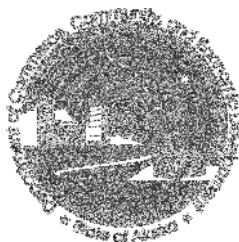
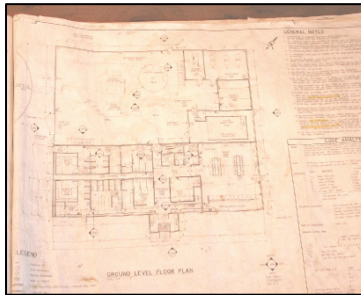


# Rural Utility Business Advisor Program Evaluation – Executive Summary July 2007

Prepared by  
INFORMATION INSIGHTS, INC.

Prepared for  
ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



# Rural Utility Business Advisor Program Evaluation

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Shelly Wade, Project Manager  
Sherry Modrow, Senior Consultant  
Joan Kane, Research Analyst/Consultant

*With the assistance of:*

Dewey Hoffman, Nancy Lowe, Jana Peirce, Sylvan Robb, Chris Rogers

*Prepared for*

State of Alaska  
Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development  
Division of Community Advocacy

*Prepared by*

Information Insights, Inc.  
429 L Street  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501  
(907) 272-5074 phone  
(907) 272-5076 fax

Billing office:

P.O. Box 73490  
Fairbanks, Alaska 99707

[www.infoinsights.com](http://www.infoinsights.com)  
[info@infoinsights.com](mailto:info@infoinsights.com)



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Rural Utility Business Advisor (RUBA) Program provides management capacity building assistance to utilities throughout rural Alaska. The program focuses on communities currently constructing facilities and those scheduled to receive new or expanded sanitation services.

Twelve RUBA staff members provide services from seven regional offices located in Anchorage, Bethel, Dillingham, Fairbanks, Juneau, Kotzebue, and Nome. RUBA Program staff provide technical assistance that covers a range of needs including assessing management and financial conditions of rural utilities, developing work plans identifying RUBA assistance, and identifying tasks for utility staff, city councils and village councils to address utility management issues.

The Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development (DCCED), Division of Community Advocacy (DCA) solicited proposals for an evaluation of the RUBA Program. According to the purpose statement in the request for proposals, community development programs that routinely collect information regarding performance, community feedback, and local impact are better equipped to respond to changing local conditions, address program weaknesses, improve service delivery, and improve overall program effectiveness.

DCA specified the evaluation process to collect information for its long-term goal of “determining community needs and community satisfaction with RUBA Program services rendered...[to] guide service delivery decisions, inform decision-making processes regarding overall program direction, and improve overall program effectiveness and long-term community impact.” The short-term objective for the comprehensive evaluation was identified as collecting information related to:

- Program performance
- Program effectiveness
- Community feedback
- Agency feedback
- Overall program impact

Information Insights conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the RUBA Program between December 2006 and July 2007. The evaluation process was comprised of five independent and discrete sections: 1) Program History; 2) Activity Inventory; 3) Community Feedback; 4) Agency Feedback; and 5) Community Impact. The final report is also structured according to these five substantive areas of inquiry.

The evaluation was conducted in five phases, represented by the five main chapters of the final report. The Executive Summary and appendices comprise the remainder of this report. The Executive Summary contains a brief overview of each chapter in the report, a summary of the methodological approach, main findings and compiled recommendations. The information and recommendations presented here reflect the RUBA Program's commitment to assist rural utilities, advocate on their behalf, and empower local communities to manage and administer water and wastewater utilities.

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## **OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS**

### **RUBA PROGRAM HISTORY OVERVIEW**

The RUBA Program History Overview includes an overview of the RUBA Program under the oversight of the DCCED, concentrating on changes over time in staffing, resource allocation, and program focus.

From its beginning in the 1990s, the RUBA Program has defined itself as a leader, partner, and teacher in rural Alaska sanitation issues. The program began with one staff person working in Mountain Village and has grown to a staff of 12 Local Government Specialists working from seven regional offices.

RUBA Program managers and staff work on processes to help community leaders develop and run successful rural water and wastewater utilities. RUBA staff members contribute to long-term sustainability of rural utilities across Alaska by providing on-site community and utility assistance, teaching utility management courses, and working closely with agency partners.

### **ACTIVITY INVENTORY**

The activity inventory compiles the range and scope of work conducted by RUBA Program staff in rural communities and regional offices. This chapter discusses each of the seven major categories of activities:

- RUBA Assessments
- On-Site Community Assistance
- Regional Utility Management Courses
- Special Projects
- RUBA Staff Development
- RUBA Program Administration
- Other Program Activities

RUBA staff members use the RUBA Program's longstanding presence and unique agency-based liaison role in rural communities as a guide to providing assistance, advice, and services. The essential and sustainable indicators associated with the utility

management assessment process require RUBA staff activities to address a wide range of community needs. The RUBA Program places priority on directing resources to Program activities rather than building a heavy administrative structure. For example, 61 percent of staff travel resources go to communities in the form of RUBA assessments, on-site assistance, and Utility Management Training (UTM) courses. Standardizing collection and management of data for Staff Travel and Reporting System (STARS) and other RUBA Program records will improve future statistical analysis of program elements.

### **AGENCY FEEDBACK**

Information Insights interviewed 18 representatives from 12 federal, state and tribal agencies that have an established work history with RUBA Program staff. This chapter summarizes major themes that emerged from the agency interviews and reports agency perceptions of program strengths and weaknesses. Agency representatives provided their insights about overall effectiveness of the RUBA Program and recommended ways RUBA Program staff can improve upon current service delivery methods to meet the short- and long-term needs of rural Alaska water and wastewater utilities.

Agency representatives commented extensively on the availability and expertise of staff, the training courses, and some components of the assessment as the primary strengths of the RUBA Program. Agency representatives consider RUBA Program staff familiarity with and proximity to communities a valuable resource both in terms of issues communities face and communities' relationships to agencies beyond RUBA.

Agency feedback also revealed concerns about what agency representatives see as troubling trends with the RUBA Program. Agency representatives noted the increasingly regulatory role of RUBA staff, emphasis on indicators, understaffing, and lack of community training opportunities as the primary weaknesses of the RUBA Program.

### **COMMUNITY FEEDBACK**

This chapter of the RUBA Program Evaluation summarizes results of a survey of over 200 community members in 146 communities and key informant interviews in six RUBA communities. The compiled survey responses reflect community perceptions of the program, satisfaction with program services, and overall impact and importance of the RUBA Program for rural Alaska communities.

The chapter includes recommendations from community members for improving overall service delivery. Community members provided their thoughts about how RUBA Program staff can best address the short- and long-term needs of rural Alaska water and wastewater utilities. The chapter includes extensive quotes from the survey responses.

Community members indicated high levels of satisfaction with the RUBA Program and program staff. Respondents generally felt RUBA Program administration, training, and technical assistance were strong components of the RUBA Program. Community members expressed concerns about the RUBA assessment process, delivery of training, and the availability of staff. To address program weaknesses, respondents provided a wide range of recommendations including requests for improvement to RUBA Program

training and staffing and increasing communication between RUBA Program staff and community members.

Survey respondents identified the extent to which they expect to use RUBA Program assistance in the future. The majority of respondents anticipate using RUBA Program assistance often; city administrators and clerks place particularly high value on RUBA Program services.

### **COMMUNITY IMPACT**

The Community Impact chapter of the RUBA Program Evaluation identifies the most and least effective program components based upon cumulative findings developed during the evaluation process.

Consideration of the many sources used in the evaluation process confirms the following highly effective components of the RUBA Program:

- Training
- Multi-faceted approach to providing technical assistance
- Staff experience

Information Insights concludes these activities have provided the greatest benefit to rural communities; they contribute to both the short- and long-term sustainability of rural utilities through effective training, delivery of assistance, and competent and responsive staff.

Multiple sources of information indicate several elements have been less effective and may interfere with the RUBA Program's core mission of providing technical assistance to rural communities to improve overall utility management. The following aspects of the RUBA Program have resulted in the least amount of community benefit:

- Overemphasis on the assessment process
- Over-extended staff resources
- Inadequate tracking of staff activities

Principal sources of information used to develop findings in this report included:

- Surveys and interviews with RUBA senior staff and field staff
- Existing records of staff interaction with communities
- Interviews with agency representatives
- Surveys of community members and interviews with community key informants

The Community Impact chapter identifies tools and methods that have the potential to yield a more comprehensive picture with data-rich analysis. Using the definition of community impact as a measure of change in community capacity before and after RUBA assistance, evaluation of impacts calls for a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to assess short- and long-term community impacts. Although many impacts have

been documented during the evaluation process, there was a heavy reliance on interviews and surveys. In order to accurately and effectively measure community impact, the RUBA Program needs to adapt its recordkeeping methods to supply a strong set of quantitative measures in the future.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

Information Insights' evaluation of the RUBA Program included analysis of qualitative and quantitative data using the following methodological tools:

- Personal interviews with select current and former RUBA Program staff
- Review of program reports and administrative documents including online RUBA Quarterly Reports, RUBA Training System Information, STARS, travel spreadsheets, and other electronic and paper program documentation
- Personal interviews with current and former utility staff and agency representatives in the regional hubs of Anchorage, Bethel, Fairbanks, Nome and Sitka and six RUBA communities
- Surveys of utility staff in rural communities

Available records provided a wealth of information; however, the RUBA Program's records in most cases do not offer longitudinal tracking or consistent application of quantifiable data elements. Past and present methods of data collection and activity documentation complicate analysis and presentation of RUBA activities and impact of the program.

The RUBA Program has not kept the type of data-rich records that lend themselves to a quantitative analysis of community impacts. Limitations of the available data make it difficult to assess changes at the community level by analyzing community capacity before and after contact with the RUBA Program. Measurement tools that would be most useful in performing longitudinal analysis are limited due to the inconsistent and incomplete nature of available data.

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## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

During the evaluation process, Information Insights identified RUBA Program strengths and weaknesses and the most and least effective components of the program. A summary of major findings follows.

### **STRENGTHS**

- RUBA staff members are accessible and knowledgeable. They understand the complexity of issues facing rural communities and incorporate their experiences and expertise into improving program service delivery.

- UTM course content and delivery help rural utility staff better understand all aspects of utility management. Rural utility staff can apply what they learn from UTM courses to day-to-day management of rural utilities.
- The RUBA assessment process provides agency and community members with a snapshot of rural utility capacity. The assessment highlights strengths and weaknesses of a utility and gives rural utility staff a set of benchmarks with which to make management improvements.

#### **WEAKNESSES**

- Growing emphasis by Village Safe Water (VSW) on the assessment of essential and sustainable indicators detracts from the RUBA Program's primary mission of providing technical assistance to rural utilities.
- The RUBA Program is understaffed and presently cannot meet the strong demand for its services. Staff cannot sufficiently assist and evaluate every rural utility that requests technical assistance or that needs a RUBA assessment.
- Staff of rural utilities would like the RUBA Program to offer more frequent training, especially UTM courses and non-UTM workshops.

#### **MOST EFFECTIVE**

- Training offered by the RUBA Program, including UTM courses, non-UTM workshops and on-site assistance, provides rural utility staff with useful knowledge and skills for improving utility management.
- RUBA Program staff members employ multiple modes of service delivery. Program staff conduct on-site visits and are available for long distance assistance via e-mail, phone and fax.
- The RUBA Program employs staff that have lived and worked extensively in rural Alaska. Staff members are in the unique position to act as intermediaries between agency representatives and community members.

#### **LEAST EFFECTIVE**

- Current use of the RUBA assessment overshadows the RUBA Program's original mission of providing technical assistance to rural utilities; continuation of this practice jeopardizes program staff relationships with rural communities.
- RUBA Program staff members continue to add to the list of communities they assist without addressing the issue of inadequate staffing, resulting in overextended staff and inconsistent service delivery.
- RUBA Program staff members report activities and interactions with rural communities without linking their actions to utility management areas. The RUBA Program will not have the data it needs to determine the impacts of program activities on rural utilities and communities until it changes record-keeping tools and methods.

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

A primary purpose of the RUBA Program Evaluation is to provide DCA with practical recommendations for improving service delivery, effectiveness, and accountability. The Information Insights project team also anticipates that by implementing the recommendations that follow, the RUBA Program will have systems more suited to comprehensive program evaluation in the future. Information Insights based these recommendations on the assumption that the RUBA Program will have ample funding and staff to undertake these tasks and with the understanding each task falls under the purview of the program.

During the evaluation, community and agency representatives praised the RUBA Program for its success in working to increase capacity for rural utilities across Alaska. Both groups provided recommendations and cited improvements the RUBA Program could undertake to better meet its mission of providing management assistance and financial training to rural utilities.

## **RUBA ASSESSMENT**

1. Restructure and revise indicators.
  - a) Continue to evaluate the function and validity of sustainable and essential indicators. Ask communities to identify what they perceive as sustainable and/or essential. Revise indicators every two years.
  - b) Scale indicators to match existing water and wastewater conditions in rural communities; establish separate indicator criteria for honeybucket/haul and piped water systems.
  - c) Consider how restructuring and revising assessment indicators will affect the ability to measure overall impact of the RUBA Program.
2. Formally group RUBA communities according to their level of technical and managerial fitness and need; set tiered benchmarks for communities that may require substantial, moderate, or minimal levels of assistance and conduct assessments accordingly.
3. Encourage RUBA staff to work closely with other agencies and to document status reports of utilities and feedback from other agency representatives. Include feedback from Village Safe Water (VSW) Program and Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) engineers on the planning and construction of water and wastewater facilities.
4. Communicate more clearly to communities and agencies the quantitative requirements that comprise each indicator. Standardize indicator criteria, such as collection rates, within RUBA Program staff reports to ensure comparable assessments for communities across RUBA regions.

5. Separate the duties of certain RUBA Program staff.
  - a) Dedicate one RUBA Program staff member to identify utility management issues and to assess management problems (e.g., complete RUBA assessments).
  - b) Assign a different RUBA Program staff member to work with communities to address identified issues and problems (e.g., provide on-site and long distance assistance, conduct on-site training activities).
6. Establish a category of RUBA assistance agreement goals for RUBA communities and RUBA Program staff; these should directly relate to management areas of the RUBA assessment.
7. Prepare communities for the assessment process by consistently sending explanatory materials about RUBA Program expectations prior to the assessment.

**ON-SITE AND DISTANCE-DELIVERED TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**

8. Prioritize assistance to communities based upon capacity levels of RUBA communities. Communities with most intense needs should receive help first.
9. Separate assessment tasks from assistance tasks. When possible, a RUBA Program staff member that did not assess a community's utility management issues should provide technical assistance.
10. Allocate staff time for on-site assistance according to specific management areas.
11. Define each indicator in quantitative terms.
  - a) Create documentation to guide communities through Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and common assessment problems.
  - b) Make this information accessible by fax or mail, downloadable from the RUBA Program website, and through e-mail (using PDF, Word documents, or other easily transmittable formats).

**REGIONAL UTILITY MANAGEMENT TRAINING (UTM) COURSES**

12. Improve the quality and quantity of UTM materials.
  - a) Ask communities and agencies to identify current training materials that correspond to RUBA assessment areas. Update the information regularly.
  - b) Provide an online document repository of UTM materials to allow communities to review and reproduce training materials after course participation.
13. Increase the number of UTM course offerings.
  - a) Combine existing agency training events to maximize access to training opportunities.

- b) Survey community needs in collaboration with agencies such as regional health corporations to determine an appropriate number of training opportunities annually.
14. Publicize UTM opportunities.
- a) Use existing communications structures, such as Alaska Municipal League (AML) e-bulletins, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium utility newsletter, and regularly scheduled conferences and events to inform communities about opportunities for UTM courses.

#### **SPECIAL PROJECTS**

- 15. Develop RUBA-related publications and training materials based upon needs identified by communities and agencies and in conjunction with RUBA assessment areas.
- 16. Document special assistance to communities according to RUBA assessment areas.
- 17. Increase the number of training opportunities for non-UTM workshops, such as QuickBooks Pro instruction, and consider multiple methods of providing training materials, including distance-learning opportunities.

#### **STAFF DEVELOPMENT**

- 18. Work with an outside facilitator and current RUBA Program staff to develop a strategic plan. Revisit and update the plan at least every five years.
- 19. Use Quarterly Report indicators of community performance and staff activity reports from STARS as tools to review performance of each regional office.
- 20. Consult current staff about how they conduct RUBA assessments to develop a programmatic standard and encourage consistency across regions.

#### **PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION – REPORTING AND DATA MANAGEMENT**

- 21. Improve the staff reporting system.
  - a) Report staff interaction with communities by management area, including any recommendations made to communities for upcoming quarters.
  - b) Require a standardized approach for staff reporting across all regional offices.
  - c) Provide staff the option to associate their interactions with communities with a corresponding management area: finances, accounting systems, tax problems, personnel system, organizational management, and operation of utility.
  - d) Provide staff the option to specify the amount of time they devote to each activity according to specific program management areas.

- e) Integrate reporting tools across reporting mechanisms and data sources (e.g., STARS, trip reports, travel spreadsheets) by allowing staff to report activities according to program management areas.
  - f) Establish a common understanding among all current RUBA Program staff of the use, necessity and application of standardized reporting procedures.
  - g) Revise the reporting system to create reports tied to programmatic needs, such as planning, budgeting and scheduling.
  - h) Output staff activities in a manner accountable and transparent to funding sources and other collaborating agencies.
22. Implement quantitative reporting of indicators by assessment management areas. For example, report back to agency and community representatives the changes in utility performance using financial, accounting, tax, personnel, organizational and operation management indicators met over time.
23. Implement minor revisions to Quarterly Reports.
- a) Track and report community performance by recording improvements according to management areas on a quarterly basis.
  - b) Develop and include a field for reporting sanitation project status within the Quarterly Report interface.
24. Integrate the results of reporting and data management modifications to develop a community impact matrix that presents community performance and staff activity together. This succinct set of data points will assist program staff in prioritizing their responsibilities to communities with RUBA Assistance Agreements.

**PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION – GENERAL**

25. Make an overall investment in information technology for the program. Create database tools that align with the purpose of the RUBA Program and provide mechanisms for measuring the effectiveness and impact of the program.
26. Establish Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with other agencies to increase interagency collaboration and cooperation and to reduce redundancy of services or other programmatic inefficiencies.
27. Conduct a program evaluation every five years; involve current staff and identify outcomes staff would find valuable and applicable to improving the delivery of program services.