast space and distance, isolation, harsh weather conditions, natural resource barriers—generate numerous problems for local officials trying to meet the transportation needs of their citizens. Representative requestors include:

- An extension agent who wants information on alternatives to dirt roads.
- A local official who needs funding sources for upgrading the community's ground traffic control system.
- A state transportation official who requests information on transportation models applicable to rural areas.
- A community development organization that seeks information on funding sources for road repair and bridge rehabilitation.

Funding Requests

The rate of requests the Rural Information Center received for locating funding sources for local officials, rural communities, and citizens steadily increased from 16 percent in FY 1989 to 19 percent in 1990 and 1991, to 26 percent in 1992 and 1993, before it jumped to 35 percent in 1994. Rural communities and citizens call RIC to identify funding sources, to determine if they qualify for the funds, and to learn how they can apply for the funds. RIC provides this information from a variety of private, state, and federal online funding databases in addition to researching the center's large reference collection of funding source directories.

The funding request subject breakdown closely parallels the Rural Information Center's total annual subject breakdowns. For example, in FY 1994, 52 percent of all funding requests were health related, 26 percent were rural development, and 22 percent were in the remaining seven subject categories. This compares with the FY 1994 subject request breakdown of 50 percent for health, 32 percent for rural development, and 17 percent for the seven other subject categories (see Figure 2).

ELECTRONIC ACCESS TO RURAL INFORMATION

In 1991, the Rural Information Center established a RIC/RICHS sub-board to make rural information available electronically on ALF (Agriculture Library Forum), NAL's electronic bulletin board (301/504-6510). The sub-board contains a variety of information bulletins prepared by the RIC staff, including those on RIC/RICHS services; federal and state rural development resources; federal and private rural health grants; federal rural health legislation; and national, regional, and state rural development and health conferences. RIC also provides full-text access to its publications, which include funding resource directories, federal funding sources for local governments, tourism promotion, health funding sources, Native American health care, elderly, leadership development, affordable housing, and historic preservation to list a few.

In addition, RIC cooperates with other government agencies and organizations in loading additional rural information on the bulletin board, including the two RICHS publications funded by DHHS, *Rural Health Services Funding: A Resource Guide* and *Agricultural Safety and Health: A Resource Guide*; SBA's revised edition of *Working Together: A Guide to Federal*

and State Resources for Rural Economic Development; revised editions of the *Directory of Rural Studies Scholars and Educators* and *A Rural Studies Bibliography* (jointly produced by RIC and the National Rural Studies Committee [NRSC] located at the Western Rural Development Center); and the National Association of Development Organizations Research Foundation's (NADORF) newsletter, *Economic Development Digest*.

Beginning in August 1994, the Rural Information Center further expanded its rural information electronic dissemination effort when it loaded many of its ALF bulletin board electronic files on NAL's new Internet Gopher (gopher.nalusda.gov). At this time, NAL's Gopher did not have the capacity for RIC to provide full-text access to its printed publications. However, at the request of the White House and the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, NAL did load RIC's most popular publication, *Federal Funding Sources for Rural Areas*.

After the NAL expanded the Gopher capacity in 1995, RIC loaded over thirty of its publications for Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman's six regional rural forums held throughout the country between April 17-24 and concluding on April 25 with President Bill Clinton's National Rural Conference in Ames, Iowa. USDA's Office of the Under Secretary of Agriculture for Research, Education, and Economics sponsored a World Wide Web (WWW) server (<http://www.reeusda.gov/ruralconf>) for President Clinton's Conference and listed the Rural Information Center as the first USDA rural information resource provider featured on the server. The WWW server permits RIC users with access to a graphical WWW reader (such as Mosaic) to view a graphically enhanced version of its publications. In April, NAL initiated a WWW server (<http://www.nalusda.gov>) that also accesses RIC files.

The National Association of Community Action Agencies and the Rural Information Center received a grant from the USDA Forest Service and USDA's newly established Natural Resources Conservation Service, the former Soil Conservation Service, to research case studies of successful practices in limited resource communities. This public-private partnership will identify and compile innovative and successful community projects, strategies, programs, and other rural information materials, and broadly disseminate them for use by rural communities and community rural development practitioners. RIC will electronically disseminate the resources on both its ALF and Internet files.

CONGRESS AND PARTNERS STRENGTHEN RIC

State Partners

The Rural Information Center closely networks nationwide with four state-level offices and councils, including the Cooperative Extension Service, state offices of rural health, state libraries, and state rural development councils.

First, as previously mentioned, the Rural Information Center, as an Extension Service partner, networks closely with CES and has RIC State Extension Coordinators in all fifty states and Guam. During RIC's initial start-up between 1988 and 1989, the newly appointed coordinators participated in a RIC-conducted three-day workshop to enable them to become familiar with RIC services and rural development assistance capabilities before they implemented and promoted the RIC program in their states.

Second, RIC formally networks with the fifty SORHs and also maintains an ALF sub-board for the rural health offices to provide electronic networking and conferencing capabilities to meet their communication needs on professional issues.

Third, the Rural Information Center networks with more than half of the state libraries for the purpose of providing information assistance in meeting the information needs of rural libraries lacking access to specialized information requirements of their communities. RIC established this networking effort with the support and encouragement of the Rural Libraries Services Committee (RLSC) of the American Library Association at the January 1988 midwinter conference. RLSC felt that a network supporting rural libraries and based on the RIC State Extension Coordinator model would prove to be a valuable resource for rural libraries operating with limited staff, budget, and information resources.

Fourth, RIC networks with the State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs) established under the 1990 Presidential Initiative on Rural America with a council now existing in all fifty states. Each council is a collaborative partnership of federal, state, local, and tribal governments, and the private and nonprofit sector. The SRDCs' partnerships develop local solutions for rural economic development issues in their state. The federal government, in partnership with the National Governors' Association, began this rural initiative that grew into the National Rural Development Partnership and operates as councils at both the state and national level.

The SRDCs work closely with its federal counterpart, the National Rural Development Council (NRDC), which consists of senior program managers representing federal departments and agencies and national organizations. The NRDC, which includes the Rural Information Center, works on behalf of the SRDCs and provides partnership guidance at the national level.

In addition to these four formal national networking partnerships, the Rural Information Center has a long-standing cooperative effort with a state university—Clarion University of Pennsylvania and its Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship. RIC's effort is twofold. First, through cooperative agreements, Clarion University provides RIC with an average of three graduate library science interns annually. Each student usually

updates two RIC publications during his or her three-month internship. The interns also participate in NAL training courses on AGRICOLA, various software packages, and the Internet. They also experience reference work on either the main NAL reference desk or the RIC 800 toll-free desk. Second, RIC cosponsored, with Clarion University and others, three Information and Rural Development Conferences in 1988, 1991, and 1992.

USDA and Congressional Mandates

USDA support and congressional legislation also strengthen the Rural Information Center's program. In 1991, the Secretary of Agriculture established a department-wide rural revitalization task force to review USDA's rural nonfarm programs, identify factors affecting the performance of these programs, identify rural needs, and make recommendations on the department's future role in providing rural economic development. The task force concluded that USDA's programs, for the most part, do not promote any single strategy for developing rural areas and, in some cases, rural needs change faster than the programs are able to adapt to and keep pace with. The task force's report to the secretary proposed eighteen recommendations clarifying USDA's commitment to rural development, strengthening coordination among the rural programs, and improving USDA's ability to implement its rural programs. One of these eighteen recommendations was that USDA strengthen the resources of RIC (Rural Revitalization Task Force, 1989a, p. 27; Rural Revitalization Task Force, 1989b, pp. 7-8).

After considering this report, the cabinet-level White House Economic Policy Council Working Group on Rural Development, chaired by the Secretary of Agriculture Clayton Yeutter, also recommended that the federal government strengthen the Rural Information Center's resources and capabilities (President's Economic Policy Council, 1990, p. 17). Shortly after the release of the working group's report, President Bush ordered the implementation of his six-part Presidential Initiative on Rural America. The sixth initiative recommended providing a center to give technical assistance and detailed information on federal programs that service rural communities. This initiative was to take the form of an expansion of RIC and the participation of relevant federal agencies (U.S. Congress. Office of Technology Assessment, 1991, pp. 143, 149). In addition, a key RIC function was to provide toll-free access through an 800 telephone number.

Congress continued to expand the Rural Information Center's mandate as it examined rural economic problems. Both the *Rural Partnerships Act of 1989* (Title V, § 501) and the *Rural Business Link Promotion Act of 1989* (§ 3) authorized USDA to expand RIC's mandate to that of a National Rural Information Center Clearinghouse for the purpose of providing "information to local rural communities, nonmetropolitan coun-

ties, and rural areas concerning rural development matters and the availability of Federal rural development assistance" (*Rural Business Link Promotion Act of 1989*, 1989, § 4).

Congress also included the Rural Information Center's expanded mandate in the *Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990*, commonly called the 1990 Farm Bill. Congress directed the Secretary of Agriculture to establish a National Rural Information Center Clearinghouse at NAL and authorized \$500,000 in appropriations for each of fiscal years 1991 through 1995. The bill directed RIC to "provide and distribute information and data to any industry, organization, or Federal, State, or local government entity" and, when possible, to "use telecommunications technology to disseminate information to rural areas" (Title XXIII, § 2381). Congress further instructed RIC to make available to states for educational purposes its resources on rural health and safety information (§ 2390), to provide information to electric and telephone borrowers about useful and effective rural development efforts (§ 2343), and to provide, along with the Extension Service, information on federal, state, and private programs that provide training that increases the leadership abilities of rural residents (§ 2346).

Federal Partners

Since 1990, the Rural Information Center has been a focal point for federal cooperation and program expansion as a result of mandates from the President, Congress, and USDA. The involvement of USDA and other federal agencies reinforces RIC's national mandates. RIC continues to coordinate with USDA and other federal agencies with rural development programs to expand the program at the federal level through a variety of interagency funding agreements that enhance RIC's rural information delivery capabilities.

Besides the program support from DHHS for the RICHS program and the continuing cooperation with the Extension Service, RIC receives strong support from USDA's Office of the Under Secretary for Rural Economic and Community Development, formerly the Office of the Under Secretary on Small Community and Rural Development. At the direction of the Under Secretary's Office, the former Farmers Home Administration transferred a funded staff position to RIC in 1992 for the purpose of hiring a librarian; the Under Secretary's Office continues to support this position through a collaborative multiagency funding arrangement. Also, since 1992, the Forest Service transferred funds for RIC's part-time staffing positions and publications program.

INFORMATION OUTREACH

In brief, rural officials and citizens need relevant, accurate, and timely information for identifying strategies for diversifying their economies, for assisting in making decisions, for providing guidance in allocating resources, for using their ingenuity, and for setting their horizons (Myers,

1987, p. 7). Requestors—rural citizens seeking information, new ideas, and/or funding sources for any topic imaginable—demonstrate their needs by the great variety of questions RIC receives, the responses to which they hope will help sustain their communities.

Because of this need, the Rural Information Center will continue to extend its outreach efforts and the availability of its services to the grassroots level of rural America. RIC will continue expanding its efforts to add the information most important to rural officials and communities on its ALF and Internet files. RIC will also continue its cooperative efforts with other federal and state agencies, national organizations, and public-private partnerships to acquire information resources that it may load on both the Agriculture Library Forum and the Internet. RIC hopes that, in addition to its current information delivery services, its efforts to increase the amount of information available electronically for rural communities will contribute to narrowing the information gap between urban and rural citizens as more and more rural communities are able to connect to electronic sources such as ALF and the Internet.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank M. Louise Reynnells, the Rural Information Center Technical Information Specialist, for her diligent effort in reformatting RIC subject and funding requests that made it possible to provide the statistical information in this chapter. The author would also like to thank her husband, Philip John, for providing editorial assistance.

REFERENCES

- Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990*, Pub. L. No. 101-624, 104 Stat. (1991).
- Frank, R., & John, P. L. (1989). The Rural Information Center. *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 63(9), 40-43.
- H. R. 2026, 100th Cong., 1st Sess. § 202(b) (1987).
- Hines, F. O. (1994). *Telecommunications and its impact on rural America* (NADO Research Foundation White Paper). Washington, DC: National Association of Development Organizations Research Foundation.
- John, P. L. (1994). The Rural Information Center: Federal and state cooperation expands information access. *Rural Libraries*, 14(2), 37-48.
- Lyng, R. E., & Vautour, R. R. (1988). *On the move: A report on rural economic development in America*. Washington, DC: USGPO.
- Lyng, R. E., & Vautour, R. R. (1989). *Signs of progress: A report on rural America's revitalization efforts*. Washington, DC: USGPO.
- Madigan, E. R., & Vautour, R. R. (1991). *Putting the pieces together: Annual rural development strategy report*. Washington, DC: USGPO.
- Myers, P. C. (1987). *Testimony of Peter C. Myers, Deputy Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture, before the Conservation, Credit and Rural Development Subcommittee, House Agriculture Committee, May 19, 1987*. Unpublished manuscript, U. S. Department of Agriculture.
- Nakazawa, A. T., & John, P. L. (1993). The Rural Information Center: A resource for economic development. *Economic Development Review: The Journal for the Economic Development Practitioner*, 11(2) 62-65.
- President's Council on Rural America. (1992). *Revitalizing rural America through collaboration: A report to the President*. Washington, DC: President's Council on Rural America.

- President's Economic Policy Council. Working Group on Rural Development. (1990). *Rural economic development for the 90's: A Presidential initiative: The findings and recommendations of the Economic Policy Council Working Group on Rural Development*. Washington, DC: President's Economic Policy Council.
- Rural Business Link Promotion Act of 1989*, S. 1030, 101st Cong., 1st Sess. (1989).
- Rural Partnerships Act of 1989*, S. 1036, 101st Cong., 1st Sess. (1989).
- Rural Revitalization Task Force. (1989a). *A hard look at USDA's rural development programs: The report of the Rural Revitalization Task Force to the Secretary of Agriculture*. Washington, DC: USGPO.
- Rural Revitalization Task Force. (1989b). *Recommendations of the Revitalization Task Force to the Secretary of Agriculture*. Washington, DC: USGPO.
- U.S. Congress. Office of Technology Assessment. (1991). *Rural America at the crossroads: Networking for the future*. Washington, DC: USGPO.
- Vautour, R. R. (1987). *Rural development strategy update: Fiscal years 1986-87-88*. Unpublished manuscript, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Under Secretary for Small Community and Rural Development.