



Rural Development Legislation

By Ian Pulsipher

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Rural communities often enjoy unique resources, but face special problems that can hinder their development. Although legislative rural development efforts encompass a wide variety of issues, this brief highlights four major areas of legislative action that lawmakers across the country focused on in 2004.

Increasing High Speed Internet Access. In today's economy, the information and communication capabilities made available through high-speed Internet services have become indispensable competitive factors for economic development. The long distances between rural communities make high-speed Internet access especially important for the economic activity of individuals and businesses. However, high-speed Internet service is particularly difficult to find in rural areas because it is so costly for telecommunication carriers to provide.

Three states enacted legislation last year related to telecommunication access in rural areas. In Louisiana, Act 167 created the Louisiana Broadband Advisory Council charged with developing a statewide plan to encourage cost-effective broadband access. Kentucky enacted House Bill 627, that creates a task force to study the deployment of broadband technology. The same bill also prohibits state regulation of both broadband technology and the terms of broadband service in the commonwealth. In California, Senate Bill 1276 extends the life of the High Cost Fund Program that provides rural residents with telecommunication services at the same prices as those of urban residents.

Adjusting Health Care Programs for Rural Realities. Ensuring adequate health care in rural communities is vital for economic stabilization and growth for its residents. Rural hospitals and health care centers often cannot offer the services that urban hospitals provide. Legislatures have explored ways to improve the health care that rural residents receive through bills that provide state agencies the flexibility to better address their specific rural situations.

Connecticut's Public Act 81 allows rural health care agencies to provide hospice care by waiving certain staff requirements. Kansas House Bill 2760 now allows critical access hospitals to create and maintain psychiatric and rehabilitation units despite length-of-stay restrictions that had previously made this impossible. Along with legislators from other states, Arizona lawmakers recognized the difficulty of providing ambulance services in rural communities and enacted House Bill 2671 that allows rural counties to contract with other cities and towns for ambulance services. Mississippi created the "Rural Health Availability Act" establishing a procedure for health service organizations to enter into cooperative agreements to enhance hospital care and provide cost efficiencies for rural communities.

Combating Methamphetamine-Related Crime. The nationwide increase in methamphetamine use, production and associated crime in recent years has hit rural communities especially hard. Methamphetamine related crime burdens rural communities with significant costs and diverts already scarce public resources. A number of states introduced bills last year to deal with this issue. Illinois and North Carolina both enacted legislation that increases the penalties for methamphetamine related crime. Illinois Senate Bill 1793 doubles the maximum penalty for methamphetamine offenses in cases where children under 18 could have been exposed to its harmful effects. Legislation enacted in North Carolina allows for sentences of individuals involved in the production of methamphetamine to be extended 24 months if police officers, firefighters, parole officers, probation officers or emergency medical service providers are injured at meth labs. The same legislation also defines the crime of methamphetamine distribution leading to the death of a person as second degree murder.

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Creating Rural Policy Organizations. Developing a comprehensive state rural development policy often involves creating a permanent agency or office with the resources and authority needed to examine rural needs and opportunities, and the ability to affect state policies and programs. North Carolina, Texas, Pennsylvania and New York are often pointed to as examples of states with strong state-level rural development organizations.

In 2004, a number of states enacted bills creating or expanding rural development organizations. Louisiana House Bill 1220 created the Center for Rural Initiatives within Louisiana State University to conduct research on rural conditions and development strategy and provide policymakers with this information. Maryland Chapter 467 established the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation, an organization charged with encouraging the development of agricultural industries and markets, and providing capital credit for investment in agriculture. Oklahoma created the Rural Action Partnership Program within the Department of Commerce to facilitate cooperation between state organizations, individuals and corporations involved in rural development efforts. Utah Chapter 73 created the Office of Rural Development within the Department of Community and Economic Development to prepare annual plans to address issues of rural economic development and to participate in the implementation of these plans. The Center for Rural Virginia was created by Senate Bill 407 to conduct research on rural issues, analyze rural Virginia economies, implement rural development strategies, and develop and conduct leadership training for local rural leaders.

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Other Development Issues. In addition to the four areas described above, state lawmakers in 2004 also worked on legislation addressing a variety of other issues. These include infrastructure needs; agriculture, small business, and industrial development; revenue generation and tax incentive programs, as well as public safety and education. Given the diversity of America's rural areas, these and other issues will continue to require the attention of state lawmakers, and especially require creativity in their efforts to ensure the successful development of rural communities.

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