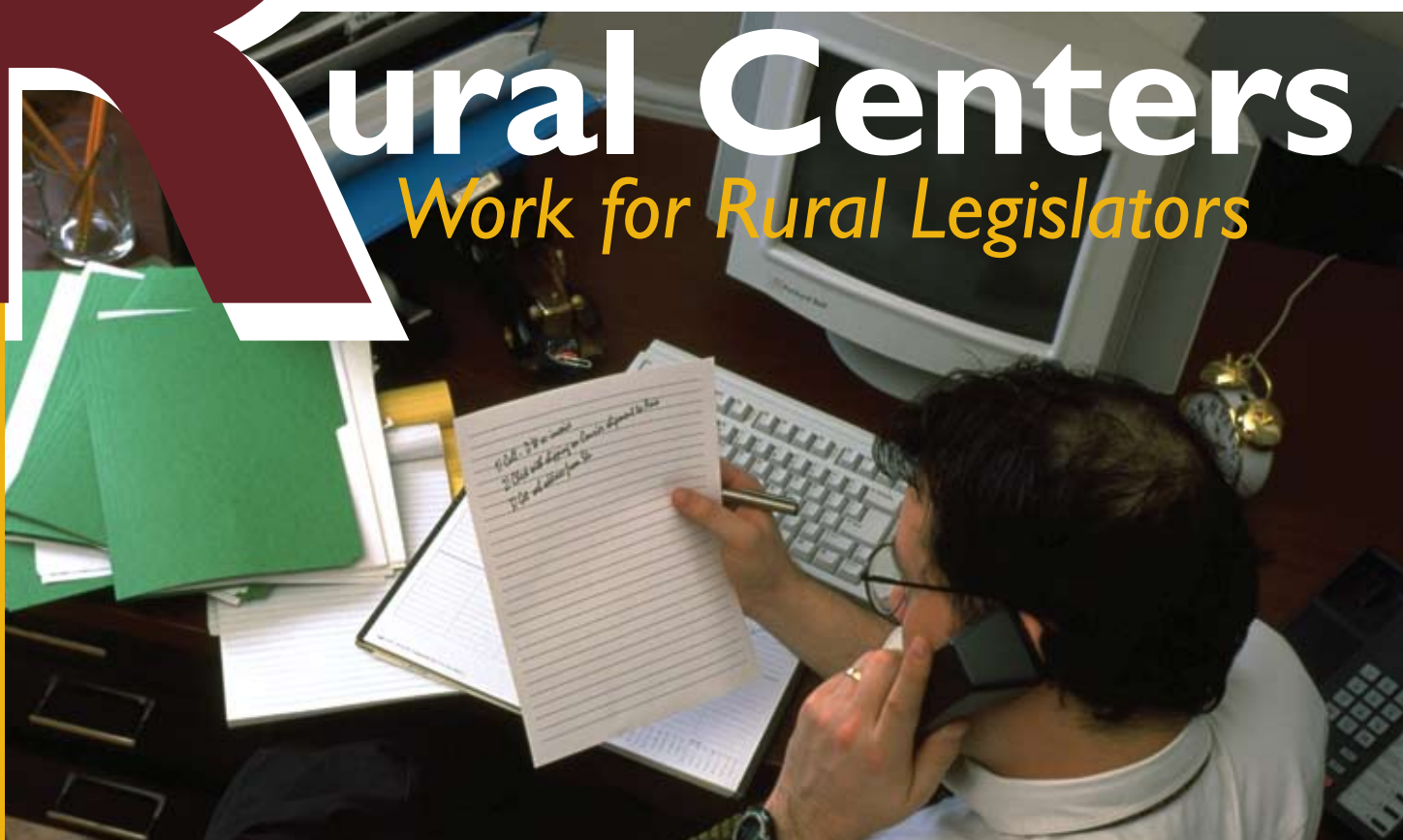


Rural Centers

Work for Rural Legislators



To fill the void of research and strategic thinking, several states have created “rural centers,” offices or agencies with a rural focus and a statewide purview that is comprehensive in nature. Their aim is to encourage continuous learning to fuel strategic thinking to design programs that speak to rural needs.

By Bobby Gierisch

“What can I do for my district?”

It’s the basic question on every state legislator’s mind, whether rural, urban, suburban or inner city. For rural legislators, however, it’s a particularly difficult question—with no easy answers. Indeed, for nearly a century—since Theodore Roosevelt’s 1911 Country Life Commission—legislators and others have been trying their best to find an answer, often to little avail.

As the economic distress of rural areas continues, the question is raised by more and more people with greater and greater urgency.

Complicating the situation is that the answer varies depending on who is asked. Farmers tell us one thing, health experts another, educators still another, and so on with experts from every field—transportation, economic development, telecommunications, local governments, etc. —each assuring us that their domain is the most critical.

Confronted with so many answers from so many friends and colleagues, legislators are apt to throw up their hands in frustration. We simply can't do everything. As a result, the question then becomes, "What do I tackle first? Where do I get the most bang for the buck?"

- Do we get more from paving rural roads or upgrading the credentials of rural school teachers?
- Is it more important to deploy broadband service or support rural clinics and hospitals?
- Should we fund regional business parks or subsidize ethanol production?
- Do we support community leadership development or affordable housing? Work force development or farmland preservation?

Regrettably, the research rarely exists to answer such questions. And lacking the basis to proceed in a strategically sound manner, legislation is often piecemeal, based on what seems like a good idea at the moment or what is politically expedient.

To fill the void of research and strategic thinking, several states have created offices or agencies with a rural-only focus. The first of such "rural centers" were created in North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Illinois in response to the economic dislocations of the mid-1980s. Another five were created through the 1990s, and five more in 2004–2005.

"Rural centers" are offices or agencies with a rural focus and a statewide purview that is comprehensive in nature.

Not all rural centers are agencies or offices of state government, though most are. Some rural centers are based at universities, but those are primarily engaged in academic research,

Centers whose scope is limited to a single sector such as rural health, telecommunications, transportation, etc., are not included in the classification. The value of these institutions is not questioned, but our focus is on those with an orientation toward action based on research.

No two of these centers are exactly alike. For example, centers in Texas, Georgia and Arkansas are executive-branch state agencies, while those in Louisiana, Utah and Oregon are within the governor's office. The centers in North Carolina, Minnesota and Virginia are private, nonprofit organizations, Illinois' is university-based, and Pennsylvania's center is a legislative agency.

Six of the rural centers have more than 20 employees, while five have fewer than 10. The smallest budgets are in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, while the largest are in the tens of millions. And the newest centers are still very much "under construction."

However, they all have similar missions and, broadly viewed, tend to do the same things.

First, all are engaged in continuous learning about the conditions

and needs of their rural areas. In some states this learning takes the form of formal research programs; in others it occurs through standing committees, conferences, or just daily interaction with the center's rural "clients."

Second, their continuous learning fuels strategic thinking about programs that will best suit the needs and provide the best return on investment.

Third, their strategic thinking is the basis for designing programs to speak to rural needs.

And that, of course, is the payoff for legislators, governors and others looking for ways to help their rural regions: well designed programs, based on the sound foundation of continuous learning and strategic thinking.

That said, the work of a rural center is valuable only if policymakers seize upon it as an opportunity for action. Under the best conditions, rural centers work hand in hand with members of the legislature and the executive branch, including legislative rural caucuses where active caucuses exist.

But rural centers are aware that they do not exist in a vacuum. Many others play important roles in rural communities: local officials and civic leaders, universities and community colleges, cooperative extension, USDA, councils of governments, rural development councils, and electric cooperatives to name a few. The role of the rural center is not to monopolize or direct, but to exercise leadership, pointing the directions that others may choose to follow.

Legislators seeking ways to help rural citizens may want to look to their rural center—if they are lucky enough to have one—as a source of well-designed programs based on sound thinking and research. Those without such a resource may want to consider creating one.

—Bobby Gierisch is director of State Policy Programs for the Rural Policy Research Center (RUPRI). Prior to joining RUPRI, he was director of research and policy analysis for former Texas House Speaker Pete Laney. RUPRI, based at the University of Missouri-Columbia, provides objective analysis and facilitates public dialogue concerning the impacts of public policy on rural people and places.

As our rural office gets more involved with legislators and staff, their value escalates tremendously. With their knowledge, and us working together, we're immeasurably better off than ever before.

—Texas Rep. Rick Hardcastle
Chair, House Committee on Agriculture and Livestock