

REMARKS BEFORE THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON CONSUMER INTERESTS

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Would you know how to obtain information on airline safety records, on nutrition labeling, on complaining about the programming on your local TV station?

The Federal government offers a tremendous variety of services of use to the consumer. However, people often do not know what is available and who to contact. Federal Information Centers offer that assistance. They can direct you to the appropriate office.

It has often been said that the lasting value of an education is not in learning all the answers -- that of course is impossible -- but that the lasting value is in learning where to go to get the answers when you need them. This is a major goal of consumer education.

Without getting into a discussion of the adequacy of Federal services, we certainly can agree that the Federal government does offer a tremendous range of services and has a wealth of information that can be of use to the average consumer. However, these services are dispersed through more than 120 different agencies, are provided by 2.5 million Federal employees, scattered throughout the country in any one of nearly 10,000 different Federal buildings. There is a book called the Government Organization Manual which in 600 pages of very small print attempts to define the activities of the Federal government. It can barely scratch the surface. How then can the average consumer be expected to know what assistance is available from the Federal government and where to go to get it?

A 1966 Columbia University School of Social Work Study very precisely defined the problem which plagues citizen-government communications: "Specialization, dispersion of authority and legislative inconsistency make service bureaucracies very complex; the individual in need of service can find his way through the maze only with the help of generally unavailable expert guidance."¹

For the Federal government, the Federal Information Centers (FIC) offer that expert guidance.

¹Alfred J. Kahn, Lawrence Grossman, Jean Bandler, Felicia Clark, Florence Galkin, and Kent Greenawalt, Neighborhood Information Centers: A Study and Some Proposals. New York: Columbia University School of Social Work, 1966.

Their purpose is simple. Located throughout the country, they provide citizens a place where they can turn when they have a problem or question and don't know where in the government to go for the answer. FIC's are a clearinghouse for government questions. Their job, if they cannot answer the question themselves, is to direct people to the agency and the office within that agency which can help. Centers provide "information on information." Their job is to do whatever research and often make many calls themselves in order to pinpoint the source of assistance.

They relieve the average citizen of the frustration of being referred from office to office before getting an answer to his question.

The Centers are now located in 37 major metropolitan areas throughout the country with 37 other cities connected to the nearest Center by toll-free telephone lines.

The program began in 1966 with pilot operation in Atlanta, Georgia. It grew slowly at first. In 1969 President Nixon ordered expansion to all major metropolitan areas, which precipitated the growth to 74 cities.

The Centers now are helping over half a million people each month throughout the system. In Fiscal Year 1973 they handled 5.5 million inquiries. This fiscal year we expect to surpass that total by more than one million.

Information specialists staffing the Centers have to be walking computers with a memory ten miles long. They are called upon to be psychologists, mothers, mind-readers and very good listeners. They must have a good broad knowledge of the range of Federal programs, a tremendous amount of patience, flexibility, ingenuity and compassion.

The Centers receive every question imaginable. Most often people are concerned with taxes, veterans and social security benefits, with federal employment, travel abroad and immigration. But the full range of questions defies the imagination.

An information specialist might, within an hour's time, help one man find out whether he might be entitled to make a claim on a back injury he received while working in a coal mine in 1949 and help a woman find out the current status of a federal court case which would require employers to pay "sick pay" to women on maternity leave. We've been asked if the government could offer any assistance in setting up an earthworm business, if a permit is required to import black-faced gray kangaroos and who to complain to about a plane that broke the sound barrier and simultaneously broke one woman's toilet seat!

Many of the questions Federal Information Centers receive are directed to state and local government for assistance. This is especially true in the field of consumer protection. And though Centers may not have the same depth of expertise in state and local government, they are knowledgeable and always try to put people in the right direction.

I know of only one question that the Centers were completely stumped on: "What's the end of infinity?" There are some questions that even the Federal Information Center cannot answer!