

## COMMUNITY AND FAMILY ADJUSTMENTS

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Rural communities and families have been forced to make many major adjustments in the 1980s. These challenges continue. Changes in an economy that once provided stability to rural America are demanding parallel changes in nearly every rural institution, including its families. Many of these challenges may be met through the development of new public policies and practices.

A role currently being assumed by many extension policy educators is helping rural citizens to identify problems created by change and to analyze their attendant policy issues. Part of this process is encouraging community members to create workable alternatives for solving those issues. This workshop explored alternatives for doing this. Participants 1) identified some of the concerns and problems being faced as rural communities and families adjust to today's economic and social realities; 2) developed alternatives for policies and practices to address two of these problems; 3) did this through use of the "Preferred Future" method.

### Identifying Concerns

Workshop participants agreed that the general concerns of rural Americans include:

- *Managing in times of financial insecurity.* This is not a new concern, but continues to become more complex, especially in regard to community services.
- *Creating job opportunities.* Needed are work that will allow breadwinners to live at home and maintain present life styles and opportunities for more than one family member to work.
- *Maintaining optimism and hope.* After seeing neighbors move, young people elect to move to cities and the social fabric of the community shrink considerably, attitudes often become depressed.

- *Access to adequate health care.* Rural communities and farms have a high percentage of older people. Always at a premium, hospital and health services have grown even scarcer.

- *Maintaining quality education.* Rapid change requires a literate work force and opportunities to learn new job skills. Modern equipment and well-trained teachers are needed.

- *Meeting child care and elder care needs.* The multiple-earner family requires help with the nurturing and care activities once assumed by full-time homemakers.

- *Organizing effective community services.* The need for services such as fire and police protection continues despite fewer resources to maintain them.

- *Retaining local control of government.* Outside decision makers, financial stress, lack of information and inadequate technology make this very difficult at a time when local attention may be the most effective way to meet the community's needs.

### **Focusing on Public Problems**

From this list, workshop participants selected *education* and *health care* as two very pressing concerns in rural America and identified current problems in each area:

*Education.* Problems identified included a need for early childhood education programs and care; the problem of illiteracy—in all age groups; the need for job training and retraining; and the importance of continuing programs for students with special needs such as handicaps, cultural and language differences.

*Health Care.* Here, problems included setting priorities for health care allocations; managing supplementary food programs; providing motivation for preventative health measures; assuring maternity care in communities where few babies are born; having access to long-term care, and serving families with no insurance.

In the next step, small groups of participants focused on one aspect of each public problem and use the Preferred Future approach for creating new alternatives for solving them.

### **The “Preferred Future” Method**

Looking into the future and determining what might be the best possible situation for a community is an excellent way to set a standard or goal for the development of policy and practices. After selecting a problem, groups outlined what they saw as a “preferred future,” the best possible situation in relation to the problem that now exists. Three groups chose health-care-related problems and one group selected literacy, an education-related problem. The following

alternatives, which could lead to “preferred futures,” were generated for these two concerns:

### **“Preferred Future” for Rural Health Care**

Each community should have access to a comprehensive health care facility reachable within 45 minutes. This facility would include a prenatal/child health component and provisions for long-term health care in addition to standard hospital care. No patient would be refused because of inability to pay.

#### *Policy/Practice Alternatives.*

1. Organize the community to develop a comprehensive health care plan.
2. Develop a community medical self-insurance plan, through tax assessments, that contains a sliding fee premium for members and includes state and federal medical subsidies.
3. Create local training and job opportunities for medical aides and paraprofessionals.
4. Develop a system to train, reward and encourage volunteer workers in the medical facility and outreach programs.
5. Encourage medical professionals to serve rural communities through scholarship/service contracts and tax breaks.
6. Collaborate with educational agencies to motivate members and provide preventative health care instruction.

### **Preferred Future for Education**

All community members have a right to opportunities for becoming functionally literate. Adults are entitled to a second chance at developing literacy skills.

#### *Policy/Practice Alternatives.*

1. Fund pilot programs to explore the effects and cost/benefit of literacy programs to the local community.
2. Raise community awareness of need for literacy.
3. Develop a support system for public school efforts to keep students in school and enhance literacy teaching.
4. Collaborate with employers and vocational programs to integrate literacy education with job-related activities and goals.

The preferred futures method can be used with community groups and rural decision makers to develop an inclusive approach for solving local problems. From these discussions, an understand-

ing of the nature of the policies needed to make solutions work will emerge. This process is a way to begin building human capital and commitment while finding answers and meeting the adjustment challenges rural families and communities now face.

#### REFERENCES

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## ***Priority Issues for a New Farm Bill***

