



OFFICE OF THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR **SHEILA SIMON**

Governor's Rural Affairs Council Strategic Planning Working Group Recommendations

A Vision for Rural Illinois

The Governor's Rural Affairs Council will develop and implement strategies for improving delivery of State of Illinois services to rural Illinois and to expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life for rural residents.¹

To identify the issues confronting rural Illinois, and to design strategies to promote rural development, the Office of the Lt. Governor, the Governor's Rural Affairs Council (GRAC), and the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs undertook a four step process of data collection and analysis based on surveys and face-to-face community dialogues.

PROCESS:

Step 1 included the Rural Life Poll, conducted in 2010, which surveyed Illinois residents in metro and non-metro counties about attitudes toward quality of life and economic issues, and toward local and state government services. In Step 2, the citizen members of the GRAC completed the Rural Life Poll, and described to the full Council their concerns and priorities for rural issues to be addressed. State agency and advisory members then responded to the Rural Life Poll in Step 3. Step 4 included a series of six Rural Listening Posts during which Lt. Governor Simon, members of the Rural Affairs staff, and GRAC members heard firsthand from rural leaders and citizens about priorities and concerns.

Rural Listening Posts (RLPs) were held beginning in March 2012 in Peoria, and subsequently in, Carbondale, Mattoon, Gibson City, and Freeport, culminating on May 10, 2012, in Quincy. The selection of sites ensured that the overall information collection process includes geographically diverse viewpoints.

Each Listening Post was scheduled for two hours and a two-step process was used to gather information. In the first hour, a survey was administered using Turning Point Technology, an electronic polling system that allows participants to answer questions, tabulates the responses, and projects them using a PowerPoint presentation. Questions similar to those administered in the Illinois Rural Life Poll were posed to participants who then responded to each question when posed.

In the second hour, participants were organized into small groups to discuss issues raised in the surveys. These issues included education, health, infrastructure, workforce development, internet, business climate, and quality of life. The ideas discussed during the roundtable discussions were recorded and transcribed by group facilitators.

With the completion of the Listening Posts, information on rural issues had been gathered using four different approaches, querying four different groups of stakeholders from across the state. This data was gathered anonymously at a distance through the mailed survey, and in a face-to-face method at the RLPs, which were all attended by the Lt. Governor and her staff. This multidimensional approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods, enabled the GRAC to gather information from a variety of viewpoints and to assess the level of awareness of rural residents in the issues affecting them.

¹ Executive Order 4 (2011) Regarding the Governor's Rural Affairs Council

OUTCOMES:

The Listening Post process, the Rural Life Poll, and the testimony by GRAC Citizen Members generated a wealth of information useful in developing strategies, initiatives and the following recommendations for action:

A major finding of the RLPs is the need for a more effective dissemination of information about existing programs and services offered by state agencies. Participants agreed that local leaders must work together to find solutions to the issues. To do that effectively, local leaders must have access to the best tools and best practices in community and economic development. Local leaders need to know the services available and how to access them. The GRAC, through its members, is uniquely positioned to improve awareness and access to programs and services designed to serve rural Illinois.

Another important finding is that, by and large, rural residents are not looking to the state or federal governments to solve their problems by creating new programs or providing more funding. In contrast, RLP participants more often expressed a desire for state leaders to simplify and modify policies and legislation to better serve rural areas. Participants also expressed the need for a rural voice that will represent their interests in policy matters. The GRAC, under the leadership of the Lt. Governor, is the appropriate entity to play this role.

The findings of the RLPs were presented to the Governor's Rural Affairs Council at the July 26, 2012 meeting. A working group was formed and was charged by Lt. Governor Simon to prepare recommendations to address the findings of the data gathering process. The working group included the following GRAC volunteer members:

- Christopher Merrett, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs
- Gregory Scott, McLean County Area EMS System
- Francisco Alvarado, Illinois Department of Human Services
- Richard Breckenridge, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency

In addition, Norman Walzer, Center for Governmental Studies at Northern Illinois University and a GRAC advisor, and Laura Hepp Kessel, Policy Analyst for Rural Affairs, Office of the Lt. Governor, participated in the meetings. Karen Poncin and Gisele Hamm from the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs assisted by facilitating the working group meetings.

The working group met twice (August 31, 2012 and September 17, 2012). During its first meeting, they reviewed the findings of the Listening Post Report and brainstormed ideas for addressing the issues raised. In the second meeting, they refined and prioritized the ideas and prepared recommended actions for the entire GRAC.

Recommendations for Action

The working group identified three major initiatives:

- 1) Enhance Access to Services for Rural Illinois
- 2) Empower (or Position) Rural Illinois for the Future
- 3) Move Rural EMS Forward.

The group concluded that the implementation process could be accomplished best by forming several specialized working groups of GRAC members² which can more easily arrange meetings (face to face or conference calls) and work more quickly than the 25 member Council.

Thus, the initial GRAC working group recommends that GRAC members serve on one or more working groups to ensure successful implementation of the recommendations during the next 24 months.

Working Group 1. Enhance Access to Services for Rural Illinois

A major finding of the RLP was that rural residents are unaware of many programs and services available from state and federal agencies. Participants repeatedly requested the creation of programs that already exist. It became obvious that rural residents have difficulties effectively accessing the large number of government offices with services that address rural issues. In fact, providing more coordinated access to services was high on the list of reasons for creating the GRAC in 1987. Thus, much of the working group discussions focused on ways to make State government more accessible to rural residents and leaders.

Goal: Develop strategies that improve the access and deployment of available rural programs/services.

Suggested Strategies

1. Inventory services/programs serving rural areas with special emphasis on those that address the issues identified in the RLPs. Compile this inventory and make it available to rural residents in an easily accessible format.
 - a. Prepare a plan for a GRAC-sponsored campaign to promote services and the available inventory using press releases, newsletters, web sites and social media. Identify appropriate events and venues for promoting services and the inventory (i.e., Community Economic Development Conference, Leadership Conference, Downstate Voice Conference, Farm Progress Show, and/or the State Fair).
 - b. Develop a plan to work with local resource groups to enhance access to programs and services. These agencies could include the regional planning councils, UI-Extension, DCEO regional staff, Illinois Farm Bureau, legislative constituent service staff, and/or local economic development agencies. These resource people would serve as local experts/guides to services appropriate to their regions.
 - c. Explore the feasibility of holding a series of “regional state agency outreach” meetings that bring state resources to rural areas to address issues identified in the RLPs and by the region.
 - d. Identify gaps between current services and issues identified in the RLPs.

² In some cases, it will be appropriate to bring in resource people from other agencies/organizations with expertise on specific issues to serve on working groups at the discretion of the chair.

- i. Include these gaps and suggested recommendations in the Annual Report to the Governor and General Assembly.
 - ii. Explore the feasibility of forming inter-agency working partnerships to address gaps in services where appropriate. (i.e., USDA/DCEO Food Hub Partnership).
2. Explore the implementation of a demonstration project with the Illinois Department of Human Services that examines how it is delivering programs and services to rural areas.

Suggested Activities

- a. Examine what services are available, how those services are marketed, and who is eligible.
- b. Identify the methods by which IDHS tracks services to rural areas.
- c. Examine who is served and identify any gaps in services in rural areas.
- d. Develop recommendations to other GRAC member agencies on specific strategies for improving their delivery of services to rural areas.

Working Group 2. Empower (or Position) Rural Illinois for the Future

Much of the discussion during the Rural Listening Posts and the working group meetings focused on the perception by participants that the needs of rural areas were overlooked when legislation is drafted, program requirements are determined, or regulations are enacted.

Goal: Develop policy and legislative recommendations to improve services to rural areas.

Suggested Strategies

1. Develop initiatives to enhance awareness of legislators, legislative liaisons, etc. to consider impacts to rural communities when legislation is being considered.
2. Research programs in other rural states to identify some “best or promising practices” that might be of use in Illinois based on issues raised in the RLPs. Share this information with GRAC member agencies to see whether similar programs might be feasible or whether current programs could be modified to make them work better.
3. Develop specific legislative recommendations to address gaps in services/programs identified by Working Group 1.
4. Prepare information on trends in Illinois to identify how rural Illinois compares with comparable states on important issues, update this comparison annually, and include in the annual GRAC report, along with suggested legislative and policy changes.

Working Group 3. Move Rural EMS Forward

The future of rural EMS was extensively discussed in the Rural Listening Posts and at the GRAC Working Group meetings. The initial working group recommends that a working group review the findings of the House EMS Task Force Report with the goal of developing recommendations that address the needs of rural areas.

Suggested Strategies

1. Evaluate the recommendations of the House EMS Task Force and evaluate their impact on rural areas.
2. Make specific policy and/or legislative recommendations to meet the needs of rural areas.

3. Explore ways the GRAC can work with and support the efforts of the House EMS Task Force.
4. Explore the feasibility of holding a Rural EMS Summit. This Summit could bring together rural stakeholders to explore the ramifications of the House EMS Task Force report. Possible topics for that Summit include:
 - a. Recruitment/retention of EMS personnel in rural areas;
 - b. Appropriate educational requirements/delivery for rural EMS personnel; and
 - c. Implementation of the report recommendations in rural areas.

The initial GRAC working group recommends that the three working groups be created at the October GRAC meeting. The new groups will begin meeting immediately and will report progress at the January meeting and each subsequent quarterly meeting. The Lt. Governor’s Rural Affairs staff and IIRA staff will serve as resource staff for each group.

Suggested Timeline for Working Groups

Month	Activities
October 17, 2012*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working Groups formed • Members Identified • Resource Agencies/People Identified
November 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific Tasks Identified • Completion Targets Set • Work Plan Completed • Work Begins
December 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work Continues
January 16, 2013*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report Progress to GRAC
February 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work Continues
March 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work Continues
April 17, 2013*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report Progress to GRAC
May 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work Continues
June 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working Groups Submit Year End Report on Activities, Progress, Recommendations, and plans for FY2014
July 24, 2013*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report to GRAC on Activities, Progress, Recommendations, and plans for FY2014. IIRA and Lt. Governor Rural Affairs staff finalize Annual Report
August 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IIRA submits Annual Report to the Governor and General Assembly which, in part, summarized the progress of the Working Groups
* Governor’s Rural Affairs Council Meeting	