

The Value of Small Towns: State Agency Helps Texas Keep Its Rural Assets

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Big cities may be the economic powerhouses of the state, but many things Texas is known for—from our friendly reputation to our vast natural resources—originate in the small towns of rural Texas.

In fact, small towns are an integral part of the state's economy. Their productive value comes from all areas of the state, spans multiple economic sectors, and is embodied in both tangible and intangible factors. For example, rural counties account for 78 percent of the market value of the state's agricultural products, which exceeded \$14 billion in 2002. In 2001, the food and fiber system made up a hefty ten percent (\$72.8 billion) of the Texas economy.

For all their contributions, small towns are sometimes challenged to remain viable in a quickly changing

world. To retain our valuable small towns, the Office of Rural Community Affairs (ORCA) makes the broad resources of state government more accessible to rural cities. The agency ensures a continuing focus on rural issues, monitors governmental actions affecting rural Texas, researches problems and recommends solutions, and is a coordinator and provider of rural-focused state and federal resources.

ORCA is a proud partner of small towns and is committed to helping rural Texans and rural cities achieve

their goals effectively and efficiently. Since it began operations in January 2002, the agency has worked to strengthen rural cities and assist them with community and economic development and health care by serving as the central source for rural programs, services, and activities, so that governmental resources are delivered efficiently and with the best possible results to the state's rural residents.

Community Development

The agency administers the non-entitlement portion of federal funds that come to Texas through the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program. Through grant programs and training assistance, the agency supports colonia infrastructure, disaster relief, community and economic development, and other efforts designed to improve quality of life in small towns. ORCA has awarded more than 1,232 grants of federal funds (totaling \$345,550,998) to 692 rural cities and counties to assist with community and economic development needs, benefiting 1,975,712 rural Texans. Of those rural Texans, 1,155,380 are persons of low-to-moderate income.

ORCA serves as the only source of state funds for disaster relief to repair public infrastructure. In response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the agency created a new specialized disaster relief grant and made available \$1 million in disaster relief funds to rural Texas cities and counties, providing shelter to storm victims.

Rural Health

As the Texas State Office of Rural Health, designated by the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration, the Rural Health Division at ORCA serves the health care needs and interests of rural Texas cities. ORCA offers numerous services and programs to

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benefit rural healthcare systems, including assistance for Critical Access Hospitals, EMS improvement efforts, health facility improvement, stipends and loans, workforce recruitment and retention initiatives, and other health care-related grants. Since its inception, the agency has assisted 572 rural cities in improving access to healthcare and improve healthcare facilities.

Following the hurricanes, ORCA's Rural Health staff members developed a new relief program for rural cities in which health care systems and facilities were stressed by the disaster. A total of \$420,000 in grants of federal funds for disaster recovery was awarded approximately six weeks after the release of the new grants. Recipients may use the funds to respond to unprecedented demands placed on health care systems following the recent storms.

Economic Development

Through instruments such as the Rural Viability Index and financial support such as business-related grant and loan programs, ORCA encourages rural cities to create local economic opportunity, diversity, and stability. ORCA is also dedicated to facilitating and providing access to existing resources and techniques that may be of use to rural Texans.

Since January 2002, the agency has created nearly 5,000 jobs in rural Texas and supported rural community and economic development needs to benefit 1,975,712 rural Texans, including 1,155,380 persons of low-to-moderate income.

Colonias

ORCA serves colonias throughout Texas, including cities located near the Texas-Mexico border and non-border colonias, by providing rural cities and counties with federal funds for a variety of projects designed to help colonias' residents improve their quality of life. In addition, ORCA provides funding for the operation of seven colonia Self-Help Centers. Since beginning operations, the agency has awarded 388 grants of federal funds (totaling \$127,771,317) to 167 cities, counties, and colonias along the Texas-Mexico border to address community and economic development needs. As a result, 885,335 rural Texans along the Texas-Mexico border have benefited from the agency's assistance. Of those rural Texans along the Texas-Mexico border, 535,322 are persons of low-to-moderate income.

ORCA's role in rural Texas offers a better chance for small towns to enjoy long-term viability and continue as contributors to the prosperity of the state. Home to 2.9 million people, rural Texas serves as a valuable asset by enhancing the economic strength and stability of the state, providing abundant natural resources, and contributing to a rich cultural identity that is distinctly Texan. The small towns of rural Texas are assets that should not be lost in the commotion of our fast-paced world.★

For more information on grants and services available to small towns and rural cities, visit the Office of Rural Community Affairs online at www.orca.state.tx.us.