

THE CENTER FOR RURAL PENNSYLVANIA

Testimony before the  
Senate of Pennsylvania  
Intergovernmental Operations Committee

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Senator Gene Yaw, Chairman

Barry L. Denk, Director

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Thank you Majority Chairman Smucker, Minority Chairman Blake and Committee Members for this opportunity to present information on the Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

In our 24<sup>th</sup> year of operation, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania remains committed to fulfilling its mandate of sponsoring applied research and maintaining a database on rural trends and conditions as a legislative service agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly.

As you know, Pennsylvania has the third largest rural population in the nation – 3.5 million rural residents, or 27% of the state's 12.7 million residents – 75 percent of the land area in Pennsylvania is rural.

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania is the second oldest state-level rural policy and research center in the country with a national reputation for its work.

Our work is determined and directed by a fully engaged Board of Directors comprised of legislators, academics, and governor appointees who ensure that our research has merit and impact in public policy deliberations, meets the academic rigors of validity and reliability, and has practical application for rural Pennsylvania and its 3.5 million rural residents.

### **Research and Data Analysis Impacting Public Policy**

Here are some examples of where the Center has informed public policy deliberations at the national, state and local level.

**Development of a Proposal for Statewide Federally Funded Area Health Education Centers (AHECs) Program.** The Center's seed research grant to Penn State – Hershey led to the development of the Department of Health and Human Services' funded establishment of seven area continuing medical education centers (AHECS) serving all of Pennsylvania. These centers are in their 16<sup>th</sup> year of operation.

**Health Professional Shortage Area and Medically Underserved Area Designations.** Mansfield University researchers documented, to strict federal standards, 21 HSPA and MUA areas affecting over 500,000 Pennsylvanians. These

designations resulted in increased Medicare reimbursements for health care providers, use of the J-1 visa program for recruitment of primary care providers, and enrollment in federal loan forgiveness programs.

**Teleteaching in Pennsylvania Schools.** Research from Mansfield University documented the use of distance education for curriculum offerings in all 501 Pennsylvania school districts. It showed considerable differences among suburban, rural and inner city schools and helped inform the deliberations that led to Pennsylvania's acclaimed Link-To-Learn Initiative.

**Main Street/Elm Street.** Staff research documented the financial impact and viability of Pennsylvania's Main Street Program when it was a program under DCA/DCED. This documentation supported efforts that culminated in enabling legislation and line item funding for the MSP. When the legislature was considering the companion Elm Street legislation, Center staff was called upon to offer analysis for the potential impact and maximum benefit for rural communities.

**Route 6 Heritage Area.** In the mid-1990s, the Center worked with the fledgling Route 6 Tourist Association to document financial impact and potential for further development of rural Pennsylvania's tourism industry. The Center's data analysis and advocacy supported the Route 6 Tourist Association's formal recognition by DCED's Office of Travel and Tourism which responded with funding and promotion efforts.

**Community Education Councils.** The lack of postsecondary education institutions and program offerings in the northern tier of rural Pennsylvania is well known. Center research and data supported the original network of five community education councils in their documentation of impact. Center support helped achieve legislation and line item appropriation for the CECs. Most recently the Center for Rural Pennsylvania completed an in-house research project that is being used to pursue support for the establishment of a community college serving an 11-county region of north central and northern Pennsylvania.

**Zoning for Farming.** Conducted by Penn State faculty, this research resulted in a practical guide, with sample ordinances, for how local governments could support Pennsylvania's agriculture industry. Originally printed in 1994, the legislation was

updated as a result of Acts 67 and 68 and continues to be requested by municipalities for its practical applications.

**PA Blu-Prints.** An interactive CD-ROM was the product of this research conducted by Penn State. It provided practical, visual guidance to local municipalities who could “envision” the results of ordinances affecting future development within their jurisdictions. It was also supported with funding by the Mellon Foundation and received national recognition. It was included in DCED’s Planning ToolKit that grew out of Pennsylvania’s Sound Land Use Planning efforts under the Ridge administration.

**Computer Security Issues for Local Governments.** Penn State-Altoona faculty surveyed local municipalities around the state to determine their levels of security, staff training, and operations regarding municipal computer systems. It generated such interest from the PA State Association of Township Supervisors that it was the featured topic in its monthly magazine. The researcher also conducted a workshop at the township supervisors’ annual conference.

**Agritourism.** Recognizing the importance of agriculture and tourism to Pennsylvania’s economy, the Center funded research at California University of PA to document agritourism efforts and financial impacts in the state. It also generated a practical guide to assist farmers, economic developers, and municipal officials in how they can support and expand agritourism in Pennsylvania.

**Wind Energy Conflict Areas.** As part of Pennsylvania’s effort to develop alternative energy, wind energy facilities— both large and small scale – are dotting our landscapes, particularly rural areas. Accompanying this is an increase in concerns about potential negative impact on wildlife habitats including endangered species. To help inform local municipalities that make siting decisions, faculty at Indiana University of Pennsylvania documented areas of the state where wind energy development could impact natural habitats. The end result was a CD-ROM depicting the 235 municipalities in 39 counties where wind energy development could impact natural species habitats.

## **Research and Data Analysis Impacting Communities**

While the General Assembly is the first and primary audience for our public policy research findings, the Center's Board of Directors – who review and approve all research projects – recognizes that all research does not need to result in legislative action.

Change, as we know, occurs at the local level. Decisions in Washington, Harrisburg, and the county seat affect people on Main Street. Often our research has its greatest impact with school boards and administrators, economic developers, hospital administrators, human and social services, and civic minded and engaged citizens.

Here are some examples of our research impacting local communities.

**Community Visioning.** Taking the lessons learned, and best practices, from four separate community strategic planning efforts – led by teams of researchers, extension personnel, and community developers – the Center published the first edition of “Planning for the Future: A Handbook on Community Visioning.” It is now in its third edition and is on the Center's “Best Sellers” list. One of the best examples of how our research affects change at the local level is Tamaqua, Schuylkill County. Started as an ad hoc effort in 1994, Tamaqua's visioning project evolved into a nonprofit organization and resulted in the restoration of the downtown rail center, the establishment of a multi-municipal recreation authority and a successful Main Street program. Additional success stories include renovation of downtown buildings for business and residential use, establishment of a community college branch campus and expanded health care services. Tamaqua's success story was recognized in March 2011 in Washington, DC by the national Local Initiatives Support Corporation at its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania was part of a panel that focused on Pennsylvania rural development success stories.

**Pennsylvania Downtown Manual.** Across Pennsylvania, many communities are working to revitalize their downtowns to remake them into the hub of activity they once were. This how-to guide from the Center provides practical advice for planning and implementing successful revitalization strategies.

**Growing the Links Between Farms and Schools.** The Center developed this guide to help support and coordinate efforts across the Commonwealth to increase connections between farms and schools to open up new markets for locally grown products, educate our youth on farm production, provide nutritious foods, help schools meet curriculum requirements and support the local economy and community.

**Guide on Effective Citizen Engagement.** This guide was developed based on the simple belief that local governments, community organizations and public agencies make better decisions and have greater positive impact on their communities when they increase the frequency, diversity and level of engagement of community residents.

**Childhood Overweight and Obesity.** The Center was the first to analyze statewide data on childhood overweight and obesity by rural and urban county. The results of the analysis were picked up by the Associated Press. The article was featured in 48 national and statewide media outlets. The AP article was featured on AP.com, CNN.com and MSNBC.com. The Center's report was also featured in a variety of television news spots including KHQA TV of Quincy, IL, WISI TV of Columbia, SC, and WGAL Channel 8 of Lancaster, PA.

**Transfer of Wealth.** This study was completed on all 67 counties to provide estimates on the amount of personal wealth that is likely to be transferred from one generation to the next from 2005 to 2055. The 50-year transfer of wealth estimate for Pennsylvania was \$1.17 trillion. Center staff has met and continues to work with community foundations to help them identify strategies for garnering some of that wealth for community investment. This is especially critical given the wealth creation being generated by Marcellus Shale development. To that end, the Center is planning a fall 2011 conference for Pennsylvania's community foundations to address this opportunity.

In addition to sponsored research with faculty at Penn State, the State System of Higher Education and Pitt regional campuses, the Center has developed capacity in-house to administer surveys that generate primary data from a rural perspective on current issues and trends. Here are some examples:

Firefighters Recruitment and Retention, Parks and Recreation Issues in Small Communities, Municipal Police Chiefs, Pennsylvania Inventory of Historic Barns, Farms Participating in Pennsylvania's Agriculture Easement Program, Farmers' Market Managers, and Tourist Promotion Agencies.

Attachment 1 includes a complete listing of the Center's research reports, fact sheets and current research projects.

All of this culminates into the largest statewide database on rural trends and conditions. The Center receives regular requests for database information from legislators, state and local government officials, businesses, diverse community-based organizations, media and the general public.

For example, from May 1, 2010 to May 1, 2011, the Center completed 264 detailed data requests/analyses as follows:

- Non-profit organizations – 32%
- Education Institutions – 24%
- Government Agencies – 21%
- Businesses – 12%
- Media and General Public – 11%

In addition, for that same period, an average of 15 persons, each day, downloaded data from the Center's on-line database.

### **Representing the Legislature at the National, State and Local Levels**

Pennsylvania is nationally recognized for its commitment to rural through the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Staff is called upon at the national and state levels to serve on committees, task forces, etc.

- National Conference of State Legislatures – staff vice-chair and staff chair Agriculture and Rural Development, Homeland Security Task Force, Rural Development Task Force
- U.S. Election Assistance Commission on rural voter registration and turnout

- Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) Steering Committee for Pennsylvania Initiative
- USDA Economic Research Service – Re-Defining Rural and Frontier task force
- Annie E. Casey Foundation – Arkansas Rural Families for Economic Success Summit
- Charter member – National Coalition of State Rural Policy Centers – sponsored by Rural Policy Research Institute, University of Missouri
- Governor’s Sound Land Use Advisory Committee
- PA House of Representatives Education Committee Rural Education Task Force
- Pennsylvania’s Task Force for Working Families
- Pennsylvania Rural Families for Economic Success Initiative
- Moving Heritage Tourism Forward in Pennsylvania Task Force

Staff is often called upon to provide rural perspectives on major funding decisions for executive branch agencies and others. Center staff serve or have served as grant reviewers for:

- Penn State Ben Franklin Partnership Program
- PA Department of Health Primary Care Challenge Grant
- PA Department of Health Smoking Prevention and Cessation Grants
- PA Department of Environmental Protection/League of Women Voters Groundwater Policy Grants
- PA Department of Education Link-to-Learn Technology Grants
- PA Office of Administration – federal rural Broadband grant applications

Staff serves or has served as board/advisory members on:

- Keystone Development Center
- Pennsylvania Farm Link
- Pennsylvania Rural Health Association
- Pennsylvania Rural Partners
- Pennsylvania Downtown Center
- Interagency Task Force on Civil Tension
- Pennsylvania Public Health Advisory Council
- Covering All Kids and Families
- Keystone Ag Innovation Center



- Heritage PA – Association of Heritage Area Managers
- Pennsylvania Environmental Council

Center staff is regularly called upon to speak at conferences and meetings about trends and conditions affecting rural Pennsylvanians. These venues are another way in which our research and database inform and educate people at state and local levels.

- Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture
- Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors
- Pennsylvania Farm Show
- Penn State University Economic Development Class
- Venango County Leadership Development Class
- Elk County Leadership
- Pottsville Economic Development Corporation Multi Year Strategic Plan
- Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association
- Penn State RULE Leadership
- Mifflin/Juniata United Way Strategic Planning
- USDA/ARC Northeast Rural Planning Session
- Schuylkill County Visioning
- PA Association of Community Foundations
- National Coalition of State Rural Policy Centers
- Erie County Nonprofit Partnership Conference

The Center's research results and data analyses are regularly featured in statewide publications and media including:

- Monthly articles in Pennsylvania Borough News
- Articles in Pennsylvania Township News
- Articles in Penn Lines, the monthly magazine of the Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association
- Articles in Pennsylvania County News
- Articles in Lancaster Farming
- Berks County Cable
- Radio PA (last was on the County Reassessment report of 2010)
- WITF Smart Talk radio and TV (last was on issue of rural brain drain)

Attachment 2 provides some examples of published articles.

The Center's considerable work within Pennsylvania rural communities and small towns is another way in which the Center for Rural Pennsylvania serves as a legislative agency for the Pennsylvania General Assembly. Much of our impact and much of the change that we affect is done for constituents of the legislature, and is often at the request of legislators.

With funding from the Pennsylvania General Assembly and hands-on involvement from the Center's Board of Directors, the Center's work and accomplishments have achieved national attention, and state and local impact. I respectfully submit this is evidenced by the work cited above.

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania is recognized as the "go-to agency" for valid and reliable research and information on rural Pennsylvania and we look forward to continuing this work.

Thank you.