

A STUDY OF THE ROLE OF  
THE DISTRICT COMMISSIONER IN PROVIDING  
SERVICE TO RURAL UNITS

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally the Boy Scout program in rural America has been received with enthusiasm and success. However providing adequate support and service to rural units and their leadership has generally been very difficult due to various geographic and cultural considerations. This dissertation examines the administration of unit service to rural units and the role of the District Commissioner in this process. The administration of unit service has proven to be an ongoing challenge requiring a versatile District Commissioner to ensure that all boys receive the Scouting program no matter where they live.

The history of the Boy Scouts can be traced to the late 1890's when a British Army officer, Robert Baden-Powell, realized that his men lacked basic outdoor skills. Due to this situation, Baden-Powell wanted to teach his men how to be resourceful and adaptable to any given situation. In addition, he wanted his men to learn the qualities of leadership and teamwork. (History of Cub Scouting, 5) He therefore wrote a handbook called Aids to Scouting, to help accomplish this purpose. The handbook helped his men learn how to operate on their own and in small groups through various training games and contests.

It wasn't until his return to England after the Boer War, that Baden-Powell discovered that English boys were using his

handbook in playing games. He decided to work out a program of scouting more directly suited to the needs of boys. He therefore developed a program that would consist of games but goal oriented and built around very high ideals. These ideals would later become the Scout Oath and Law in the United States:

"On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight."

A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

It was at this time that Baden-Powell tested his ideas set forth in Aids to Scouting on boys. So in 1907 Baden-Powell took twenty boys to Brownsea Island to put into practice his ideas on outdoor skills and Scouting was born.

It was Baden-Powell's genius in recognizing the enormous appeal the special activities of Scouting held for boys, that would set in motion a movement that would affect the entire world. (Rosenthal, 62) The popularity of Scouting would therefore cause rapid growth into every geographic and social setting and thereby require the development of an extensive administration system to oversee the movement. This was especially true when Scouting came to the United States. The administrative system had to break down the country into regions, then councils, and then districts in order to ensure that Scouting fulfilled its objectives according to specific guidelines and principles. It is the mission of the Boy Scouts of America

to serve others by helping to instill values in young people and in other ways to prepare them to make ethical choices during their lifetime in achieving their full potential.

(The District, 2)

#### OVERVIEW OF UNIT SERVICE

In order to accomplish the aforementioned mission or objective, the Boy Scouts of America established its organization and proceeded to outline their purpose in 1910. It was determined to divide the country into workable geographical areas, councils, in order to ensure that the Scouting program was made available to all youth. Whereas the purpose of the council is to guide and support its districts for the achievement of the movement's purpose, the district is to work through chartered organizations and community groups to organize and support successful units. (The District, 2)

In rural areas, a district could take in several counties covering a significantly diverse area. My experience has shown that establishing a district identity can be extremely difficult as well as conducting activities, meetings, etc. In addition, rural areas may have a much higher percentage of fragile, precarious units where the need for unit service is much greater. (Commissioner Fieldbook, 26) Consequently chartered organizations, volunteers, and professionals must work together closely to promote, maintain, and execute Scouting's objectives. These objectives, Scouting's objectives for the youth of America are character development, citizenship training, and mental and physical fitness (Commissioner Fieldbook, 3) which are congruent to the basic rural value system. It is the districts then who are

responsible for membership, finance, program, and unit service which directly affect the youth membership and leadership of the rural area.

In examining the unit service function and the role of the District Commissioner, their purpose was to provide direct support to units and unit leaders. The whole hope of the movement rests upon two assumptions: that unit leaders can use the movement's program in a manner to make a difference in the lives of young people and that district volunteers will do whatever is necessary to ensure every unit leader's success. (The District, 9) These assumptions continue to remain paramount in today's Scouting. As District Commissioner, I discovered that maintaining an active and relevant program, with solid unit adult leadership, were essential. The role of the commissioner is critical in ensuring that a unit is involved, healthy, and progressing. Additionally the commissioner can be of immeasurable support and provide necessary assistance to the unit leader. Although the role of the Unit Commissioner and District Commissioner is sometimes misunderstood, especially by new unit leaders, overall its function is not only appreciated but actively sought. Once unit leadership understands the basic function of commissioner service, a valuable resource has been established. Under the guidance of the District Commissioner, the Unit Commissioner provides a vital link between the unit and the district and therefore the council and the Boy Scouts of America. This link, resource, becomes a lifeline to new units and clarifies unit service. The only reason for having commissioners is to help units succeed. (Commissioner Fieldbook,9)

What are the services and assistance that are provided to units and unit leaders by commissioners?

The range of services provided to the unit and its leadership by the commissioners staff, is not only beneficial but necessary. These services include such items as charter renewal, information of district and council events and activities, counseling and direct support to unit leaders, assistance to the unit in meeting their program objectives, ensuring that the youth members receive the Scouting program according to the standards, guidelines, and principles set forth by the Boy Scouts of America, and so on. The District Commissioner seeks methods by which he can best serve the unit. I would look for methods that met the particular needs of a given unit. Through discussions with the unit's leadership and observation of the unit, you could usually discover their most pressing needs and then begin to find solutions. Being able to look at each unit individually was extremely important in allowing me to accomplish my objectives of unit service. Furthermore I feel that the best way to strengthen a unit is to strengthen its leadership. Counseling is a most effective method of helping unit leaders develop their potential. (Commissioner Fieldbook, 27) So through a variety of services, the District Commissioner and his staff, focuses upon the unit, and its leadership, in order to serve its youth members.

#### RURAL COMMUNITIES

In urban or suburban areas where large concentrations of youth and volunteer leaders live in close proximity to each



other, the administration of unit service is dramatically less difficult. However in rural areas, where distance and geographical considerations are major concerns, such things as communication, personal contact, and involvement with isolated units poses numerous problems. Baden-Powell taught that "what suits one particular troop or one kind of boy, in one kind of place, will not suit another within a mile of it, much less those scattered over the world and existing under totally different conditions." (College of Commissioner Science Handbook, 64) Therefore the ability to carry out Scouting in remote rural communities is not an easy job. (Rural Communities, 3) The District Commissioner of a rural district must face a number of obstacles in administering unit service with significant time constraints. Not only is distance and time a concern but culture and lifestyles are major factors. The following characteristics of rural people may apply: they are generally skeptical of outsiders, resist outside ideas, very independent, more conservative than urban populations, they are people rather than thing oriented, organizations tend to be flexible and loose, and acceptance of their group takes precedence over formal leadership. Assessing the given characteristics of any community is therefore a necessity, a step that should be taken first before service can be properly initiated.

Rural areas have been categorized into four types; stable, high growth, depressed, and isolated. Of these four types, the isolated areas create the greatest rural challenge for Scouting. These are areas farthest from urban areas, they are areas that

often have the lowest population density. They may be islands, mountain areas, or large sparsely populated areas, and they have the least contact with the outside world. (Rural Communities, 3) It may seem difficult to understand that it is possible for given communities to be out of touch in today's world, but these areas do exist out of the mainstream. Lord Baden-Powell wrote, "We want to give every boy his chance to succeed in life." (Jeal, 433) That is the challenge set forth to the rural District Commissioner, deliver the program to wherever the youth may live.

It has been shown that isolated rural units require far more service from the district. (Rural Communities, 39) The District Commissioner has the responsibility of ensuring that all units within his or her district receives service. As previously indicated, the commissioner must take into consideration a number of factors or elements when determining unit service for a given unit. As a commissioner, you provide units with meaningful service that delivers Scouting's ideals to boys, brings about membership growth, and ensures on-time charter renewal. (Commissioner Fieldbook, 5)

#### THE COMMISSIONER CONCEPT

The mission of commissioner service and that of the District Commissioner has been established by the Boy Scouts of America in the Commissioner Concept. Briefly we have seen that service to rural units and rural leadership can be determined by a number of variables. Now the task for the rural District Commissioner is to apply the concept to the rural unit by

taking into consideration these variables. The concept for today's commissioner service is to focus on the unit, its leader, and its function. The commissioner's specific mission is to keep units operating at maximum efficiency so that they can deliver a good program to a growing membership. (Commissioner Fieldbook, 9) By adhering to the expressed nature of unit service, commissioners fulfill the intention set forth in the concept. They are successful in their mission when units continue to operate, units regularly accept new boys, and units effectively deliver the ideals of Scouting to their members. (Commissioner Fieldbook, 9) To be successful, I learned that the District Commissioner cannot do it alone, he must guarantee that he recruits and trains enough Unit Commissioners to provide direct service to each unit and work with the unit leaders. This may be extremely difficult in rural areas to locate the appropriate individuals to serve as Unit Commissioners who can relate to the unit leaders or have a community relationship with them. By guiding the districts' commissioner staff, the District Commissioner attempts to ensure that units have the best chance possible to succeed.

How does the District Commissioner oversee the unit service function in a rural district and fulfill the requirements of the commissioner concept? The following guidelines and suggestions have been established through the National Rural Emphasis of the Boy Scouts of America (Rural Communities, 39-41):

1. Be flexible. Unit situations differ greatly and require different responses on your part. Use whatever resources are at hand. Be spontaneous. The help

you provide on a unit visit may not be exactly what you expected to accomplish.

2. Be responsive to unit needs and circumstances. Don't put the wants and needs of the district ahead of the wants and needs of the unit. You are an advocate of the unit and a helper of unit volunteers.
3. Provide immediate help and response to unit needs. Don't wait. In some communities, conditions change so fast that-if you wait-the problem may totally disrupt the unit.
4. The best help is usually provided on a friendly, informal basis. Keep your help more people-oriented than thing-oriented. Your job is helping people.
5. Some unit volunteers won't seek your help with their problems. You may have to go the extra mile to make yourself available to units.
6. Learn about the unit. Listen. What are their interests, needs, resources, and background? How can they be reached? Who do they know?  
  
Don't sell Scouting so hard that you aren't listening to what unit leaders are saying. Watch and listen to the unit in action, but with no suggestion of snooping or prying.
7. Many people lack confidence in doing something new. They fear failure. And the thing they need most to succeed is a feeling of confidence. You can help them increase their self-confidence. Spread the can-do spirit.
8. Provide immediate recognition for small successes. Say "well done". Write a note. Make a phone call. Or present a small award. Material awards are more effective than abstract recognition.
9. Use the show and do method of training. But, be sure both the "show" and the "do" are related to the unit's environment and lifestyle. Link your coaching to what unit leaders are presently doing in their units.
10. Try to look at the total unit situation. Avoid a fragmented look at units. Otherwise, much of what goes on councilwide and district-

wide may never help some units at all.

Each week, review a few units in depth with the Scouter to whom you report or those who report to you. For each unit: (1) Look at total condition of the unit. (2) What is the priority for help? (3) What individual service efforts can we provide in the next 30 days? (4) Who will make it happen and how?

The next week review several more units. After a month or so, you'll be back around to the original group, and the cycle repeats itself. This helps focus time and effort on the total picture of individual units rather than on a number of categorical checklists for the district. This assures a constant updating of individual needs and service plans to meet those needs.

11. Don't be a super Scouting expert. Avoid discouraging unit people with a showy display of expertise. Help them be the experts. Your attitude toward unit people is more important than any information you have to share.
12. Be prepared to spend more time with those units that need the most help. Visit or otherwise stay in touch, more than once a month. With a new or reorganized unit, make some kind of weekly contact until the unit has "taken root."
13. Empathy. Always try to understand how things look and feel to the other person. Empathy can be one of the most valuable and powerful qualities you can develop to strengthen your relationship with each unit, your communications, and your ability to get things done through other people.
14. Face to face communication is usually preferable to telephone. Telephone is usually preferable to written forms of communication. When you write, use more informal, handwritten notes and letters.
15. Counsel with unit people in a way that protects their pride and provides solutions that fit their unit and their community situation. If people are poor, don't blame them for their low income condition. Never tell people they are poor or disadvantaged. No labels, please. Talk about "our" community.

16. Don't take sides in neighborhood or unit squabbles. Respect confidences. Don't gossip about unit people.
17. In some units, you may need to help leaders understand that boys can benefit for Scouting even though such traditional advantages as parent participation, a functioning unit committee, and help from the chartered organization are limited or absent. Avoid "overtrain", the over emphasis on the ideal way to the extent that people conclude they can't do the job in a non-ideal situation.

Some unit leaders try to cope with their special needs and problems alone. Frustration soon sets in if nothing is<sup>n</sup>the district is tailored to their individual needs.

18. Be responsive to weddings, funerals, hospitalizations, and other events important to the lives of unit Scouters. Also be familiar with key events in the life of the chartered organization.
19. Respect the lifestyles of different communities and groups. Remember, most people we are serving are serious, complex individuals with a deep sense of humanity and a desire for independence and respect.
20. Think in terms of alternative approaches, not single solutions. We can be bound together in Scouting fellowship even though we use somewhat different situations.

Again, flexibility is the key word, the same end but through different means. When you use a special approach, tailored to the needs and circumstances of some population group, don't tell people they are different. People don't want to feel they are being treated differently. You can use different methods without making people feel they are different.

- 21.. And, finally, relating well to others requires a high degree of self-awareness and self-knowledge.

In rural districts the emphasis is upon a personal approach or people relations. Due to geographic limitations, isolation, and lack of direct contact, execution of unit service must take into consideration a number of issues. These issues can

be lifestyles, attitudes, community social structure, nature of organizations, values, and cultural diversity. The achievement of successful Scouting in rural areas means different things to different councils across the country. (Guidebook on Serving Rural Communities, 8) But in all instances the District Commissioner must establish and maintain credibility. Within the rural district, credibility means a program that is relevant to the community, continuity of units or tradition, development of trust between the community and Scouting, and quality of service. The importance of credibility cannot be overstated. When developing the annual commissioner service plan, all of the aforementioned should be taken into consideration. This Annual Commissioner Service Plan gives specific purposes for regular and supportive contact with units by the commissioner staff. In addition, this plan encourages commissioner visits and guides unit activities toward being Quality Units. (The Annual Commissioner, Service Plan) The recommended commissioner service plan follows the natural flow of adding new members, purchase of uniforms, preparation for summer camp, unit program planning, and replacement of adult leadership. So rather than<sup>a</sup> establishing a general plan, a more unit specific approach could be taken. When developing my annual commissioner service plan, in two different rural mountain districts, I focused upon individual units within a broad, comprehensive service plan.

In addition, personal continuity of relationships with a unit is important for success. (Guidebook on Serving Rural Communities, 43) Providing intermitant service with a number

of district volunteers can cause problems with trust, communication, and accessibility. Some units will be best served by the district assigning someone simply because they are the best person to help the unit, regardless of the title they carry. (Rural Communities, 43) I found this to be especially true when serving very isolated areas in the mountains of East Tennessee. It was critical to the Scouting program in this area to recruit individuals, even with no previous experience, to handle very specific tasks or to serve the needs of one unit.

The District Commissioner, in conjunction with the district training chairman, has to develop a plan to ensure that there is relevant and understandable training available for all leaders. It is important that isolated leadership have a firm grasp of what Scouting is and how to implement the program. The District Commissioner, through his/her Unit Commissioners, can be invaluable in providing needed training to new leaders as soon as they are recruited. By providing training immediately, you can avoid losing new leaders before they have even begun. For some units and their leadership, commissioners are the only contact they have with the district or council. In addition, commissioners are also involved with carrying programs to the unit. (Commissioner Fieldbook, 9) The problem here lies in developing a unit program that is meaningful to any given rural community. As commissioner this can be done by completely assessing the situation(unit) you are interacting with. Flexibility and adaptability are paramount when evaluating a unit's needs and type of program they desire. Such considerations as



resources, financial difficulties, lack of a sponsoring organization, unit meeting patterns, multiunit activities, and geography have a significant bearing on participation by rural units. In North Carolina, part of my district was so far removed from the rest, that it became involved with another council. Effective councils not only understand needs, they also know what rural people want. (Guidebook on Serving Rural Communities, 54) At this point we are not advocating changing the fundamentals of the Scouting program but adapting the specifics to a given situation. In areas of rechartering, chartered organizations, and unit leadership, you may have to adopt non-traditional methods. For example having a community organization operate several units, even in different locations, but with a single committee for all units; or two or more organizations pool their resources to jointly operate one or more units. (Guidebook to Serving Rural Communities, 29) These are two examples of adapting to the needs of a community to provide its youth with the Scouting program and continue to meet BSA regulations. The Boy Scouts of America's scouting program is broad and flexible in operation and new techniques should be developed. However, you must learn to tell the difference between creative programming and major deviations from Scouting methods. (Commissioner Fieldbook, 20)

The job of the District Commissioner in managing unit service in a rural district becomes a continuing challenge that can change every day. Situations and circumstances can be very unstable which can demand immediate responses to difficult problems. This is a job that has evolved into a position that

requires the ability to be flexible, adaptable, and dedicated to providing Scouting to all youths. I discovered that the aforementioned, flexibility and adaptability, were essential in any attempt at unit service in rural mountain districts. Because the Boy Scouts of America really believes in citizenship training, it will continue to move dynamically into rural communities. (Guidebook to Serving Rural Communities, 74) It will move with aggressive but thoughtful concern with new horizons of understanding and flexibility of approach. (Rural Communities, 74) The District Commissioner, as the leader of service to the unit within the district, must develop a plan to ensure that each unit and unit leader is served, that diversity between areas is acceptable, that credibility is established and maintained within each community, and provide the opportunity to all youth to participate in Scouting.

#### SUMMARY

For years, the Boy Scouts of America has said that "Scouting is for all boys." (Guidebook to Serving Rural Communities, 3) Therefore the District Commissioner and his/her staff, must regularly visit all units in their district, facilitate on time charter renewals, appraise and help units improve their programs, help units earn the Quality Unit Award, and demonstrate concern for unit leaders. The District Commissioner must develop a philosophy and plan of action that is designed to fit the rural district that is being served. By using the commissioner

concept and after a thorough assessment of the district and its people, organizations, scouting history, geographic and cultural considerations, a program for unit service is devised to give regular and supportive contact to each unit. All of the particulars of the rural community such as lifestyles, traditions, attitudes, etc. have to be evaluated. It cannot be over emphasized about the importance of properly evaluating what you will be working with in terms of leadership, units, and community. Additionally the establishment of credibility means stability and continuity of units, program relevancy, quality, and trust to the rural community. This will not be a quick process but will require some dedicated planning on behalf of the District Commissioner. A good place to begin this process in any rural district is with prior scouting history in the community, this can be a major factor in any approach you may decide to take.

Nearly twenty-five percent of the United States population is rural. There are approximately six million youths in rural areas available for Scouting. (Guidebook to Serving Rural Communities, 3) The challenge is for each aspect of Scouting, whether it is program function, finance, or unit service, to find the means to serve these youth. Rural Scouting situations vary greatly from location to location. (Scouting Magazine, 46) This is the challenge and the opportunity that the Scouting movement has the tradition and energy to meet. (Guidebook to Serving Rural Communities, 74) To ensure that unit leaders receive the support they need or that units remain healthy or that youth members benefit from the Scouting program,

the District Commissioner has to meet the challenge.

On August 9, 1937 Robert Baden-Powell concluded his address to 27,000 Scouts assembled for the Fifth World Jamboree in the Netherlands, with a personal farewell: "Brother Scouts, the time has come for me to say good-bye. We are meeting for the last time--some of us. I am in my eighty-first year and am nearing the end of my life. You are at the beginning of yours." (Jeal, 542) In this statement Baden-Powell put forth a challenge in his farewell to all Scouts and Scouters. It is a challenge to adhere to the principles of Scouting and to ensure that the movement continues. This is the beginning, a perpetual beginning, each and every time Scouting is faced with a problem or difficulty. Whether you are organizing a camporee in the mountains of North Carolina or recruiting youths in rural Oklahoma, the challenge must be met. The district unit service team, District Commissioner, and Unit Commissioners, have the ultimate challenge of overcoming geographics, isolated units, communication problems, lack of involvement, diverse community attitudes and lifestyles, confronting limited resources, and establishing credibility to provide the Scouting program.

Through flexibility, understanding of diversity, adaptability, ingenuity, and dedication, the rural district commissioner fulfills the objectives of the Scouting program. By adhering to the basic principles of Scouting, the District Commissioner assesses his units and their leaders and then implements a functional unit service program. All variables<sup>a</sup>

must be taken into careful consideration with a thorough assessment of the district situation. By being resolute and recognizing that each unit has an identity of its own, commissioners can provide meaningful service. Just like each community may have similarities with other communities, there still are specifics that must be considered. As a District Commissioner, your district may cover a large area encompassing a number of distinct communities. In any given community it may be the determination of a few volunteers that keeps Scouting alive. "Volunteers' perseverance-usually a nucleus of two to four families making the program happen"-allows Scouting to exist in sparsely populated places, says Thomas McSwain, Scout Executive of the BSA's Great Salt Plains Council in northwestern Oklahoma. (Scouting Magazine, 46)

The annual service plan may be broad in nature but purposely non-specific in order to address the different communities within the district. The District Commissioner should provide room within the plan to meet the needs and requirements of each unit. Once again, versatility is paramount in providing unit service under these circumstances. Tailoring Scouting to rural areas is a part of our Scouting heritage. (College of Commissioner Science, 64) The local council can also be of tremendous assistance in establishing a plan of action. Local council support for this aspect of Scouting's mission, unit service within the district, depends on the ability of someone in the council to adequately interpret effective rural

operation. (Guidebook to Serving Rural Communities, 11)

Whether you invite council level volunteers to rural meetings or programs or present reports to the executive board, it is important to develop support and an understanding of how Scouting is functioning in the rural districts. Concern starts at the top or highest positioned volunteers or professionals. Concern for rural people must start with the council executive board and its professional staff. (Guidebook to Serving Rural Communities, 9)

In 1908 when Lord Baden-Powell established his Scouting for boys program in England, his initial purpose was to provide a military type program for youth. Gathering ideas from Ernest Thompson Seton, Daniel Carter Beard, and others, he rewrote Aids to Scouting, a military manual, into a manual as a nonmilitary nature skill book and called it Scouting for Boys. (Scouting History, Internet. Online) A program that would provide opportunities to youth to learn certain skills and ideals that had not been available to them previously in a structured activity. By focusing on such concepts as duty to God and country, discipline, self reliance, honesty, and being resourceful, the Boy Scout movement continues to grow and change. Scouting must continuously change to meet the demands of todays society.

Today, Scouting is presented with the challenge to be flexible and adaptable in order to serve all boys no matter where they live. This is a challenge to all volunteers to meet the demands of a changing society. The challenge is to follow the Scout Oath and Law, to fit our operation to the needs

and characteristics of the people we serve, to use the great wealth of information and tools that are now available to councils to fulfill the opportunity of touching the lives of youth, of overcoming many obstacles, of providing the Scouting program to all youth.

The District Commissioner, through unit service, is in a position to have a positive influence on virtually every aspect of district operation in relationship to units and unit leadership. As District Commissioner, you help determine the great impact that Scouting has on the lives of young people in rural communities. You help bring a better life to adults, community organizations, and whole communities in rural districts. (Guidebook to Serving Rural Communities, 3) Therefore it has become extremely important that the unit service function within rural districts be correct in all aspects. From the formulation of your annual service plan to rechartering, the District Commissioner must remain flexible where unit service skills take precedence over other concerns. An attitude should be developed where no unit is allowed to fail due to lack of service. The District Commissioner and his staff has to become involved with the community and its people. You must fully understand what or who you are trying to serve. Then put together your plan based upon specific objectives, recruit the necessary volunteers/commissioners to execute the plan, and then establish a system of checks and balances to measure your performance and ensure that the unit and its leaders are being served.

A major portion of effort is devoted to the realization of results that are not measurable, but that are needed to achieve results which measurable. (Guidebook to Serving Rural Communities, 74)

It will require greater effort and sufficient dedication to make unit service effective in rural districts. The District Commissioner will be on the cutting edge on meeting the goals of the Boy Scouts of America in providing service to the rural district. It is a challenge and opportunity that we must accept if Scouting is to remain on the frontier of service to American youth. (Guidebook to Serving Rural Communities, 74)



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