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The LSC-sponsored Rural Issues and Delivery Symposium was held at the Arbor Day Farm Foundation's Lied Conference Center in Nebraska City, NE October 31 through November 2, 2002. Facilitated by two Nebraska attorneys, Dan Alberts and Tania Diaz, thirty-three advocates gathered to share ideas and develop strategies designed to improve the delivery of legal services to rural communities across the United States.

The symposium served as LSC's first national conversation focusing on the challenges facing rural areas. LSC Vice President of Programs Randi Youell's letter of invitation to attendees noted, "The symposium is intended to serve as the foundation for more in-depth consideration of the issues facing rural America and its territories by the Legal Services Corporation and legal services programs. The Legal Services Corporation intends to use the dialogue generated by this retreat as a lens through which to focus its own work and develop its own priorities. From this, we hope to gain a better understanding of the needs and hopes of clients and communities in rural areas. It is crucial it for us to provide a comprehensive and integrated approach for achieving justice where scarce or declining resources, economic hardship, scattered or isolated populations and geographical barriers collide."

Opening

Randi Youells and LSC Board member Maria Luisa Mercado opened the symposium Thursday afternoon. We began relationship building with our introductions and then proceeded to put a face on poverty by telling stories about clients.

Putting a Face on Poverty

Alaskan tribal elder and Kiana Mayor Hazel Apok began the storytelling with a dramatic description of the incredible isolation Alaskan tribes face. We wrapped up the afternoon summaries of the stories about rural clients we heard, as prepared by Claire Parins, former director of the ABA Rural Pro Bono Project and Ian Morrison of Legal Aid Ontario:

PARINS:

- * Isolation abounds; but the rural poor are not homogenous.
- * Diminishing rural support systems and a lack of infrastructure are leading to increased poverty. There is confusion about the services that are out there, a lack of knowledge about legal rights. Triage is often the main part of the job and clients come in crisis. They are scared.
- * There are family farmers who need food pantries even though they live to grow food for others. There are many who will not ask for help because there is a lack of privacy in rural areas. Neighbors watching what neighbors purchase with their food stamps.
- * Yet many live without basic necessities like health care.
- * Rural poverty is about race and class. It's about the stigmatization of the poor, disdain for those who live on the wrong side of the tracks.
- * But our clients are resourceful and our attorneys represent communities not just individuals.

MORRISON

Comments organize themselves into three categories:

1. "Just not enough stuff" (fundamental barriers for low income people)
 - a. Not enough social services
 - b. Not enough places to go
 - c. Not enough medical care
2. "Diversity of Rural America" - Locally, the rural poor may look homogenous, but the further we pull back and look at the big picture, the greater the diversity.
3. "Everyone has a face" As Ken Penokie (Michigan) commented, "(rural) Poverty is hidden but not anonymous." In communities where everyone knows everyone, this profoundly affects how people name their problems, how they think about solutions, how the poor are seen by others. We can't think about rural services without remembering that in a small place, everyone has a face.

Data supporting the anecdotes

The next morning Penn State Rural Poverty demographer and active member of the Rural Sociological Society Leif Jensen shared his work with us, expressing his excitement that our anecdotal attempts to put a face on rural poverty the afternoon before was fully supported by the research he had done. Jensen noted that there was significant data available on rural poverty with which he could help the legal services community connect. Jensen also offered to begin to work with the group to develop specific questions on rural legal issues for his next round of research.

Workgroups

We self selected into four workgroups and began developing proposals/thoughts around the following issue areas which had been identified by the co-facilitators as those most often arising in the phone conversations when they called each one of the participants and spoke to them prior to the symposium

- 1) Networking - Building Collaborations in Rural Areas
- 2) The Urban /Rural Dichotomy - balancing resources/presence in urban/rural areas
- 3) Best Practices for Delivering Services in Rural Areas
- 4) Development of Resources for Rural Delivery

Workgroups continued to work throughout Friday evening and at breakfast Saturday, then gave reports when we convened Saturday morning.

Next steps:

We moved to a discussion of next steps before adjourning.

A national voice: there was consensus that a national "aggregate" voice for rural legal services needed to be developed outside the rubrics of LSC or NLADA (but that each should be connected with such an effort).. Rural Policy Research Institute

(www.rupri.org) Director Chuck Fluharty shared information about the National Rural Network, a collaboration of more than 80 non-governmental organizations that interacted but were also divided into sectors (such as rural healthcare, rural economic development, etc). He noted that there is no rural "legal" sector and volunteered to approach those foundations RUPRI works with on a regular basis to begin immediate development of a rural legal sector and support future staffing and convening of such a sector. These sectors, under the umbrella of the national rural network, are beginning work on a national strategic plan. The White House has also been approached by the Network and the Congressional Rural Caucus to create a National Commission on Rural America which would convene a national conference. It was agreed we should seek to have someone connected to the legal services community appointed to this Commission. LSC board member Maria Luisa Mercado volunteered to be that person. An independent rural legal services working group will be lead by Steve Xanthopoulos (Tennessee) and Linda Zazove (Illinois) to help create this national aggregate voice. Nebraska Legal Services Director Doug German will work with Chuck Fluharty at RUPRI to being the development of the legal services/RUPRI relationship.

Rural issues at national conferences: Susan Patnode (Rural Law Center - NY) will work to develop a rural delivery workshop the Equal Justice Conference next spring while Jim Wayne (Louisiana) agreed to help develop a rural delivery workshop for next years NLADA conference. Sarah Singleton (private bar - NM) will seek to make rural delivery an agenda item at the Access to Justice (SPAN) chairs meeting at EJC.

LSC's role: The group requested LSC consider creation or a Rural "chair" at the corporation, but Randi Youells explained that that leaders in Native American and Migrant Farmworker legal services also wanted "chairs" for their interests and LSC did not have the resources necessary to add staff to fulfill all these requests . She did refer the group to LSC Program Counsel Willie Abrams and his specialty in Rural Development. We also discussed the adoption of a rural lens as a priority in grant conditions, technical assistance contracts and TIG grant awards. The group also expressed an interest in beginning to work for a rural delivery add-on to Congressional funding in future years that might be used for rural initiative grants in much the same way TIGS had been initially proposed and developed.

Balancing individual cases with systemic work: There was much discussion throughout the course of the Symposium about the systemic work/individual case "balance" and how to achieve it when resources were scarce.

Need for increased capacity expertise in CED/transactional analysis: there was some excitement around discussions about the importance of expertise in transactional analysis and community economic development as a needed focus for rural systemic work.

An informal rural delivery listserv has already been established among symposium participants, awaiting the development of a more formal and staffed national rural legal services network. The listserv is open to anyone interested in rural legal services issues. To join the listserv, interested people should contact Susan Patnode at rlc@capital.net