

## ■ Rural Public Services

Rural local governments face special problems in providing services for their citizens. The following are rural characteristics that affect ways in which rural local governments provide services:

- **Isolation**, the geographic separation of rural areas from metropolitan centers, leads to low utilization rates for rural public services, inadequate response times for emergency services, and the detachment of service delivery professionals from their colleagues.
- **Low population density** means higher per unit costs of some services and the inability to supply specialized help (for example, for the handicapped) because the area cannot support the services for so few clients.
- **A lack of fiscal resources** puts many rural communities in a financial squeeze with resulting service deprivation for local residents.
- **The lack of an adequate supply of trained personnel** has several implications for service delivery in rural communities. Critical functions may go understaffed, scarce employees are often overworked, service quality and quantity suffer, and long-range planning becomes difficult.

Isolated rural communities often suffer from medical services and facilities that are of lower quality than those found in metro areas. Even if medical care services were evenly distributed across the Nation, and were of equal quality, it is likely that nonmetro residents with chronically low incomes would still have serious difficulty receiving adequate care in a complex medical system where access is based mainly on the ability to pay.

Because many rural communities are small and isolated, and lack financial resources and trained personnel, similar problems are encountered in the provision of other rural public services. Various approaches have been taken to deal with these problems:

- Some communities contract with private-sector firms to provide services. For example, 36 percent of rural localities contract out legal services to for-profit firms rather than perform such services themselves.
- Some communities that want to attract new residents and businesses may find it beneficial to cooperate with other towns and share in the cost of furnishing services they cannot afford by themselves. Rural communities can work together in a variety of ways, and mutual aid is one way. Such an approach is commonly used for fire and police protection.
- Another approach is for one community to sell a particular service to another. About 23 percent of isolated rural governments contract with other governments for solid waste disposal, about 19 percent for the operation of libraries, and 18 percent for tax assessing.
- Still another method of cooperation is joint action, especially for large projects such as building and operating hospitals or airports. Various methods of dividing costs and creating joint committees or governing boards are worked out for such projects.

Although most rural community residents do not enjoy the same level of public services available to urban area residents, much progress has been made in improving

some rural services over the last 30 years. Rising incomes and increased aid from higher level governments have made possible more and better programs for rural governments.

The management capacity of rural governments to plan and carry out these programs has improved. For example, in the 1960's and 1970's a nationwide system of multicounty substate regional agencies was developed to help rural communities plan for and manage their new population growth.

Still, the institutional base of rural governments is more fragile than that of urban areas, and these isolated governments remain more vulnerable to external changes than do metropolitan governments.