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Briefing Report 8

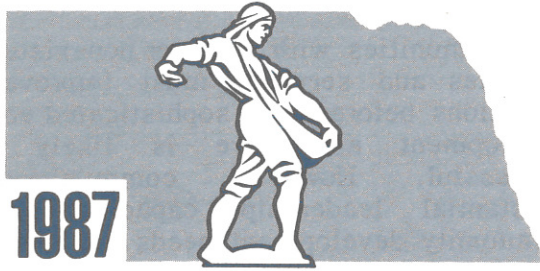
Nebraska Legislative Issues Symposium
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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BRIEFING REPORT

8

NEBRASKA LEGISLATIVE ISSUES SYMPOSIUM

FOCUSING ON READINESS AND CAPACITY IN TARGETING STATE ASSISTANCE TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

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One approach to developing a targeted rural development program could combine a number of elements to achieve a building block program to assist Nebraska's communities. Such an approach makes the following assumptions:

- Different kinds of assistance are needed for communities, at different stages of development,
- Assistance cannot be useful until there is a clear understanding of the needs and capabilities of the community, and
- Providing assistance to communities that are not ready to use it is mostly unproductive.

If these assumptions are correct, the state could develop an assistance program that includes the following.

Assessment

A process could be developed to assess communities' basic needs and capabilities. This could include a self-assessment by both public and private experts.

The assessment process would determine specific needs and capabilities. Assistance could then be directed as appropriate; for

example, figure 1 shows that three levels of need and three levels of capacity can be combined to provide a rich view of community readiness.

Figure 1
Assessing Community Readiness

Community need	Leadership capacity and motivation		
	High	Medium	Low
High			
Medium			
Low			

Leadership capacity and motivation are extremely difficult to measure, but would include factors such as previous participation in community and economic development projects, organizational capacities in both the public and private sectors, and willingness to commit local resources to development efforts.

Needs can be identified in many ways (see Briefing Report 7). Among the most important might be tax base, per capita income,

unemployment, change in employment and personal income, and condition of physical infrastructure. Need can also be identified by specific developmental concerns. For example, some communities must often build basic public facilities and services before they can expect to be successful in economic development, while others have strong facility bases but lack basic economic development capabilities.

Many communities would be low in leadership capacity and high in particular needs. Some communities would fit in the mid-level, some with strong leadership but moderate needs, others with low or high need levels but moderate leadership. Communities may also have low need levels in some areas and high need levels in other areas. Finally, some communities will have low need levels but some limitations in leadership capacity that should be addressed.

Tiered Assistance

Based upon the assessment process itself, a program of targeted or focused development assistance could be created to match needs, capacities, and capability levels. Assistance might come in any of the following forms:

- Assistance to build readiness and leadership within the community,
- Assistance to improve local facilities and services, and
- Assistance to improve the economic activity within the community.

One, two, or all three types of assistance might be applied to specific communities. Many communities may need help with readiness and leadership development. This may be most acute where need is greatest, such as in Nebraska's smallest rural communities (those with less than 500 residents), where population decline presents enormous quality of life challenges, and in the states' medium-

sized communities where maintaining market position will require leadership and a sound base of facilities and resources in the face of changing economic and population circumstances.

Communities with weak or nonexistent local facilities and services must improve these conditions before more sophisticated economic development assistance is likely to be successful. However, communities with substantial leadership capacity and low community development needs are possibly in the best position to receive assistance to improve economic activity.

Assistance Vehicles

- Documentation—includes items such as videotapes; software; and written, audio, and visual assistance products that show local residents how to meet existing needs and improve capacity.
- Training—can be provided directly to communities and can include readiness and leadership training and more substantive training about improving community and economic development conditions.
- Direct Assistance—involves working directly with communities to improve their conditions, and could involve a variety of assistance and capacity building activities. Such assistance could be provided by the state, regional agencies, university personnel, private consultants, and other peer community personnel.

¹For more information on this concept in Nebraska, see David F. Paulsen and Burton J. Reed, "Nebraska's Small Towns and Their Capacity for Economic Development," and David R. DiMartino, "Nebraska Settlements: Status, Trends, and Policy Choices." *Nebraska Policy Choices: 1987*. Russell L. Smith (Ed.). Omaha, NE: Center for Applied Urban Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1987.

This *Briefing Report* was developed by the Center for Applied Urban Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha for the Legislative Council Executive Board, to provide background information for the 1987 Nebraska Legislative Issues Symposium. The *Briefing Report* is intended to provide an overview,

pose important questions, and identify alternative policies and strategies for a specific issue. The views and opinions expressed are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent those of the University of Nebraska at Omaha.