The State Data Center Program in North Carolina

The North Carolina State Data Center (SDC) program, a federal-state cooperative between the US Bureau of the Census and the State of North Carolina, was established around 1978 or 1979 to provide Census Bureau data products and training resources to the state in return for the state's concentrated enhancement of census data dissemination and explanation. There is a comparable program in each state with a designated "lead" agency and other state-level "coordinating" agencies as well as an umbrella of local and special agencies to multiply the efforts of meeting the needs of the citizenry for census information. North Carolina was one of the first four states to enter into the State Data Center program. The program was the brainchild of a visionary state employee in Indiana, who was interpreting and distributing census information to data users of all types. Part of the success of the program stems from the fact that there is no explicit funding to the state and a great deal of freedom to organize and operate as best suits each individual state. The bonus to the Census Bureau, in addition to enhanced data dissemination, is liaison with a group of individuals who maintain grass roots contact with hundreds of thousands of users of census data, users that represent government, businesses, the media, non-profits, academic research, and private citizens.

Each year, the entire North Carolina State Data Center network responds to between 20,000 and 50,000 requests for information. Questions come by phone, mail, e-mail, and in person and range from a simple request such as "what is the current population estimate for Wake County" to "what are the recent trends in the migration of elderly into your state, why are they locating in certain communities, and are they wealthier or less wealthy, more educated or less educated, than the surrounding population." There are other questions that require a brief tutorial for the client, such as what is the difference between the concepts median family income and median household income. Most of the questions responded to by the network require a synthesis of the US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census' census and survey data, a thorough understanding of census concepts, state-produced statistics, local knowledge, and research techniques. In other words, the State Data Center, with the help of the local affiliates, adds considerable value to the basic information received from the Census Bureau. The data become "information" in the hands of the State Data Center staff.

In North Carolina, the lead agency for the State Data Center program is the **Office of State Budget and Management (OSBM)**, which is located in the Office of the Governor. There are three state-level coordinating agencies: the State Library of North Carolina, the Odom Institute for Research in Social Science, and the Center for Geographic Information and Analysis.

The lead agency has a statutory mandate for statistical coordination in state government, and it has a long history of serving the public in information delivery and information locator services. Historically, it has produced the *Statistical Register of State Government Statistics, the Profile of North Carolina Counties, the North Carolina State Statistical Abstract, the State Government Telephone Contact List*, and a variety of special reports dealing with topics such as commuting patterns, census geographic concepts, and census occupational information. The lead agency also maintains an on-line menu-driven system of nearly 1,500 most-frequently-requested data items with historical information going back to 1970 through the present. This system is called Log into North Carolina. The State Demographer is located within the Office of State Budget and Management and produces annual estimates of the population of counties and municipalities and periodic long-term population projections for counties, all of which are readily available for dissemination through the lead agency.

Because of its broad interest in and responsibility for state statistics and statistical coordination, the lead agency has broadened the scope of the State Data Center program in North Carolina to include much more than Census Bureau data. It is a "user group" for the Bureau of Economic Analysis and disseminates and supports economic data for that federal agency, as well. It also has ongoing interest in the statistics and statistical methodology for all state programs and in metadata efforts across state agencies.

The lead agency in the Office of State Budget and Management is the main point of contact with the Census Bureau and with other state's Data Centers. It has primary responsibility for processing mainframe tapes of decennial census and survey data when there are not printed products or CD-ROM software already available for the need. Specialized data requests from government agencies, those involving considerable research, and those requiring programming are handled by the lead agency. The North Carolina State Data Center also works independently and with other states to develop geographic profiles of data, building upon indications of the need for these from large numbers of data users.

The **State Library of North Carolina**, with its mission of information dissemination, is the primary contact for data requests from the general public that cannot be answered by a local affiliate of the SDC program. The Library provides individualized training in the use of CD-ROM products and software for census data extraction. Together the State Library and State Budget staff prepare an Affiliate Manual and conduct site visits for orientation of new SDC affiliates and for re-acquaintance with continuing affiliates. The Library also subscribes to a variety of private data sources that enhance the overall resources of the network. The Library processes requests for copies of census maps to accompany data.

The **Odom Institute for Research in Social Science**, located on campus at UNC Chapel Hill, provides electronic data library services to the statewide academic community. In addition to census data, IRSS houses all past Lou Harris polls, the semi-annual Carolina Poll, and a large variety of other socio-economic and public opinion data, including vital statistics. Staff at IRSS instruct professors and students on census data products and concepts and assist with academic research involving the need to analyze data.

The **Center for Geographic Information and Analysis (CGIA)** coordinates the state's GIS corporate database and is staff to the GIS policy-making body. Requests for in-depth geographic analysis and research are handled through the Center. CGIA also provides a clearinghouse of metadata about GIS data layers available on the corporate database. For the last several censuses, it has contracted with the state legislature to coordinate the Block Boundary Suggestion Program for coordination of census geography with the delineation of voting districts in the state.

The **affiliates** of the State Data Center program initially included the 18 regional councils of government (Lead Regional Organizations, or LROs) and ten large public libraries. The counties of the state fall into the service area of one of each of these types of affiliates. Besides the data furnished through the State Data Center program, the affiliates often have a variety of local data sources to enrich their handling of data requests from their constituents.

After the State Data Center program became a national success, the idea emerged to broaden it to include more than the Census of Population and Housing and some survey data to encompass all the Census Bureau's economic data. This included census of Agriculture, Census of Retail Trade, Wholesale Trade, Export data, County Business Patterns, Construction statistics, Housing statistics, etc. The Census Bureau initiated another federal-state cooperative called the **Business Information Data Center**. North Carolina was one of the pilot states for this effort and, as a pilot, established several new affiliates types: academic affiliates, a few large Chambers of Commerce, and a few non-profits. The BIDC was a success in North Carolina, and, in fact, from the beginning had already been functioning under the usual SDC umbrella due to the broad scope and interpretation of the program in North Carolina. The state, however, was unable to provide quality support for the large number of added "affiliates," so the number was decreased, but several pilot affiliates remained, some as full affiliates and some in a new class called associates.

The State Data Center **Academic Affiliates** number eight and represent distinct areas of expertise, such as housing and construction, agriculture, and migration. The **Associates** category is comprised of those affiliates added in the BIDC pilot that maintained a strong desire to continue with the program, but which are not expected to provide the level of services and participation of the affiliates.

Annually, a memorandum of agreement is signed between each Affiliate/Associate in the NC SDC and two of the state level coordinating agencies, the Office of State Budget and Management and the State Library. The agreement outlines the expected services of each party for the coming year and names the contact person for these activities.

Since it began in 1978-79, the products received for dissemination from Washington have changed from being primarily paper publications, microfiche, and large-reel mainframe computer tapes, and mylar maps (for blueprint copies) to more CD-ROMs, internet products, and the promise of plot-files for census maps. As products have changed with changing technology, so the state's approach to data dissemination has changed. After the 1980 census, page upon page of computer print-outs of early census data and detailed tables of sample information were mailed to affiliates for further distribution. After the 1990 census, instruction was provided for using extraction products to obtain the same types of information from CD-ROM files. With the 2000 census, staff will be assisting users with Internet data-finding products and developing geographic profiles to distribute through the internet. There is a trend for the general public finding it much easier to directly obtain the information needed without making a special request. Along with that trend comes the increasing need to develop quality products to post on the internet in anticipation of user needs and to strengthen the service of interpreting and explaining the data, especially as it relates

to North Carolina and its communities.

Also, the Census Bureau is turning more frequently to State Data Centers for critique of proposed data products and services and for administrative functions in conducting the census, such as assistance in securing office space, recruiting aids, publicity, and liaison in making necessary contacts.

The North Carolina State Data Center program continues to leverage its cooperative working arrangement in the established SDC network to weather the challenges of decreased staff, increased turn-over, changing technology, and competing projects because of its strong commitment to serving the data needs of the state.