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"Federal Information Center, How May I Help You?" Or, "People Serving People"

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1. Let's start with **what the Federal Information Center (FIC) is and why it was founded.**

The first FIC work site was set up in Atlanta in 1966 - that's over 30 years ago. The concept was simple: The FIC would be a traffic cop to assist callers to get to the right part of the right agency after just one call. This function would eliminate the public's having to call multiple offices and would allow agencies to handle only the calls they should receive. The program expanded over the years and now responds to about 2 million calls a year placed to a nationwide toll-free number, (800) 688-9889. The FIC is open from 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., eastern time, for live assistance. Recorded messages on frequently asked questions are available at all times.

The FIC responds to public inquiries about Federal agencies, program, and services. That sounds simple. Until you realize the breadth and depth of information required to respond to inquiries that may include:

- flood relief for a North Dakota urban dweller this month;
- disaster assistance for a North Dakota rancher who lost livestock during a blizzard last month;
- a no-charge telephone number for passport information (they do exist);
- which copyright form is used to protect a song (several possibilities);
- who to see about food stamps;
- how to obtain a replacement for a lost savings bond;
- how to complain about worker safety issues;
- how to get a job with the Federal Government, and

- a subject near and dear to our hearts: how to obtain a Government document.

This is of course just the smallest range I can mention. The real questions include, as any librarian knows, any imaginable subject.

2. So how does the staff go about trying to respond to all of these issues? One major way is to have a **computerized data base** with more than 100,000 points of contacts, with Government fact sheets, with the complete Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance, and with other information about Federal programs. The data base, up to now, has been designed for internal use only. For the past little while we have been working with the Government Printing Office (GPO) to transfer this relational data base onto a CD-ROM. The disc will then be sent to the Government depository libraries and will be sold to the public through GPO's sales program. We have tested the disc at some local libraries (college and Government) and are about to receive what we hope will be the first version to be distributed. We want to update the public data base every quarter. (The live data base is updated daily.)

And there's more. We are also working with our sister program, the Government Information Xchange, to see about placing the FIC's data base on their Web site, <<http://www.info.gov>>. The FIC already refers Web users to specific sites or to the general search tool; the Web site will now refer Web users to a live person if they need assistance or information they can't obtain through their own search.

3. "So," you ask, "why have I never heard of you?" The principal way that **callers find out about the FIC** is through local telephone directories. We list the number in nearly 400 large-city directories (at least one in each State) all across the U.S. Is the FIC a well-kept secret in spite of that? Yes, it is. "Why is that?", you ask. Until funding allows for the call volume to increase, we have to place a cap on the number of calls. So we rely on other information professionals and on other Government offices to let more people know about us and expand the workload slowly. To that end, there are brochures and Rolodex® cards available for you to take back to your library and more are available by letting the FIC or me know.

By the way, nearly two thirds of our calls currently come from the States of California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas. About two fifths of the calls come from the regional dialing areas of Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, San Diego, San Francisco, and Tampa.

4. Let's also discuss some **minutia and other tidbits** for those who need or want to know such things:

- The average cost for a call is about \$1.50.
- The FIC's budget is about \$3.3 million and the major expenses are personnel and telecommunications.
- The FIC employs about 80 staff-years.

- The FIC has distributed copyright forms since 1975 and now distributes more forms to individuals than the Copyright Office does.
- We are working with the Consumer Information Center to distribute their catalog more readily by having set up a separate toll-free '888' number for catalog calls.
- The FIC is the principal source of information on Federal per diem rates because of an agreement with another part of GSA.
- We also have an agreement with the U.S. Marshals Service and the Consumer Information Center to provide information on the Marshals program to sell property seized by Federal law enforcement agencies.
- Callers who speak only Spanish are directed to Spanish-speaking staff. Other languages are dealt with on an ad hoc basis.

5. Now, about **Government documents** specifically. What we try to do in the FIC is avoid a knee-jerk referral to a sales program, even though some documents are available only through GPO or NTIS. But some are available from the publishing agency for free. It certainly can't hurt to verify which approach is more valid in a specific case. If the real question is the use of the document, we also consider it fair to refer a caller to a library if we have verified that the document is available for public use at that library.

6. At this point, let me summarize what I think is the key point about the FIC: We offer people a chance to talk to **real, live people** about their inquiry. Yes, we have a choice of recordings that a caller must wend through. Yes, we are working to make information about the Government available to the public in other media like the Internet. But we know that some people are going to be confused no matter what we do. And others will have questions about new or changed programs that cannot be answered in a database that was written before yesterday. We, like the public libraries, are a place for people to contact **people** who will help them with their concerns.