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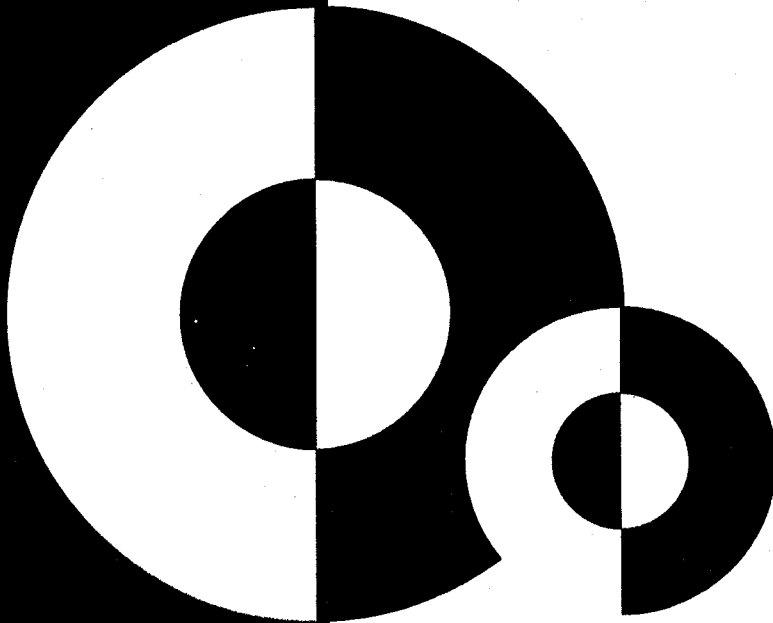
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INSERVICE GUIDE

A Supplement

public issues *education*

**Increasing competence
in resolving public issues**



FOREWORD

INSERVICE GUIDE

A Supplement to Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues

Public issues are, by definition, controversial or they wouldn't be "issues." Because people have different values and are affected differently by policy decisions, they disagree, sometimes heatedly, about the nature of the issues, what should be done to resolve them, and what constitutes a more desirable state of affairs, or "improved quality of life."

In those times when viewpoints rapidly become polarized, when formerly private issues rapidly become public ones, and when public issues tend to quickly harden into divisions among economic, social, and political groups, Extension has both an opportunity and a challenge to educate the public about critical issues from an ethical perspective. Ethics refers to standards of conduct that indicate how one should behave (what ought to be done), based on moral principles and duties arising from widely-held notions of right and wrong. Consideration of ethical principles is an action concept, not just a set of abstract thoughts. To be successful, the Extension educator must believe in and follow several philosophical and ethical principles:

- Science cannot be used to identify the most appropriate set of values. Even an undisputed fact may be viewed quite differently by different interest groups.
- The educator does not possess the wisdom (by virtue of superior education or scientific knowledge) to decide what is best for the public.
- A democratic system of government places high priority on the right of individuals to choose for themselves among alternative solutions to public issues.
- The capacity of citizens to make decisions about public issues is increased by education about those issues and the public issues decision making process.

Ethical concerns are particularly important at certain points in the public issues education process:

- Choosing the issue—Is it your issue or is it the community's?
- Framing the issue—It is extremely important that the issue be stated in a neutral and objective manner that lends itself to education and discussion.
- Involving audiences and stakeholders—It is essential to involve all those who have an interest/stake in the issue and give all of them the same message. Specific interests will constantly seek to get you to advocate/support their point of view. To do so not only would be unethical but would destroy your credibility and your organization's.

- Choosing sources of information—Information needs will vary, according to the stage of the education program. Make certain that information presented is balanced, that there is a distinction between fact and interpretation, and that the audience understands the source of the information.
- Helping audiences consider values/ethics in reaching a decision—While no public issue is ever divorced from myths, beliefs, and values, part of the job of the educator is to help people understand the differences. Ethical decision-making requires a sensitivity to perceive the consequences of decisions and the ability to evaluate complex, ambiguous and incomplete facts about public issues.

You may be an elected official, a member of an advocacy group or a neutral educational organization, a private citizen eager to see an issue handled more satisfactorily, or an Extension educator who wants to make a contribution. This Inservice Guide contains lesson formats to supplement and address key points in Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues (hereafter referred to as *Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues*). As an educator or individual working with a group on a specific issue, you may select all or any part of a lesson plan, its worksheets, handouts, or activities to facilitate public issues education or the public issues decision making process in your community. Bear in mind that this was prepared to help facilitate your working toward solutions of contentious public issues, without any preconceived answers.

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