



The Advanced Rural Generalist

by R. Bruce McNellie, MSSW, LMSW, LPC, LMFT

The term **advanced rural generalist** describes a specialist who has advanced training in broad areas of social services with emphasis on the person in the environment, client systems, and community systems theories within a rural culture. To better describe the nature of this specialist, the following descriptions are provided in clarifying the concept of an advanced rural generalist and in showing how the terms relate and differ from one another.

The **generalist practitioner** is expected to have the skills necessary to advocate for the individual client, group, or community in the securing of needed resources. Tasks involve meeting with community groups, other service providers, and individuals in the community to secure needed resources for the filling of identified needs.

The **advanced generalist practitioner** is expected to have the skills necessary to advocate for the community at a macro level by meeting with individual clients, groups, or community leaders in the development of long-term resources, applying for grants, altering the way groups of clients are perceived, and identifying and removing systemic barriers, in order to meet the long-term needs of individuals, groups, or community systems.

The **generalist rural practitioner** is expected to have the skills necessary

to advocate for the individual client, group, or community in the securing of needed resources within the culture of a rural setting. Tasks involve meeting with community groups, other service providers, and individuals in the community to secure needed resources for the filling of identified needs.

The **advanced rural generalist practitioner** is expected to have the skills necessary to advocate for the community at a macro level by meeting with individual clients, groups, or community leaders in the development of long-term resources, applying for grants, altering the way groups of clients are perceived, and identifying and removing systemic barriers, in order to meet the long-term needs of individuals, groups, or community systems within the culture of a rural setting.

To describe the Advanced Rural Generalist, the terms *rural* and *rural culture* must be defined or described. While the concepts of the terms rural and urban may be intuitively clear to many, their exact nature can be so dynamic that a clear understanding between any two individuals may be elusive. There is a need to clarify some of the differences in the culture of a typically rural community vs. an urban one.

Rural and *urban* are descriptive terms that carry a multitude of adjectives

given the specific context where the term is used. Some federal guidelines define 'rural' as a county or parish under 50,000 in population. Other definitions include a strong sense of community, agrarian ties, a strong sense of independence or self determination, local control, or limited civil or public institutions. The terms are not static and defy easy definition. They are dynamic and pose a complex set of values that changes from generation to generation. Though some of the "differences" discussed here may be confused with stereotyping, they are pervasive enough to be considered factors in assessing a family in the environment of a rural community.

Trust is more important than the issues being discussed: When U.S. President Jimmy Carter was first elected, there was a story about the difference in the way business was handled in the rural south and the "big city." In New York, a business deal is often only accomplished after a series of meetings of various levels of staff who go over minute details with careful reading of contracts and agreements prior to the final signing, which is usually a formal event. Each detail of the agreement is carefully discussed to avoid any misunderstandings. In the rural south, the two owners meet, usually over food, and discuss football, sports, weather, politics, and children, anything but what they were scheduled to discuss, and in the last two minutes as they are rising to leave the meeting, they say, "Oh, by the way, let's do this deal together." If all went well prior to the "two minute warning," then it is a done deal. In a rural setting, getting to know the other person is more important than knowing the details of the proposed transaction.

Isolation: The distance from one another poses unique problems for rural communities. Some traditional services are predicated on the concept of low cost or public transportation. The national model of child abuse provision that was adopted in the late 1970s included 24-hour access to trained staff, 24-hour foster care, 24-hour protective services in-home care, 24-hour emergency day care, protective day care, counseling, supervised visitation, foster group homes, and residential treatment, among others. In a rural area, many of

these services, especially protective day care, in-home services, and counseling, are too often cost prohibitive due to the transportation issues involved.

This distance from others contributes to a feeling of isolation, which is one of the predictors of child maltreatment. Most child abusers are effectively isolated from their relatives, peer group, and friends, and this isolation can be doubly felt in rural areas. Many of the social controls that mediate extreme behaviors are more limited in an isolated rural area. A study done in the 1980s by Dr. Wayne Deuhn showed East Texas to have the highest per capita incidence of sexual abuse in the state. The extreme isolation felt by living in the heavy pine forests of East Texas could be one of the causal factors. Living among heavy timber contributes to the feeling of being out of sight of others and thus out of normal social controls. West Texas, though rural and isolated, is so wide open that it may be more difficult for anyone to ever feel totally hidden from view.

The family is private (“Stay out of my business or I will shoot you.”):

Dealing with a rural family can seem to be a throw-back in time. There is an Appalachia feeling of the family’s business being sacred and not open to anyone for any reason. The rural family has a part of its culture that says that the individual is responsible for himself or herself and that the individual should not expect or look for, but actually should resist outside help. It is considered a form of weakness for someone to accept help from others. This makes it doubly difficult for the practitioner to develop a working relationship with the family, as much suspicion must be overcome as well as guilt at even “needing someone” to come help them or help them gain access to needed resources. A further barrier to services occurs when the provider, often a member of the same rural community, shares this underlying feeling, and places blame onto the recipient of services and lowering expectations for the client’s progress.

Racism or racial attitudes/sex roles:

Rural areas often track behind urban areas in race relations. Often the access to a diverse environment is limited and the level of diversity is more fixed or static. People raised in rural communities tend to know each other in certain

roles that may remain static throughout their lives. The mail carrier, the fire fighter, police officer, sheriff, preacher, school teacher, or counselor may be the same individuals for 20 to 30 years. When one’s insurance agent is the same as one’s grandfather’s, there is an increased expectation that all insurance agents look and act as that person. This helps set the expectation for static roles. People have a place to put people and acceptance of change or flexibility is slow and difficult in coming.

Limited staffing resources both in diversity and in skills/education/flexibility:

The field of social services rarely pays enough to attract employees outside of the immediate community; thus most areas must recruit from within the rural community. These workers often carry the same bias that the community feels, such as “it is a sign of weakness to need help,” racial bias, fixed gender roles, and distrust of outsiders, and thus come to their tasks of offering help to others expecting some resentment from the client, or they may exhibit personal resentment or patronizing attitudes toward the client that shows disrespect for the client for needing or asking for such services.

Limited funding: Rural work faces statistical problems in funding. In Texas, as well as most states, there is a “capitation” issue at work in setting funding. Though a county may increase in its population, the total percentage of the state it represents often may decrease as urban areas often show the greatest growth both in total numbers as well as in percentages. As long as funding is based solely on population, rural areas will always face a losing battle in terms of allocated dollars.

Limited law enforcement sophistication: Mainly because of budget issues, a rural community can rarely offer more than a subsistence pay for its law enforcement staff. It is difficult to recruit and train professional level law enforcement personnel with low salaries. Officers are often limited to a high school background and academy training. This level of staffing limits the ability of an officer to be aware of the multiple issues involved during a child, elderly, or domestic abuse case.

Limited experience in the office of

the District or County Attorney: A combination of relatively low salaries and the low volume both contribute to a low level of sophistication in legal work in the areas of social services (child protective services, adult protective services, child care licensing). In the career of a general practice attorney, very few cases are ever handled in these areas; thus the average attorney has very limited knowledge and skill development in this area of the law. The sophistication of the defense attorneys and judges is equally limited. This makes the legal work very difficult, placing much more responsibility on the worker who must become a specialist on legal requirements, advocating for the victim as well as the alleged perpetrator. The CPS worker’s role becomes multi-functional—worker, quasi-attorney, protector of parents’ rights, children’s rights and agency all rolled together.

Limited local resources: In an urban community, there are usually several non-profit agencies that offer social services to the needy. A referral for counseling is just a phone call away, as is day care, food, rent, clothing, and medical services, and transportation is either low cost or free. In a rural area, transportation is a critical problem, but even with transportation, the need for social services is so spread out that there are very few or no social service providers in a rural county. Providers often must serve several counties in order to have enough “traffic” to stay in business. Many counties have a “sharing post,” Goodwill or Salvation Army Store, or similar store, but transportation is a problem. Emergency housing is virtually unavailable for the working poor, with lengthy waiting lists—up to 18 months in some areas. Energy assistance is available, though transportation can often be a problem when phone services are not available. In many rural areas, phone service is so expensive that many cannot afford to have a phone, which further limits access to services.

Salary: In the areas of public service, education and skills often put employees in a higher (relatively speaking) group within a rural setting. They are more often viewed as peers by the legal and medical community than workers in an urban area without an advanced degree. They are more easily assimilated into the professional commu-

nity. In court in a rural area, a worker with a few years of experience will often be accepted as an expert, whereas an advanced degree would be required in an urban setting. The rural worker is much more likely to be viewed as the expert for the community in his or her field.

Autonomy: The rural worker will usually receive less direct supervision. Thus, there is a need for more autonomy and responsibility.

Lack of specialization: The rural worker is often required to assume responsibility for a broad range of services, requiring a generic approach to case work. This broad knowledge comes at the expense of specialized skills in any one area. Training becomes equally more generic for the rural worker, expanding further the number of tasks the worker is able to perform.

Higher community profile: The worker may be the most educated and the highest paid public employee in a given community. Often, membership on boards, involvement with community

groups, and political activities become more common for rural social workers than for urban ones. The worker is often responsible for resource development.

Limited peer base: When a worker is one of a few involved in services in a community, interdisciplinary issues are more visible and more important. A mistake that angers another provider in a rural community can have far-reaching effects on the employee. The animosity is not as easily forgotten, the worker will have to continue working with that individual, and often the animosity will spread to others in the same community. Also, there is less peer support simply because of the lack of other similar staff.

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The American Board of Examiners in Clinical Social Work (ABE) makes awards of \$1,000 to second-year social work master's degree students. The awards recognize Excellence in Preparation for Clinical Social Work Practice as demonstrated by clinical practice papers. ABE offers up to five awards per academic year.

Papers are judged by a panel of advanced clinical social work practitioners and educators. The deadline for submission of papers is between mid-February and mid-March. Awards are announced in May.

For a Student Awards Kit, contact ABE at 800-694-5285, or <http://www.abecsw.org>, or ABE, Shetland Park, 27 Congress Street, Suite 211, Salem, MA 01970, Attn: Student Awards Committee.

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