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Rural Policy Advocacy Sessions organized by Center for Small Towns

Summary: A diverse group of attendees learned advocacy skills.

(November 17, 2011)-Rural policy affects us all. The decisions made by lawmakers have an impact on our day-to-day lives and our future. Recently, the University of Minnesota, Morris Center for Small Towns (CST) and the Center for Rural Affairs (CFRA) of Lyons, Nebraska, co-hosted events in Morris and Moorhead to help people learn how to get their voices heard. University of Minnesota, Morris student Zac Van Cleve '13 helped organize the events. The attendees were a diverse group, including students, educators, rural organization representatives, congressional office staffers, farmers, and interested area residents, all passionate about rural affairs.

Cindy Bigger, of Bigger Associates and a retired Extension educator, explained that first-hand accounts of the impact of policy decisions are valued by decision-makers and spoke about how individuals can influence politicians. While she acknowledges that it can seem daunting for one person to try to make a difference, we must be “many voices, in many places, with one message.” Her steps for influence are to build a relationship, then to educate decision-makers on your area of expertise, and finally to find a way to touch their lives and make them care.

The Farm Bill, explained Traci Bruckner of the CFRA, is the primary agricultural and food policy tool of the federal government and includes rural community development. She also commented on why this Farm Bill is getting less money than previous bills, as well as what the CFRA is trying to do. The CFRA is trying to ensure that the Farm Bill invests in the programs that create opportunities for rural communities. The CFRA would like to see real commodity program reform that caps payments to the nation’s largest farmers, who are crowding out the small and mid-size family farms. They are also working on the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Opportunity Act, to help address beginning farmer issues.

David Fluegel of CST discussed economic and population changes in rural areas. One of the most interesting aspects about changes in rural demographics is that, despite the fact that 18–24 year olds are leaving rural counties, they are outnumbered by 30–45-year-olds who are moving to rural counties. “They are arriving with their families and creating the potential for growth in the capacity of rural communities to adapt to changes that are occurring and to diversify their economies,” Fluegel says. “We’re moving into community re-development.” When it comes to influencing decisions on rural policy, Fluegel reminded the audience that providing input on both the federal and local level is important. and that we typically have more opportunities for greater influence on a local level.

The event finished off with the CFRA’s Virginia Wolking leading a discussion about successful ways to advocate. Wolking covered tips for calling (prepare ahead of time, introduce yourself as a constituent, be polite), for writing (send letters to the district office, use forms on the senators’ and representatives’ websites, focus on one issue per message, relate the issue to your personal experience), and other ways to make yourself heard (get to know the staff at the district office, write a letter to the editor, etc.).

Toni Merdan, staffer in Economic Development from Collin Peterson’s 7th District U.S. congressional office, attended

both the Morris and Moorhead sessions. She shared with the audience that snail mail is probably the least desired format, as all mail needs to go through a lengthy screening, courtesy of the anthrax incident. “Email and fax are the quickest and most effective methods of contact for federal offices,” Merdan said.

Bigger concluded the session by commenting on the choices for making contacts and providing input to decision-makers: “You have to do something if you want something to change.”

The Center for Rural Affairs value statement reads: “Since its inception, the CFRA has resisted the role of advocating for the interests of any particular group. Instead, we have chosen to advance a set of values—values that reflect the best of Rural America. Ultimately, we believe it is in the interest of all to create a future reflecting those values.”

The [Center for Small Towns](#) is a community outreach program housed on the Morris campus that serves as a point-of-entry to the resources of the University of Minnesota. Small towns, local units of government, P-12 schools, nonprofit organizations, and other University units are able to utilize CST’s resources as they work on rural issues or make contributions to rural society. CST’s mission is to focus the University’s attention and marshal its resources toward assisting Minnesota’s small towns with locally identified issues while creating applied learning opportunities for faculty and students.

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