

## **Connection, Cause and Character:**

An Analysis of Qualitative Research  
Exploring Views of Rural America

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## Method

This phase of qualitative research was designed to refine hypothetical reframes prior to quantitative research. The reframes for this round of research were developed in consultation with the FrameWorks research team and were based upon findings from earlier phases of research.

To test the reframes, three focus group sessions were conducted with engaged citizens (i.e., people who say they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue.) All three group interviews were conducted in Illinois: one was conducted among residents of Chicago, one among residents of the Chicago suburbs, and one among residents of rural areas outside Danville, Illinois. The groups were conducted on May 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

Throughout the report, focus group participants are noted by their location and gender. The focus group guide is included in the Appendix.

## Introduction

In early 2003, the Kellogg Foundation asked the FrameWorks Institute to assist in the Foundation's efforts to develop effective language to promote policies that would benefit rural America. The Foundation had already conducted a significant amount of public opinion research, but needed additional assistance in translating the research findings into recommendations for communications. Over the course of the following year, the FrameWorks Institute reviewed the Foundation's existing research and conducted several original research projects.

This first phase of research determined that the true barriers in public perception were more complicated than earlier experience had suggested. The problem was not negative stereotypes about rural people. In fact, positive perceptions of rural America far outweigh negative perceptions. The solution was not to provide new factual information about the size and scope of rural America. The public's assumption that progress is inevitable trumps any short term impact of new factual information about the size of rural areas or the number of people who live in rural America. Even the public's desire to protect a valued way of life, a life upon which this country was founded, was not sufficient to enlist committed support for a wide range of rural policies.

Instead, the FrameWorks Institute found that deeply held patterns of reasoning were undermining support for rural policy. American belief in individual responsibility undermines support for governmental solutions. Residents of metropolitan areas feel little sense of interdependence with rural area residents and do not perceive rural problems to be part of a broader national concern. Thus, metropolitan residents believe that people in rural areas should fix their own problems. While most rural residents have

a good understanding of the complex causes of rural problems, few urban and suburban residents have any context for the current situations facing rural America.

After the first phase of research, the FrameWorks Institute recommended that effective communications for building support for rural policies needs to incorporate the following:

- connect urban and rural residents by conveying mutual well-being, a shared fate;
- tell causal stories that characterize rural areas and small towns as systems that work well unless outside forces break the systems;
- characterize rural people as capable, responsible, and able to effect change, not as charity cases;
- emphasize solutions; and
- place responsibility for fixing the problem with government and society, not individuals.

Though the Frameworks team was confident in the general direction of the recommendations based upon the first phase of research, the team felt a need for further testing to translate the general direction into specific approaches. To refine the frames prior to quantitative testing, focus group participants reacted to three fictional editorials designed to build support for rural policies. One editorial was developed to reflect the best of the existing dominant frame for rural policies – a Rural Disparities Frame. The other two editorials were written to reflect recommendations from the first phase of research. The full text of all three editorials appears in the appendix:

- “Rural America Falling Behind” was developed to reflect the best of the rural disparities frame that is dominant in the existing rural policy discourse.
- “Planning for Future Prosperity” presents rural policies through the lens of the national economy.
- “Strengthening Communities” discusses rural policies through the lens of community needs and the interconnectedness of communities.

All three editorials featured economic policies to eliminate potential response bias due to differing perceptions of issue categories. The two experimental reframes were designed to overcome several of the barriers identified in earlier phases of research. Before reading each editorial, focus group respondents were engaged in a conversation to develop a mindset conducive to the frame being tested. Respondents’ perceptions of the issues and the communications dynamics of the frames are analyzed in this report.

The research indicates that the Rural Disparities Frame creates a competitive ‘us versus them’ mindset. Urban residents come to believe that they are being asked to support yet another charity case. Rural residents argue that their tax dollars are subsidizing urban areas. The frame is empowering for rural residents, but it widens the divide between urban and rural residents.

Across geographies, the National Economy Frame mobilizes focus group participants' concerns about the country's economic problems. However, the nation's economic problems are viewed as so severe that the task seems overwhelming. Furthermore, since urban and suburban residents know few stories about the causes of economic problems in rural areas, it is difficult for them to transfer their high level of concern about the national economy to the specific solutions needed in rural economies.

Finally, the community frame effectively connects the interests of urban, suburban and rural residents. It causes people in metropolitan areas to understand why they should care about rural America. Furthermore, the highlighted success story conveys that positive change can happen and that rural people are capable. However, the success story inadvertently suggests that communities can make these changes alone, implying that there is little need for government solutions.

In sum, this research confirms the conclusions of the first phase of research and provides specific direction about the nuances in language that will build or undermine communications on rural American issues.

## **The Rural Disparities Frame**

Rural areas are peaceful and community-oriented, but they frequently lack opportunity, according to focus group participants. They believe that urban and rural areas face many of the same problems, though problems may be more severe in urban areas and resources to address the problems may be lacking in rural areas. While all focus group participants agree that rural areas are disappearing, they disagree about the causes. Urban and suburban residents assert that rural areas are disappearing in the face of the dramatic growth of cities. Rural residents, however, remember when their local economies were functioning well, and point to the negative consequences of big businesses buying out rural areas.

The Rural Disparities Frame, which positions rural areas as falling behind the rest of the country, causes people across regions to feel that they are in competition for resources with people in other regions. Both urban and rural residents believe their tax dollars are unfairly distributed to other areas. In this frame, urban residents see rural people as charity cases, while rural people believe urban areas have undue political influence and clout. This causes urban residents to assert that rural people need to fix their own problems, and it causes rural residents to feel empowered to take their tax dollars back.

Suburban focus group respondents had a different reaction to this frame because, prior to reading this editorial, they had already discussed an editorial featuring interconnectedness. Therefore, they brought an interconnected mindset to this new information and could then prioritize policies for rural areas.

### Issue context

Urban, suburban, and rural residents all share positive images of rural areas as serene, close-knit, and safe. When asked for the images that come to mind when they think of rural areas, focus group participants respond with quality-of-life issues. "A better way to live," explained a rural woman. A rural man stated, "kind of laid-back, not the hustle and bustle of the city." "It just seems so peaceful, so low-key," explained a city woman. "People don't seem to be rushing from place to place and they all seem to know each other and help each other." Safety and trust are commonly evoked images. "Someplace you can go to sleep at night and don't have to lock your doors, sleep with a loaded gun underneath your pillow," remarked a rural man. A city man added, "It reminds me of Mayberry." "You trust your neighbors," a rural man stated.

However, not all of the images are positive. Rural areas frequently suffer from a lack of opportunity, focus group participants assert. In describing his personal experience volunteering in a rural area, a city man explained, "They had no education. They have one schoolhouse and when the coal mines left they had no jobs. It was very rural, dirt roads, no infrastructure to get any -- big business wouldn't go there because there is no way to get there."

Urban and rural areas face many of the same problems, according to focus group participants from all geographies. However, participants disagree as to whether the problems are more severe in urban or rural areas, though most tend to believe that urban problems are more severe. "You know sometimes you think of places like Iraq and Chicago," explained a city man. "You don't know when a bullet is going to hit you or not." Others, however, believe scarce resources to solve problems can make this situation more difficult in rural America. "I think they face the same problems we do only, as I mentioned earlier, they may be more grave in a small-town because you have less opportunity to solve that particular problem," stated a city man. Another city man suggested that rural areas have a resource that is frequently lacking in urban areas: "I think they have a better sense of community in a rural area and are able to help each other out."

Focus group participants note that rural areas are disappearing. According to city and suburban residents, rural areas are disappearing in the face of the dramatic growth of urban areas. "I think one of the problems that rural areas face is the urbanization of rural areas, the creeping of the city," stated a city man. "Very soon it will be Chicago to Milwaukee. There won't be anything other than the next town," stated a suburban man.

Rural residents have a different assessment of the cause of disappearing rural areas. Some remember the way it used to be – when the local economy was functioning well. "The little towns were self-sufficient," remarked a rural man. "They had everything they needed right there." Another explained the transition: "First you lost the dairy; then he lost the bakery. Then he lost the feed mill. Then he lost. It's just gone, gone, gone, gone."

Rural residents assert that big business is buying out rural America and state legislators are allowing it to happen. "Our legislators are letting them do it," a rural man complained. "If he owns a rural farm of 500 acres or whatever, and the governor says, 'we need that for something,' they just come in with power of eminent domain and take it and say 'here's what we're going to give you for your property, what we think it's worth. Now git.'" "They're not standing up for themselves and for their communities. Money talks," argued a rural woman.

Fundamentally, rural residents do not feel that they have power to enact change. "In a rural area you don't feel as empowered," a rural woman remarked. "It's like somebody out there has a magic wand and it's their job to make jobs and create jobs... we have to empower ourselves to take those risks and there has to be programs and incentives for the little guy to get going."

### **Framing Effects**

"Rural America Falling Behind" was developed to reflect the best of the rural disparities frame that is dominant in the existing discourse among rural policy advocates. It positions rural people as hard-working and facing the same problems as people in the rest of the country, but as falling behind people in urban and suburban areas. It includes a responsible planning message that calls for a revitalization of rural America through economic policies that will provide opportunities for all regions.

This editorial sparked a very different dialogue in each of the three focus groups. The differences are most likely due to the influence of two factors. First, as noted above, rural respondents hold very different perceptions about the causes of the problems facing rural America. Therefore, they are more likely to rely upon the causal stories they already know to fill in the knowledge gaps in this editorial. Second, response differences between the urban and suburban groups are very likely influenced by the order in which the articles were presented. Both of these factors are discussed in more detail below.

**The Rural Disparities Frame creates conflict between urban and rural residents by implying that urban and rural areas are in competition with each other for resources. After reading this editorial, urban residents see rural people as asking for charity, while rural people become convinced that their tax dollars are being siphoned off to urban areas. The frame empowers rural residents to take action, but it does so by pitting them against urban residents. Suburban residents expressed a different reaction to this frame because the order of presentation of the editorials was different in the suburban focus group. Prior to reading this editorial, suburban residents had already been exposed to an editorial about the shared fate of urban, suburban, and rural areas. Therefore, they could immediately bring an interconnected mindset to this new information.**

This framing approach had negative consequences among focus group participants who reside in the city of Chicago. After reading it, several city residents came to believe that they are in competition with rural areas for scarce resources and that they are expected to

financially support rural areas. "I'm not concerned with rural America," argued a city man. "I'm really concerned with what is happening around me and my children and other families in the area. It just doesn't make sense that I should have to pay for them, too. And to me that is what this is asking us to do." This approach positions rural areas as a charity case, similar to poor people in third world countries. "Like when the kids, you know how you adopt them and send \$10 every month or something for a pair of shoes or something like that. We're paying a price for that," a city woman described when trying to convey how all of America pays the price to prevent a child from going hungry in rural America.

When asked why they should care about rural areas, city residents could suggest few reasons. "I see rural areas as vacation spots for me," stated a city man. Others see the negative consequences on urban residents' quality of life if rural areas continue to decline. "They are going to come into the city," suggested a city woman. "And whatever problems that we have are just going to escalate because we are going to have all the small towns coming in."

After reading this editorial, city residents strongly felt that the problems facing rural areas are not their concern. It is up to rural areas to solve their own problems. "What are the rural Americans doing to solve their own problems?" asked a city man. "Help should begin with yourself," argued a city man. "If you don't like your lot somewhere in Indiana, then move to Indianapolis."

Furthermore, city residents suggested that responsibility should lie with representatives of rural areas. "The state lawmakers in each of those states, the rural areas, need to get more involved with the community's needs and start voting for laws and pushing more things in Congress, whatever they need to do to help their own people," recommended a city woman. "I thought about the governor," a city man suggested. "I was thinking what does the governor focus on? Does the governor totally focus on the urban areas? Does he not consider the rural areas when it comes to funding and things like that? Rural areas are basically a part of the state and I think it is pretty much up to the state government."

Even those who wanted to help rural areas after reading this article spoke out of a sense of moral justice, not mutual fate. "These are future people in America, these are our future adults," described a city woman. "What are they going to be doing if they don't have any medical care or learning or teaching or school, or morals or values or whatever they're supposed to be learning as children?"

Like city residents, rural residents also came to believe that they are in competition with others for scarce resources after reading this piece. Rural residents saw this editorial as advocating that rural areas should keep more control of their own resources. "That's where we are losing out," described a rural man. "They're taking a lot of the funding that should be kept here. It is made here. It should be kept here...They're sending it up north and down south." In describing disparities in educational funding based on property taxes, a rural woman explained, "Well who owns the property? Farmers own the property. The rural people own, so that farmer is paying for them to go to school." "It's

like the old saying, charity starts at home," stated a rural man. "Deal with your home first."

This article pits rural residents against residents of Chicago. "Because everything that we buy is priced for the people living in Chicago," complained a rural man. "The cars that we buy, the food that we buy, the electricity that we buy -- everything that we buy is priced for someone making 28% higher."

The solution, as rural residents see it, is to get involved. "The solution is to hold these people accountable where our money and where our stuff is going," argued a rural man. "That's what's wrong with America," remarked a rural man. "That's why I said there are two things. There is the government and there is us... They would not survive without we the people." Yet, rural residents continue to feel that rural areas have little clout. "But we have no political voice," worried a rural man. "We don't have enough money to go to Congress and to lobby to get something done here in Vermilion County," stated another.

The dialogue among suburban residents was very different. When asked to summarize the intent of the article, a suburban woman suggested, "We need to recognize the extent of what is happening with rural America on the rest of America." They passionately spoke of the interconnectedness of all people. "You've got to face the fact that it is all one world, and we're ultimately responsible for each other," stated a suburban man. "And if you don't start believing that, it's going to bite us in the ass." "It's going to affect you eventually down the road," stated a suburban man. "If there are no jobs in rural America, that all the people from rural America are going to come into Chicago and are going to take your job," stated a suburban woman. Some expressed their personal motivation to act. "If there is a child that is hungry and a family that is without work, it is affecting me and it is affecting everyone else here. It could be his relative. It can be my relative. What am I going to do about it?" asked a suburban woman.

## **The National Economy Frame**

Across regions, focus group participants are deeply concerned about the state of the national economy. They see fundamental societal weaknesses at the core of the nation's economic problems: corporate greed and corruption, overly high expectations in society, American generosity to the rest of the world, and global competition for a better quality of life.

The National Economy Frame, which discusses rural policies through the lens of the national economy, effectively connects with focus group participants' economic concerns. They are interested in the topic and passionate about wanting to fix it. However, the problems facing the economy seem so severe that focus group participants become quickly overwhelmed by the task of fixing the economy. Furthermore, because the economy is weak throughout the country, and because few focus group participants already understand rural economies, this frame does not build a strong enough case for rural policies. Finally, participants are skeptical about government's ability to effectively address the nation's economic woes.

## Issue Context

Urban, suburban, and rural residents agree that the national economy is in poor shape. They see myriad problems: high prices, low wages, plant closings, outsourcing, the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the cost of the Iraq war, high taxes, and a lack of national leadership on the economy. For many focus group participants, the impact of the poor economy is very personal and very real. In describing skyrocketing prices, a rural woman stated in desperation, "There is nothing to put a stop on it. Milk went up, gas is out of control. I mean I have three kids at home. I can't afford to buy milk. I do, but at the price of gas and milk, it's like this week I'm going to have gas. This week I'm going to have groceries. It's a scary thing."

They hear on the news that economic indicators are improving, but the indicators do not match their personal experience. "You can't reconcile the figures that are released with the opinion of all of us around the table," stated a Chicago man. "We see people that are unemployed more than we'd like, but unemployment is down around 5%." Some suggest that the indicators do not tell the full story. "Unemployment may be 5%, but what kind of jobs have people gotten?" asked a Chicago woman. "I mean you have an engineer who may be flipping burgers."

Corporate greed and corruption are part of the problem, focus group participants assert. A suburban woman insisted that we hold "the CEOs accountable for what they're doing. Look at Enron, WorldCom, Tyco. I mean that's despicable." In addition to the corruption they see reported on the nightly news, focus group participants are just as upset about the greed that causes a corporation to close an American factory and re-open it in a country with cheaper labor. "They're closing all of our companies and taking them overseas," a rural woman explained, "and they are paying people pennies on the dollar to do the jobs, and they turn around and sell [the products] back to the United States like they're made here in America." "They are killing our families," added a rural woman.

In addition to corporate greed, some suggest that the nation's economic concerns are due in part to the average American becoming spoiled. "We are a bunch of whiners," argued a rural man. "Look back at your grandparents' age. They didn't have any of this crap." "These kids want everything, instant gratification," argued a rural man. "They don't want to have to work what it has taken him 30, 40 years to get. They want to start out with that, and it don't work that way. That's what has got the economy messed up."

Others, particularly residents of rural areas, insist that American generosity is the problem. "We should take instead of give," stated a rural man. "The United States, that's all we do. We give, give, give. We ought to start taking." Referring specifically to American military action, a rural man argued, "We are the policeman for the whole world. We should stay at home and take care of our own instead of trying to take care of everybody else." A rural woman added, "We have people that are homeless. We have people who can't afford things that they need... but we're going to rebuild their communities for them and just leave our people nothing."

There is a profound sense of loss, a sense that the structure of the economy has changed significantly and cannot return to the way it was. "Twenty years ago the world was a whole lot smaller and we are so accustomed to this incredible standard of living and now you have an entire world and more and more of the world competing for that same piece of pie," a suburban man stated. "So now the game is a little tougher. You can't go back to the way it was... it's never going to be that way. It's changing and we have to change."

### **Framing Effects**

"Planning for Future Prosperity" incorporates a responsible planning frame, and discusses rural policies through the lens of the national economy. It reflects an interconnected perspective, suggesting that one reason the national economy is weak is because rural industries are failing. It links political and corporate decisions to the consequences of those decisions in rural economies.

**This editorial connects with the economic frustrations and worries that focus group respondents feel. The editorial is able to spark a passionate conversation concerning the problems in the nation's economic infrastructure, and it is effective in creating mutual concern for action, though the role for rural areas in rebuilding the nation's economy could be more distinctive. At the same time, the problems facing the national economy are so severe, that focus group participants are overwhelmed by the task of fixing it. The solutions seem small or unrealistic, and they have little faith in government's ability to make a difference.**

Across geographies, focus group participants agree with the problems described in this editorial. They are particularly frustrated by the corporate greed that they see. "One thing that jumped out at me was the corporate shift to maximize immediate profits. That seems to be more and more the trend with CEOs going in there and doing all kinds of changes which result in massive layoffs," stated a city man. Rural residents are particularly likely to discuss the consequences of these actions on communities. "Corporate shift to maximize immediate profits," a rural woman relayed. "That tells me in order for a town to get businesses in their town, they give these tax incentives that you don't have to pay taxes for x number of years to come and locate. Then, as soon as that time is up and you have to start paying taxes, they are out-of-town, gone somewhere else." "They are not here for the long haul. They are here, hit and go," a rural man complained. "And they're not doing the local economies any good because they are here for such a short time." "They suck everything they can from the community and don't want to put nothing back in return to the community and then they just disappear," argued a rural man. "Our way of life has been threatened," summarized a city woman.

Problematically, the nation's economic problems are viewed as so severe that focus group participants find fixing the national economy to be an overwhelming task. "There are so many different reasons why our economy is going down the tubes," a suburban man complained. "It's not just this, you know. It's our way of life." "It's a shifting

economy from a manufacturing economy to a retail economy to a service economy and to a technology economy," explained a rural woman.

Because the problem feels so overwhelming, focus group participants find it difficult to absorb the solutions suggested in the editorial. "I don't think it really suggests anything," stated a city man. "I think it makes a statement. It doesn't suggest any way to solve it. How could it? An article this size couldn't tell very much."

Focus group participants find it difficult to believe that investing in independent entrepreneurial businesses could improve the economy. "I don't see it immediately turning back around with grants or what have you for the local, because you can't compete because of volume," explained a rural man. "The local Joe Blow down here selling hardware, nails and hammers, is not going to be able to give it at what Lowes and Wal-Mart is going to do it because he is not buying it in volume."

While they like the idea of developing new industries, focus group respondents worry that this approach is not realistic. "Hansel and Gretel," suggested a suburban man. "It sounds good; it's kind of fairytale. Let's see it work. I mean this is just -- it's a statement and it's been tried and I can't believe, really point or recall any real success stories of this plan." In fact, some point to the dotcom bust as proof that there are risks in trying to develop new industries. "They built about 30 buildings just south of the Northwestern campus and they're all into high-tech," explained a suburban woman. "They brought in all kinds of businesses, the dotcoms, everything, because that was going to be the new industry. Today there are 11 people in the buildings. That's it. They're all gone because, not that their ideas weren't good, but the bubble broke and that was the end of the end. Some of that planning was good; the idea was great as he says on paper. It was fantastic. In practicality it didn't work."

Importantly, the National Economy Frame, as written, does not adequately build a case for rural policy. Partially, this is due to the overwhelming nature of the problem – all areas are in trouble and the causes of the nation's economic woes are disparate. In addition, urban and suburban residents know few causal stories about the economy in rural areas. The disappearing family farmer is an old story. "The shrinking number of farmers is nothing new. That's been going on for 300 years," stated a city man. One of the few economic stories that city residents can tell about rural areas is the impact of national retail chains on the rural economy. "You usually see it related to a Wal-Mart," stated a city man. Another added that it "is marvelous to have these small little shops in a town for the town to prosper, but these big conglomerates come in and they just swallow everything up."

At the same time, most recognize that tough economic conditions can be even more painful in rural areas. "I think it's a lot tougher for a guy in a small town, a person in a small-town. If they lose their job, it's a heck of a lot more difficult for them to find another one," stated a city man.

Finally, while most focus group respondents want government to take some action to improve the economy, several are skeptical that government will be able to achieve this goal. "I don't think it is the government's role," stated a city man. "I think that it's primarily a function of business, maybe with government help to promote business, to do the things that this article suggests. But the government has proven over the years that they don't know how to spend money." Looking to Washington, DC for solutions is ineffective, they assert, because politicians do not represent people. "The problem is, in my opinion, the wheel is so corrupt, once you get in there it is all special interest money," stated a rural man.

## **The Community Frame**

Chicago area residents' images of the rest of the state are frequently vague. The northwest corner of the state is the "apple picking area" while central Illinois is "cornfields and college." Several rural focus group participants have harsh perceptions of Danville – perceptions that frequently mirror their images of urban Chicago. Many rural focus group participants resent Chicago, and worry that Chicago is shipping all of the city's problems downstate. Rural residents see worsening conditions in their own communities, but feel unable to do anything about those conditions.

The Community Frame, which discusses rural policies through the lens of community needs and community action, communicates a vivid, responsible planning message. The highlighted success story causes people to believe that positive change can happen. However, the role of government may be too subtle in this example, leading many to believe that communities should pull themselves up without government help. In addition, the chain reaction metaphor helps urban and suburban focus group participants to understand the ways in which their fate is tied to rural areas. Rural residents, however, continue to believe that they are too small to have any effect on the rest of the state.

## **Issue Context**

City residents' impressions of the State of Illinois are dominated by images of Chicago. They think of "the Sears Tower," "land of opportunity," "vibrant," and "diversity." One city man remarked that Chicago "is all I know about Illinois. I've never thought about downstate or anything like that, just Chicago." In describing the state's strengths, one city man replied, "I think its strength is Chicago. Just Chicago itself."

Suburban residents think of Illinois as a moderate state, a cross-section of mid-America. It is diverse ethnically and geographically. They have clear, distinct images of Chicago, but vague images of downstate. When they think of Chicago, suburban residents have mostly positive images: commerce and industry, Lake Michigan, the financial district, and world-class architecture. But they also think of it as overcrowded and believe the city faces a number of problems: education, crime, and parking. "There is really no area in which Chicago does not have a problem," remarked a suburban man.

When prompted, city and suburban residents are able to voice views about other parts of the state. The northwest corner of the state is the "apple picking area." They think of Rockford, DeKalb College, cornfields, and an area that is struggling economically. "There are no jobs in Rockford and there are so many people, they have nowhere to live because they can't get a job," complained a suburban man. The central part of the state is "cornfields and college." Their view of rural Illinois seems dominated by the view they see from the interstate. When discussing trips through rural Illinois, rest stops and the interstate are frequent topics of conversation among city residents. "Illinois just does not have the number of rest stops that the other states have," stated a city woman.

Rural residents express the most negative descriptions of the state of Illinois. In trying to describe Illinois as a person, rural residents say "dry," "dead," "overrun," "over the hill," and "like an old lady withering away."

Several rural focus group participants have highly-developed, negative images of Chicago such as "violence," and "congestion." They say they do not distinguish between urban and suburban Chicago. "Anything north of Kankakee is pretty much Chicago," a rural man indicated. One recommended that citizens should "load it off into the lake." Clearly, the dominant negative image is of crime and violence. "I used to drive a semi up there," explained a rural man. "You have to lock up everything. They'd steal the hubcaps off your semi." However, some also hold positive perceptions of the variety of activities available in the city: "there is a lot of stuff to do," "entertainment," and "I love to eat and that is Chicago."

Focus group participants from rural Illinois also have harsh assessments of their own area. "Danville is like the armpit of Illinois," complained a rural man. "There is nothing here. I went to Nam in '66 and when I came back '68 it was like a ghost town. Main Street was like a ghost town. Everything had started moving out." They are angry, frustrated, and embarrassed by their local town. "Why do you want to do it in Danville when there is nothing here to do?" argued a rural man. "You go downtown, they want to charge you to park in a parking space, outrageous amounts of money." "There are so many vacant buildings around here," a rural man worried. "They tear them down and turn them into a parking lot or just an empty lot. It's terrible. It wasn't that way 40 years ago."

Rural residents look at Danville and see several of the same urban images they ascribe to Chicago. In fact, several worry that Danville is becoming a "little Chicago." "Danville is being overrun," a rural woman complained. "The Chicago people are coming down here. You've got drugs; you've got shootings; you've got robberies; you've got prostitution." They believe that Chicago's negative element is moving downstate, and is being encouraged to do so. "I saw this sign and could not believe it," a rural man explained. "Up there off the tollway, I-94, there is a sign that says 'come to Danville, it's a fine community.'" A rural woman added, "But the projects that they tore down in Chicago, they purposely relocated them here." "They are getting paid to move here and they are paying them to stay here," a rural man stated. A rural woman surmised, "Evidently we wasn't crappy enough so they had to help us out."

Focus group participants from rural Illinois express a significant level of resentment toward Chicago, believing that Chicago gets all the state's attention and revenue. They report that educational funding "is all going north." "The kid sitting in my classroom," remarked a rural school teacher, "I think it is about \$4200 per student per year. Take my same classroom north of I-80, it's about \$7,800. Same 50 kids. Same year. They've got the same electricity costs, the same gas costs, the same uniforms. They've got all the exact same expenses but about \$3000 more per kid per year. Multiply that by the last 50 years. Our kids are getting cheated big-time downstate."

### **Framing Effects**

"Strengthening Communities" discusses rural policies through the lens of community needs. The editorial was designed to reflect interconnectedness, meaning that the health of one community can affect the rest of its region and state through the ripple effect of that community's economic strength or weakness. It calls upon legislators to plan responsibly for the future of communities, and uses a specific example to demonstrate that communities can improve their economic conditions and have an impact on a region.

**There are several components of the "Strengthening Communities" editorial that are effective. First, the specific example of a community that was able to turn itself around reminds people of other similar situations they have heard about or experienced in the past. For many people, this example suggests an appropriate balance between individual initiative and government assistance. However, for many others, this example is successful because the community did not rely upon government help, thereby inadvertently undermining support for governmental approaches. Community action fits well with most people's understanding of the character of rural communities, which is beneficial, but to lead to government policies, the frame may need a more direct description of the role for government. Finally, the chain reaction metaphor seems to be an effective way to help people understand the connections between the economies of different areas.**

The responsible planning message comes through most strongly in this editorial. City residents see this article as being about "shortsighted solutions," and "too much reliance on a particular company." "To me the article is about the importance of having foresight, especially with your civic leaders and getting together a plan before it is too late," a suburban man shared.

The example of a specific town that took action successfully is a powerful component in this editorial. That example makes the article about "hope," "self initiative," "community involvement," and "community." "It looks like they settled the problem themselves with government help, rather than trying to have government solve the problem," remarked a city man. "But that's what you get from community," added a city man. "I would imagine that community is close knit." "The town itself took the initiative and put together a plan to help itself," stated a suburban woman.

The example reminds focus group participants of other similar situations – both successful and unsuccessful. Rural residents shared their experiences with a community's over-reliance on one industry. "Just like Danville put all their [emphasis on] major industry, General Motors," stated a rural woman. "So when you put all your eggs in one basket, when you're a one horse town driven by one sector of the economy, you are going to lose because once it changes, you're not changing with it." A suburban man shared a success story: "the city of Highland Park was so hungry for property taxes they brought in Kmart. They brought in several industries that did nothing but compete against the small businesses in town and what ended up happening was Kmart didn't make any money in Highland Park for 11 years. But during that time they put 53 businesses out of business. And it is only in the last five years that they finally woke up that they were destroying themselves and they've built the downtown Highland Park. And now it is a very viable ongoing area again."

However, rural residents are skeptical that Danville would be able to replicate the actions of the people of Circleville. "Well, you read in the paper we got a lot of task forces around here and it seems like they just run out of steam," a rural man reported.

The chain reaction metaphor is vivid, but it is easier for most people to see the negative relationship between regions rather than the positive. "One business goes out of business, it affects the families that are involved in the business, the employees," remarked a city man. "The individual families get affected. Their livelihood gets affected and I think it just spreads onto the kids, and the community." When asked how a good economy in one part of the state can be felt in other parts of the state, a suburban woman responded, "if they don't have to take welfare or get special tax relief and stuff like that, then they are not a drain off the rest of the state's economy." Importantly, residents of rural areas are not sure that any changes in their part of the state would affect other communities. "If it was Chicago," a rural woman explained, "it probably would affect the whole state. But if it was Danville, I don't think it would." Another rural woman added, "We are too little. We are nothing."

## **Framing Effects on Policy Understanding**

**Since city residents were exposed to the Community Frame just prior to the policy conversation, the Community Frame was able to have the most influence on their thinking about policies. Suburban residents spoke eloquently of interdependence early in their group discussion, and translated that thinking to the rural disparities conversation. However, after being exposed to additional frames, suburban residents' interdependent thinking faded. Neither the Rural Disparities Frame nor the National Economy Frame supplanted the Community Frame among suburban participants. Instead, suburban participants' rationale for supporting rural policies was muddled by the end of the focus group. Finally, rural residents' reasons for supporting policies for rural America seemed largely unaffected by the frames. They were quite practical in their rationale for supporting certain policies. However, the focus group conversation itself was empowering and caused rural residents to believe that they may be able to effect change.**

The Community Frame enhanced city residents' concerns about rural areas. While early in the conversation city residents felt they were in competition for resources with rural areas, after the Community Frame editorial, city residents could understand how their interests are connected to the interests of those in rural areas. "I think of chain reaction," explained a city woman. "I was aware of the rural but not really thinking about it. I pretty much agree with everybody here, but now in addition I'm thinking chain reaction. How does that affect the city? How does the city affect the world? And I think not so much rural versus city. I'm thinking more like how can we get together and affect each other in the best way?"

Since the urban focus group was exposed to the Community Frame just prior to the policy conversation, they were the group most likely to voice interdependence as a reason to support specific policies for rural areas. For example, in explaining their support for smart growth strategies, urban residents referred to connectedness. "It will actually sort of keep us connected, whereas what we're saying about how disconnected we are from the rural areas and how it will affect us in the city," explained a city man. Similarly, when debating the value of planning economic development that is appropriate for an area, focus group participants frequently referred to maintaining the nature of rural communities. "It supports the character of the community," stated a city woman. "Keeping the nature of rural America," added a city man. "You don't have these massive structures in the middle of a cornfield." The best reason to support medical school scholarships for those who agree to serve in rural areas is for "opportunity" for "both the individual and the community."

At the end of the two-hour discussion, there were no consistent messages among suburban focus group respondents in support of policies for rural America. The interdependent thinking they were able to express so eloquently early in the discussion (suburban residents were exposed to the community frame first) was not able to hold after being exposed to two additional frames. Clearly, there was an order effect. By the time suburban residents discussed specific policies at the end of the group, their support for policies represented a range of reasons rather than one overarching message. For example, the reason to address environmental problems is because "water is one of the most important things to our life" (suburban man). Medical school scholarships are important because "that way [graduates] have somewhere to go. Keep them in Chicago and not going out to other states" (suburban woman). While they understood the need for better paying jobs, they did not learn a rationale for why rural areas would need certain kinds of jobs. "I think rural Illinois needs jobs. I don't care if it is the butcher's store or it is a Mitsubishi plant or whatever it is, I don't care. Illinois needs to have more business coming in and less going out," argued a suburban man.

Rural people tend to rely upon practicalities and needs to express their support for rural policies. Their reasons for supporting medical school scholarships are practical: "because we need some damn good doctors" (rural woman). Similarly, the reason to support increasing minimum wage rates is "so we can live" (rural woman). The best reason for rural people to support planned economic development is to fill a need. "Economic

development has to hinge on whether there is a need for the product or service," a rural woman stated.

In addition, rural residents believe rural America has a unique moral contribution to bring to the rest of the country. "The best reason to support [planned economic development] is because rural America gives the entire country its moral compass. And if you lose rural America, the United States will never be the same," a rural man argued. They support maintaining the stability of agriculture in Illinois because, according to one rural man, "the family farmer has always been more community driven versus profit driven such as the corporate farmer. He cares about what he's doing for the most part. The corporate farmer is just a profit taker."

Though rural residents were least likely to adopt one of the experimental frames, the conversation had a dramatic impact on their perspectives. As noted earlier in this report, they tend to feel ignored. The focus group conversation was empowering. "I'm just glad somebody cared enough to listen to us, to rural America," a rural man remarked. "I can't make a difference. She can't make a difference. He can't make a difference, but everybody together maybe could," summarized a rural woman.

## Conclusions

- Conveying a sense of interdependence, of mutual fate, is critically important to building support for rural policies. An overt link between urban and rural (as in the Community Frame) seems more effective than joining urban and rural interests in one system (as in the National Economy Frame).
- Both urban and rural residents believe that their tax dollars are benefiting those in other geographical areas. Therefore, it is easy to create an inadvertent competition for scarce resources between these groups. An effective conversation needs to avoid implying that urban areas should subsidize rural areas.
- The national economy, while a very powerful issue, needs to be communicated cautiously. People can become quickly overwhelmed by the scope of the problem and believe that no solutions are possible.
- Urban and suburban residents know few causal stories for the problems affecting rural America. Knowledge of causal stories helps people understand that the problems can be addressed.
- Specific examples of success stories help to overcome focus group respondents' cynicism that government is unable to make progress on major social issues. Effective examples will need to balance the role of government with the role of rural actors in effecting change.
- Rural residents do not need to be convinced that their policies are important. Instead, they need to feel that their actions are capable of making a difference.

## Appendix

### Focus Group Guide

#### I) Introduction

- A) Standard intro – audio taping, talk one at a time, not vested, etc.
- B) Let's go around and introduce ourselves: say your name, a bit about yourself, how you are involved in the community.

#### ROTATE FRAMES ACROSS GROUPS

#### II) Creating Rural-Urban Connections

- A) Tell me, what characterizes Illinois?
  - 1) Is it a good place to live and raise a family? Why?
  - 2) If you were going to describe IL as a person, what would you say?
  - 3) How does IL solve problems? If something threatened the state or a specific community, what would people typically do?
  - 4) What kind of shape is the state in?
  - 5) What are the state's strengths and weaknesses?
  - 6) What are the most serious problems?
  - 7) I'm handing out a map of Illinois/the Midwest. Let's talk in more detail about the state as a whole. What kind of associations do you have with different parts of the state? (This will be a bit freewheeling.)  
For each major region (Chicago, suburbs, NW, Central, far South):
    - (a) What images come to mind?
    - (b) What are its strengths and weaknesses?
    - (c) What problems does it face?
    - (d) What is being done to address those problems?
    - (e) Who is responsible for addressing the problems?
  - 8) What kinds of things would you like to see happen to improve conditions in the state?
  
- B) I'd like to get your reaction to an article that was written about issues facing communities. Ask:
  - 1) What's your reaction?
  - 2) In one sentence, what is this article about?
  - 3) What problem does it discuss?
  - 4) What are the solutions to that problem?
  - 5) And if those solutions do not happen, what are the consequences?
  - 6) Is there anything that confuses you in this article?

## **Strengthening Communities**

Every day state and local governments make decisions that affect our communities. We need to ask our elected officials, “Are your decisions keeping our communities livable and prosperous?”

Local governments have become so hungry for economic development that they have become short-sighted about the consequences of their decisions. In their desperation to attract manufacturing, communities allow low wage jobs to be created using tax credits and low interest loans. They then frequently became reliant on one industry. When the economic climate becomes more competitive, these communities can't compete and a chain reaction is set off throughout the region.

When a major industry closes its doors, the institutions of small-town and rural America - local banks and merchants, grocery stores, and family-owned hardware stores -- all become caught in a web of financial collapse. As one community weakens, the stress begins to be felt by the rest of the state and region.

But we can prevent these problems before the impact becomes too great. For example, ten years ago, residents of a rural town called Circleville put together a task force to understand what had happened to their town and put in place the changes that would repair the damage and restore their quality of life. With help from the state's economic development department, the town put together a plan that called for tax credits for small business owners who set up shop in town, and funding to bring broadband Internet to town so that those new businesses can compete globally. In addition, the planning group applied for a state-sponsored program that would provide tuition repayment for young people in the region who would return as teachers, doctors and dentists.

Not only has the town been able to re-establish a strong economy and a good quality of life, but the impact of the town's improved economy has been felt across the state.

**III) The National Economy**

- A) What kind of shape is the economy, do you think?
  - 1) Thinking about our economic system overall, do you think the system is generally working or is it broken? Why, what is broken?
  - 2) What is strong in our economic infrastructure and what is weak?
  - 3) What holds our economy back?
- B) What needs to be done to make our economy stronger?
  - 1) Listen for and probe: Is this about wanting the “old” economy back (manufacturing vs. service industries) or about not being prepared for the “new” economy (high tech, knowledge-based)?
  - 2) Listen for and probe: globalization.
- C) What do we need to do to transform this economy?
  
- D) I’d like to get your reaction to an article that was written about the economy.  
Ask:
  - 1) What’s your reaction?
  - 2) In one sentence, what is this article about?
  - 3) What problem does it discuss?
  - 4) What are the solutions to that problem?
  - 5) And if those solutions do not happen, what are the consequences?
  - 6) Is there anything that confuses you in this article?

## **Planning for Future Prosperity**

Future prosperity requires that we start thinking today about the industries we want to develop, the infrastructure we will need, and the investments society makes in today's workforce. But are we planning for the kind of future that ensures our children will be better off? Indicators of economic wellbeing suggest that the nation's economic engine is being stressed in ways that will impair the American standard of living for the long-term if we do not take steps to address it now.

A series of political and corporate choices over the past 25 years have damaged the nation's economic engine. Those bad choices include: providing massive subsidies to a shrinking number of farmers which does nothing to develop a competitive economy; tax policies that provide incentives to offshore companies and outsource jobs; and a corporate shift to maximize immediate profits, rather than a long-term vision centered on investing in people, communities, and infrastructure. The result is that the American standard of living is being threatened.

Take rural industries, for example. A variety of industries, from small town stores to manufacturing, are being closed at a rapid rate. The impact extends beyond rural communities. As one part of the economy begins to fail, the economic impact reverberates throughout the country. When people in rural communities become more desperate for jobs, wage rates will fall throughout a region. To keep the nation's economic engine running smoothly, we need to fix problems before the damage becomes too great.

We can get ahead of these problems by planning for the future. For example, rural mayors from all around the nation are gathering in Washington, DC this week to ask Congress: to invest in promising, emerging industries that will provide good jobs producing products and services that people everywhere will want to buy; and to provide grants to support independent, entrepreneurial businesses that provide most of the nation's economic growth.

**IV) Rural Places**

- A) What emotions come to mind when you think of rural areas?
- B) What makes rural areas special?
- C) What problems do rural areas face?
  - 1) How serious are the problems?
  - 2) What is being done to address them?
  - 3) Who is responsible for addressing these problems? (State, federal, individuals)
- D) When you look forward 100 years, will rural areas be different? In what ways?
  
- E) I'd like to get your reaction to an article that was written about rural areas. Ask:
  - 1) What's your reaction?
  - 2) In one sentence, what is this article about?
  - 3) What problem does it discuss?
  - 4) What are the solutions to that problem?
  - 5) And if those solutions do not happen, what are the consequences?
  - 6) Is there anything that confuses you in this article?

## **Rural America Falling Behind**

All Americans need good jobs so they can pay their bills, raise their kids, and plan for the future. But the sad facts are that if you live in a rural community, you are less likely to have a good paying job. Median family income in rural areas is 25 percent less than in metropolitan areas, and the poverty rate for rural communities is 28 percent higher.

Rural people pay their taxes just like everyone else. They work hard, help their neighbors, and support the national economy by providing energy, raw material and food. But rural people keep falling further behind their urban and suburban counterparts. You might not see that on the nightly news, but it is happening just the same.

Rural America's problems are urgent, severe, certain, and frequently mislabeled as entirely agricultural issues. Rural America faces the same problems as the rest of the country, persistent poverty, poor job opportunities, poor access to health care and health insurance, a lack of infrastructure development, and isolation. Surely we can do better. If a child is hungry and a family without work in rural America, all of America pays a price.

If the United States is to succeed, rural Americans need economic policies that help them compete nationally and internationally. If we want our small towns and rural counties to be able to carry their own weight, we must revitalize rural America. We need an economic plan that works for the whole country, including the 55 million of us who live in rural communities, and the 80 percent of American landscape that we represent. We can create real opportunities for rural people that include good jobs, home ownership, and a decent education. But what we have now is not working. And the status quo is no longer acceptable.

We need a responsible debate on rural America. If no one asks the hard questions then office holders, corporate leaders, and public institutions will avoid accountability on the conditions in rural America and what they will do to make things better.

## V) Policies

I'm going to hand out some ideas that have been suggested to address some issues. For each, tell me the best reason to support that idea.

- Institute regional smart-growth strategies that restrict major development to those areas with existing infrastructure, and protect rural areas from sprawl
- Plan economic development and targeted business incentives to bring good jobs that are appropriate for the area. For example: encourage the kind of small business development in rural areas that will provide jobs while not overdeveloping land or ruining small town character; encourage light manufacturing jobs within an easy commute for urban residents and encourage retail establishments in urban neighborhoods that have few stores
- Offer medical school scholarships to Illinois students who agree to practice for at least five years in underserved parts of the state, such as rural areas and inner city neighborhoods
- Act to ensure the stability of agriculture in Illinois, particularly family farmers, such as: providing assistance for family farmers to transition to organic farming which is more profitable for farmers; developing the biofuels industry which would provide a market for corn stalks and other agricultural by-products; or ending government subsidies to agribusiness, which undercuts family farmers
- Adjust required minimum wage rates for all parts of the state to take into account the cost of living in an area
- Address continuing environmental problems, including groundwater pollution from industrial farms and environmental degradation caused by mining and forestry
  - A) When you look across these policies, which do you think is most important for Illinois? How come?
  - B) Which do you think is most important for the nation as a whole? How come?
  - C) Which do you think is most important for the future? How come?

## VI) Wrap Up

Of all the things we talked about tonight, what do you most remember? What stands out? What would you most like to see happen?