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## Rural areas often forgotten by 'developers'

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By Bill Knight

Opinion columnist

As floodwaters recede, rural residents might be inspired by how we rely on each other in crises, but we also might be reminded of why we must: We're frequently overlooked by the 86 percent of the country that doesn't live in rural areas, especially in situations less obvious than natural disasters, and particularly by the federal government.

Even in catastrophes, though, rural communities usually suffer hardships because of our size, according to a recent conference in upstate New York, "Natural Disasters in Small Communities: How Can We Help?"

"In the U.S. and around the world, smaller communities - clusters of less than 20,000-30,000 people - are generally less well-prepared to deal with phenomena than are larger communities," commented Michael Sheridan, director of the University of Buffalo's Center for Geohazards Studies. "They often are caught by surprise by an event that probably has been brewing for a long time."

Meanwhile, the government program intended to help rural America on an ongoing basis reportedly is spending money elsewhere, according to the Washington Post. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development program has given \$8.6 billion to distressed rural areas since 2001, the Post said - almost one-fifth what it gave to resorts, retirement communities and metropolitan areas: \$39.1 billion.

Elsewhere, rural America generally suffers economically and particularly endures health-related woes: Unmarried women in rural areas are at a higher risk of depression; rural patients have poor access to health information and health care; people needing organ transplants are less likely to receive them than patients in cities.

"Economic problems increase feelings of emotion stress," says Dr. James Roher of the Mayo Clinic.

"People today are worried about, among other things, the mortgage crisis and high gas prices. Many are left wondering how they are going to pay for necessities. Statistically, rural, unmarried women are more often depressed than their married counterparts."

The Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved says a lack of economic advantages and of health-care resources are the most pressing problems in rural areas.

And rural patients even have inferior access to organ transplant help, according to the Journal of the American Medical Association.

"Patients living in small towns and isolated rural areas were 8 percent to 15 percent less likely to be wait-listed, and 10 percent to 20 percent less likely to undergo heart, liver, and kidney transplantation than patients in urban environments," said Dr. David Axelrod of Dartmouth Medical School.

Despite the need, there's a disparity in aid from USDA programs, which date to the Great

Depression in the 1930s, reports the Post, which noted confusion on what "rural" means.

"I believe we should work to find a consistent definition of the term 'rural' that would apply to all of the programs across all agencies," said Republican Congressman Frank Lucas of Oklahoma.

Thomas Dorr, the USDA's supervisor of Rural Development, described it as "venture capital for rural America," and defended the assistance choices.

"We agree that some standardization would be useful," he said. "Rural Development administers over 40 programs that provide grants, loans, and loan guarantees to support rural infrastructure, affordable housing, vital community facilities and business development opportunities. Some are means-tested; others are not."

Illinois' share seems substantial, with \$509 million invested in rural areas in 2006, the last annual report available, with \$295 million for housing, \$177 million for utilities, \$17 million for community facilities and \$21 million for businesses.

The USDA helped a wind farm in Montgomery County, ethanol operations in McLean and Henry Counties, fiber optics in Marion County, and a water system in Cass County.

Attention and assistance could improve, too, if U.S. Sen. Barack Obama is elected president, his campaign claims.

"If Washington continues policies that work against America's family farmers, our rural communities will fall further behind - and so will America," he says on his web site. "But if we reject the politics that has shut ordinary folks out, we can create a new story for rural America."

The Illinois Democrat and presumptive nominee for President sees three problems here: "Rural communities are often left behind, family farmers are being squeezed, [and] Concentrated Animal Feed Operations [CAFOs: mega-livestock facilities] pollute the environment.

"It's time for real leadership for rural American to extend that American Dream. That's the dream of opportunity that I've spent my life fighting for. And that's what our rural agenda will do."

U.S. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), the GOP's presumptive nominee, seems less clear. His Web site has no rural plank from a McCain platform, and in April he seemed half-hearted.

"Government has a role to play in helping people who, through no fault of their own, are having a hard time," he said at a Kentucky speech. "But government can't create good and lasting jobs, outside of government."

After those remarks, a rural Kentucky retiree, J.K. Patrick, told USA Today that McCain and the Republicans "stand for helping Big Business and corporations."

More than sandbags are needed.

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