

County Extension Agent Development System

Phase I: Orientation

The orientation phase of an agent's development involves:

- participating in a Lexington based orientation session with other new agents
- visits with the District Director
- the mentor program, and
- visits with more experienced agents, becoming more familiar with ongoing programs and office procedures, and available technology.

Each of these components is described more fully below.

1. The Orientation Session

Approximately two to six weeks after the initial appointment agents will participate in a new agent orientation training held in Lexington. The purpose of this session is to help new agents better understand the nature of Cooperative Extension programming in Kentucky and provide some of the basic knowledge and skills necessary to be successful the first few months as a new Extension employee. It would be difficult to devote extended time to every topic during a three-day session. Therefore, this session, while providing a brief overview of the material to be covered, will focus more on helping agents know where to go for information as needed. This session also includes time orienting agents with resources in their specific program area.

Orientation training is conducted four times each year. Agents will be assigned to the session that best corresponds to their starting date and will attend only one of these sessions.

Topics at this session include:

- ***History and tradition of Extension,***
- ***Extension program development,***
- ***Extension policy,***
- ***Fringe benefits available to employees,***
- ***Record keeping, reporting, in-service training log-in procedures***
- ***Kentucky's commitment to diversity in programming,***
- ***An introduction to other new agents and resource persons.***

2. The District Director's Visits

Shortly after the orientation session, the agent's District Director will schedule a visit. The District Director is committed to helping agents be successful in their new role.

The District Director will use this and subsequent visits to discuss plans of work, reporting expectations, local budgets and resources, interoffice relationships, policies and guidelines as well as to discuss any special county or area responsibilities agents may have. This is a time to talk informally about problems and concerns and a chance to ask questions about things that are on your mind.

During these visits agents will:

- ***Discuss reporting expectations***
- ***Review the county plan of work***
- ***Examine the county situation and programming efforts***
- ***Get to know the District Director***
- ***Learn what it means to be a "professional"***
- ***Review county coordinator responsibilities***
- ***Discuss county operations***

3. The Mentor Program

The Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service hopes that through positive mentoring experiences our employees will find the challenge of growing as a professional and becoming an integral part of the organization an experience made easier through the support and encouragement of a caring co-worker. Through professional partnerships, useful knowledge and skills are communicated to new agents.

A minimum of three face-to-face visits will occur between the mentor and new agent within the first year of employment, but we expect mentors and new agents to correspond at least bi-weekly either by phone, e-mail or in person.

Mentoring relationships are well documented in nurturing a sense of loyalty and commitment to the profession. This mentoring process is the "guiding of a less experienced person through the new experiences of Cooperative Extension work."

4. On-The-Job Learning

While much of the orientation to the job is arranged, the on-the-job learning that takes place is equally important. During the first couple of months in the county, agents will want to spend time getting to know their co-workers, become familiar with the ongoing programs being conducted through discussions and by reviewing the county's plan of work. This is a time to learn as much as possible about the county, visit other agencies and organizations, and look for opportunities for collaboration. It is important to also find out about office procedures and practices, and establish relationships with support staff in the county.

As agents begin to plan and implement both new and ongoing programs, they will undoubtedly seek assistance from co-workers in their county. In addition, phone calls and visits to agents in other counties will be helpful. The District Director will assist in arranging these visits and suggest topics for discussion with other agents.

Because of the nature of Extension work, much of the learning will happen throughout the course of actually doing the job. Regardless of the formal training received, agents will learn much of the job by actually "doing." This on-the-job learning is characteristic of most professional positions.

Much of the on-the-job component is self-initiated and self-directed. The training agents have participated in to this point will help them become aware of the many resources available.

Through on-the-job learning agents will:

- ***Learn about on-going programs and potential areas for new programming***
- ***Get to know co-workers***
- ***Learn about office procedures***
- ***Learn how Extension programs vary across county lines***
- ***"Learn by doing" as they provide leadership to programs***

5. Program Area Training

Even though there are a number of common skills that all agents need, there are also some that are very distinct to each program area. While the training sessions' agents have participated in initially focused on the common elements, program area training focuses on the unique aspects of program area assignment.

Program area training is conducted under the direction of the respective Assistant Director or his or her designee. For agents with multiple or special assignments, the training expectations will reflect their particular assignment. The content of program area training will vary from one program area to another and will vary from year to year.

Initial contact will be made during new agent orientation and then will continue throughout the agent's career. Some training will be required of all agents while others will be geographically or contact agent specific. Some will take place independently while others will be a part of annual state or regional extension conferences.

Since all agents have a responsibility to community and economic development, they will be asked to participate in a training session on basic principles of community development during the first years of employment.

During program area training agents will:

- ***Participate in learning experiences specific to job responsibilities***
- ***Receive updates of information and training materials***
- ***Become familiar with resources that assist in programming***
- ***Learn how to assess program effectiveness***
- ***Learn about reporting obligations specific to program area assignments***