

**Submitted testimony of  
JoAnne H. Bush  
Mayor, City of Lake Village, Arkansas**

**Senate Committee of Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry  
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Chairman Lincoln, Ranking Member Chambliss, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for having me testify before you today. My name is JoAnne Bush, and I am the Mayor of Lake Village, Arkansas. I am pleased to present this testimony to the Senate Committee of Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, not only because this committee oversees so many important issues for Arkansas, but also because Arkansas's senior senator, Blanche Lincoln, is chairman of this important committee. Chairman Lincoln has proven time and again to be a tried and true advocate for rural Arkansas.

Lake Village is a rural community of 2,823 people located in extreme southeastern Arkansas. I am pleased to be here today to discuss USDA Rural Development programs and the benefits they provide to rural communities.

I am here today not as an expert on the technicalities of the Rural Development programs, but as someone who can provide a perspective on what it is like for a Mayor of a rural community to utilize these programs and explain the positive impact that they have on rural America. I have worked for the city of Lake Village for 38 years. I served as a city clerk for 18 years, and now I'm in my 20<sup>th</sup> year as Mayor. I am a member of the Arkansas Municipal League and served as its President in 2009.

**Rural Development is Vital to Rural Communities**

Arkansas is a primarily rural state. Approximately 500 cities make up Arkansas, and 70 percent of those are considered rural. Therefore, communities like these, and Lake Village, rely on USDA's Rural Development Programs. From water and wastewater

systems to hospitals and low-income housing, Rural Development programs have changed the face of rural Arkansas and have allowed our small cities to thrive.

In Lake Village, we have benefited from the Rural Development programs over the years and currently have a number of developing projects.

The program that Lake Village has found most helpful is the Community Facilities program. This is one of the most versatile programs available to rural communities such as Lake Village. The program assists communities in a number of areas, from helping a city provide a child care center to helping police and fire departments obtain much needed equipment. In recent years, Lake Village has utilized the Community Facilities to obtain new police cars for our police department and is currently working with USDA to obtain funding to construct a new farmers' market, which will create employment opportunities and increase access to healthy, local foods.

Right now, I am working with Rural Development to fund the renovation of a historic building located on Main Street to house our new city hall. A newly renovated City Hall means that downtown development can begin in earnest. Like many small communities, Lake Village's downtown was once a thriving social center, and the City of Lake Village expects that renovation of this historic structure will bring new businesses to the downtown area and help people rediscover the social fabric that is so engrained in small town living. In fact, the domino-effect of economic development has already started. As a result of the investment to renovate a new city hall, local investors have already been approached about renovating other downtown buildings.

I have learned through this experience it is very difficult to find federal funding for a project such as this one. For a small community like mine with a limited budget, we worked diligently to pull together several funding sources to begin construction on the new city hall. This type of innovative thinking is imperative for rural communities to survive, and Rural Development knows and understands that partnerships are what makes projects work.

For a small town mayor with infrastructure and community needs, I have to lean on my local Rural Development area office in Monticello, Arkansas for support and assistance. I have to say that they have been tremendous with their help, and I would like to acknowledge their work over the years that I have been working with them.

I cannot tell you how important it is for rural communities to have access to USDA staff who understand the unique issues facing our towns. Mayors of small towns like Lake Village don't have grant writers and often don't have the ability to seek outside resources to support grant and loan packaging. However, USDA staff understand that small town mayors are working their hardest to increase the quality of life for their citizens and support us throughout the process. I am thrilled to have access to personnel as dedicated as those in Monticello as well as the USDA State Office in Little Rock.

### **Challenges For Rural Communities**

It's no secret that small, rural communities have limited resources across the board. One particular challenge for rural communities, particularly in Arkansas, is the lack of broadband for rural citizens. Without this basic public infrastructure, rural communities are unable to compete in this ever-growing global economy, and we are left at a disadvantage for increased educational opportunities. USDA Rural Development sees and understands this challenge, and must continue to assist communities such as Lake Village build this critical infrastructure.

### **Review of Rural Development Programs**

My experience as a small town mayor and as past president of the Arkansas Municipal League, Rural Development programs work, and they work at the local, state and federal level. While public infrastructure is important, equally important is technical assistance to rural communities. Lake Village has been fortunate enough to participate in Winrock International's Nonprofit Improvement Program, which is funded by USDA's Rural Community Development Initiative. This program has proven extremely helpful to local leaders like me. This program allows Winrock to provide capacity building technical

assistance to small municipalities and nonprofit organizations. Winrock's assistance and continued partnership has given our community access to grant reviewers and classroom instruction and, most importantly, have led to introductions with individuals with the ability to assist us in all areas of economic and community development. This type of technical assistance program is effective, and we are thrilled USDA Rural Development funds this important program in Arkansas.

Chairman Lincoln, Ranking Member Chambliss, distinguished members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak today, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.