

County Extension Agent

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As an education agency, Texas Cooperative Extension (TCE) has a mission "to provide quality, relevant outreach and continuing education programs and services to the people of Texas." In fulfilling this mission, TCE has been a facilitator of change and problem solving, and a catalyst for individual and community action for 90 years.

Critical to Extension's capability is a corps of skilled educators called County Extension Agents. In Texas, these resident educators are positioned in 248 counties to serve families, youth, and communities in all 254 counties.

This local presence is supported by a group of Extension Specialists and other professionals at Texas A&M University and 12 district offices across the state. Together, the agents and specialists have expertise and conduct public programs related to the broad areas of food and fiber systems, environment, natural resources, family and consumer sciences, 4-H and youth development, and community economic development.

Cooperative Extension arose from the concept that practical, research-based knowledge should be made available to people throughout their lives. The federal Smith-Lever Act of 1914 authorized states and appropriated funds to help establish Cooperative Extension as part of the land-grant university system of teaching and research.

Today's Texas Cooperative Extension was established in 1915 when the Texas Legislature passed House Concurrent Resolution No. 2 to accept the federal provisions and assign Extension functions to both the state's land-grant colleges, namely Texas A&M University and Prairie View A&M University.

In 1917, as indicated in Article 164 of Vernon's Civil Statutes, county commissioners courts became cooperators with Texas Cooperative Extension, thus forming the county, state, and federal partnership that

continues today. Nationally, this unique structure is known as the "Cooperative Extension System."

Depending on local circumstances, county Extension offices have one or more agents, hired by the commissioners courts in collaboration with an Extension supervisor. Typically agents are employed to work within in a particular program area such as agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, 4-H and youth development, or community development. Once on the job, the agents also work together on issues that cut across these areas.

Depending on the situation in specific counties, an Extension agent may serve in a specialized position in areas such as integrated pest management, horticulture, marine sciences or communication.

The qualifications to be a County Extension Agent are:

- Master's degree in agriculture, family and consumer science, education, science/technology, or other field relevant to the mission of Extension. Applicants with a bachelor's degree will be considered based on their agreement to complete a master's degree within seven years of employment.

- Desire to work with people of diverse backgrounds and to grow and develop as an Extension professional; ability to work independently and as a team member; character and personal traits that merit a position of public trust; and ability to become an effective teacher of youth, and adults.

Today, many relevant degrees are offered outside the traditional colleges of agriculture and home economics, such as degrees in environmental science, childhood development, education, family economics, biotechnology, and water management. Certainly degrees in agriculture or home economics will

continue to be the most desirable for many county positions.

However, other degrees and combinations of experience may be warranted, particularly in light of the diverse and complex issues that Texans face. It is imperative for Extension county faculty to possess the technical skills and educational background to be effective Extension educators.

TCE has researched the competencies needed for success in staffing a wide range of agent positions. For specific positions, the hiring supervisor will analyze these findings and local needs, and determine the educational and professional qualifications that best suit each vacancy. County commissioners courts are directly involved in making the final selection to fill a vacant position.

Commissioners courts as well as county residents also provide critical input in the planning of Extension programs. Residents in each county decide what Extension should do for them and guide the planning of implementation. This is accomplished through a periodic needs assessment called the Texas Community Futures Forum, and through citizen-led program councils and program committees. More than 12,000 citizens serve on these groups annually, working in coordination with County Extension Agents.

In addition, Extension engages in ongoing communications at all levels with commodity groups, state and federal agencies, and local and regional planning groups and leaders.

Based on identified issues and priorities, key educational areas are determined in which to focus development of new Extension program pilots, curricula, and resources – all of which are available to each county Extension office. However, the combination of programs implemented locally may range from "traditional" to "cutting edge," given the varying needs, stages of adoption, and creativity of local citizens and communities.

County Extension Agents historically have employed demonstrations of new technology, including applied and/or adaptive research, on farms and ranches as well as in the home. Several methods are used to facilitate learning for large audiences, including meetings, field days, workshops, short courses, newsletters, teleconferencing, online interactive programs, and the use of volunteers and the media.

In addition, County Extension Agents are supported by a diverse array of program models, land-grant university resources, and an Extension organization with broad experience – all dedicated to education and committed to enriching lives and building better communities.

For more information on the office of County Extension Agent or other county government topics and issues, please contact the V.G. Young Institute of County Government.

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