

Opening Statement  
Rural Housing Hearings  
Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development  
March 23, 1978

Today we are going to be receiving testimony from the Farmers Home Administration and from others about what should be done to improve the housing conditions of this country's rural citizens. The deplorable housing conditions of the rural poor have been well documented in the past. Mr. Cavanaugh and other witnesses will undoubtedly cite statistics which indicate the extent and the character and need in rural America.

I don't want to judge personally the testimony before I've heard it this morning, but I think the time has passed to spur lawmakers and Congress into action by talking about the statistical evidence of housing needs in rural areas.

I, for one, don't need the same figures cited again and again and again because I have seen the problem and I know a number of my colleagues have as well.

We've seen the poverty and we've seen the squalor. In my own case, I've travelled the backroads of my own Congressional district in Oregon, Northwest Oregon, and I've seen conditions with which many of our rural citizens must contend.

Granted, the statistical evidence of poor housing in rural areas is overwhelming. At the same time, the problem with statistics is they are too impersonal; they are numbers. They don't tell the human story. And I think we should set the stage for these hearings today by talking about a particular

example of the housing conditions that exist in rural areas, an example which is mirrored all over this country and it is not limited to any one geographical area.

I am aware, for example, of a migrant labor camp in Oregon where families of up to 7 people live in 12 by 15 foot, one-room wood shacks. These shacks do not have running water. There is no refrigerator. The only appliance in these facilities is a two-burner gas grill. To get water, families in the camp use outdoor cold water spickets. There are no private toilet or shower facilities. Approximately 57 family housing units must share common wash facilities.

The only playground for the children in these areas is a stagnant mud puddle left from the evening rain.

The problems are obviously very, very severe.

At the same time, it is clear that the needs of rural areas are unique from metropolitan areas of the country. For one thing, poor housing conditions in rural areas are less obvious than they are in urban areas. They are not nearly as easy to see. They are more easy to forget.

It is more difficult for a rural resident to have access to services and, conversely, for housing programs to reach rural residents that need them.

In urban areas, we talk about providing low income housing. When we do so, we think in terms of constructing rental units often owned by a public housing authority.

In rural areas, the solution is not quite that simple in many cases. Rural communities frequently do not have the sewer and water capacity to support new housing. In many cases, it's not feasible to construct rental units either because it is not a customary housing source or because of management difficulties.

Many rural areas do not have housing authorities which could sponsor rental housing. Given the institutional limitations on addressing the housing problems in rural areas, it is necessary to look for every possible mechanism for delivering improved housing to rural America.

We need to adjust our existing programs to make them more responsive to the needs that we have seen. We need to look for ways to leverage private investment for low income housing in rural areas.

And one final note: As we search for new strategies to solve the housing problems in rural America, I, for one, firmly believe that we must look for comprehensive solutions. The housing problem in a community is not going to be solved unless there are adequate water and sewer facilities. A community's residents may not be able to afford new housing unless income levels can be strengthened through a variety of economic development programs. The more we can coordinate resources available to rural communities, the more successful we are going to be in addressing the poverty, the substandard housing, and the squalor

that you can see in any backroad small town across the length and breadth of rural America today.