

THE GEORGIA CONSUMER SERVICES OPERATION

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Consumer affairs must be useful in people's daily lives. The answer is not a federal program but, instead, at the local level. The Feds can and have helped in integrating consumer service delivery.

An example is the HEW funded Georgia Consumer Services from 1969 to 1972. One result is a service delivery system for consumer education to all citizens of Georgia, particularly low-income people. During 1972, 10,946 consumer counselors and trainers were certified who redelivered at the local level direct services to 330,474 citizens.

Another result is a statewide toll-free WATS system. Citizens call in free from anywhere in Georgia to receive information, counseling and referral to proper help. In one year 23,054 calls were handled with an 85 percent success rate for valid complaints. With the help of federal funds, an expansion of this consumer hot line opens May 1. There will be 20 telephone counselors, 8 incoming toll free WATS lines with switching capacity to connect the caller to anywhere in the state with the counselor still on the line. This will be supported with federal and state funds.

The Feds have funded "Operation 360°." Dr. Nan Preas, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Georgia, has initiated a pilot program in 15 counties around the city of Columbus in Georgia. It is a multi-agency sponsored program which uses the extension service as the vehicle for delivery of services and information to the citizens of these counties. The components of the program are hot line where any citizen can call for information on a variety of subjects all the way from jobs to consumer problems. They also utilize TV, radio, and a news letter that are coordinated on one subject each week. They currently have one 30-minute TV shows a week and are moving towards 30- to 60-second spot announcements. They have developed a catalogue of services in each one of the counties that the county Extension Agents use in answering and

giving guidance to the people who call the system. It is pilot and if successful will be expanded to other centers within the state of Georgia.

A standardized computer coded complaint form has been developed. It will be used by the Georgia Consumer Service, Atlanta and Augusta.

Consumer Credit Counseling Services of Atlanta is an agency whereby citizens who are experiencing budgetary difficulty can receive counseling and reduced payment plans through the Consumer Credit Counseling Services with their creditors. The service is of no expense to the consumer since it is supported by voluntary contributions from the business community. This type of service also exists in Athens, Macon and Savannah and will currently be operational in Augusta and Columbus.

Nancy Chandler of the Cooperative Extension Service has set up an intensive educational program with Chapter XIII families. It is a free service to these families. The training of counselors is in the process; training manuals are being developed for their use when working with families.

The Center for Consumer Research has been set up at Georgia State University. The underline goal is to contribute to improved consumer business relations through activities in four major areas: Research, Information Retrieval, Educational Program and Community Contact. Information exists on the consumer, its behavioral patterns, his attitudes and perceptions and the practices of the purveyors of consumer goods and services. However, the sources of such information are difficult to assess. The difficulty of assembling information on research underway or already completed often results in duplication or redundant efforts. The need for organized and understandable information and additional objective research provides the basic premise for the establishment of the center of consumer research. The center assembles comprehensive information on consumer research and service activities.

Self regulation is an important part of consumer services. Three CAPs or Consumer Action Panels are now in operation: MACAP (Major Appliance), CRICAP (Carpet and Rug Institute) and FICAP (Furniture Industry) SOCAP or Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business has also been organized. The purpose of SOCAP is to foster the integrity of business, government and consumers and advance the consumer affairs profession. These CAPs operate on a national basis. Here in Georgia, we also have a local organization, the Corporate Consumer Affairs Representatives of Georgia primarily in the greater Metropolitan Atlanta area. Membership is comprised of high corporate officials who have interest or related responsibilities to consumer fields. Members are from the Airline Industry, the Banking Community, Retailers, Manufacturing, etc.

They meet once a month to discuss current corporate policies affecting consumers and to discuss and become educated on consumer problems. Two of these national groups are headquartered in Georgia: CRICAP in Dalton and SOCAP in Atlanta.

Another aspect of self regulation is the creation of the National Advertising Review Board and local ones. Atlanta is currently exploring the possibilities.

These consumer services are examples of dealing with consumer problems where they happen -- at the local level. Our experience in Georgia has shown that working at the local level, with in some cases the help of federal funds, provides valuable services to consumers.

Prepared by Karen Hull from notes of the talk