



**Henry M. Brooks**  
**State Specialist,**  
**Community Resource**  
**Development**  
**Cooperative Extension**  
**Service, Kentucky State**  
**University, Frankfort,**  
**Kentucky**

*Do Extension Paraprofessionals Need A Career Ladder?*

Paraprofessionals in Extension programs have become almost as common as agricultural and home economics agents on the county level in most states. Their accomplishments have been evaluated and their contributions to the total Extension program glorified. They have been used in the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, and as community development aides, agricultural assistants, family development and management aides, and in many special Extension programs.

Paraprofessionals in Extension have many diversified educational and experienced backgrounds. Their ages range usually from the early 20s to the late 60s and early 70s. Their formal education ranges from less than a high school education to Bachelor of Science degrees.

Should their initial employment with Extension be the alpha and omega of the Extension career? Most professional Extension workers begin their Extension career with the intention of moving up in the organization. Extension workers that perform outstandingly and continue to increase their formal education usually are rewarded and/or promoted. The same should hold true for paraprofessionals. An outstanding paraprofessional is worth just as much to Extension as an outstanding agricultural, home economics, 4-H, or community development agent.

Some professional Extension workers have complained about the added responsibility of supervising and paperwork involved in using paraprofessionals. If a career ladder were available, a paraprofessional could eventually move into the position of supervising other paraprofessionals in a given area. Thus, the opportunity for advancement would be an incentive for the paraprofessional and would relieve the professional of this task.

A proposed career ladder for paraprofessionals could include four levels. Levels one and two could be entry levels. Levels three and four could be the primary merit levels. A paraprofessional that reaches level four could be in a position to supervise other paraprofessionals.

*Paraprofessional Career Ladder:*

- 4 - Merit level (paraprofessional supervisor)
- 3 - Merit level
- 2 - Merit level and entry level for paraprofessional with formal education above high school
- 1 - Entry level

The main argument against a career ladder for paraprofessionals has been the projected increased cost of using them. The Extension Service can usually employ two or three paraprofessionals for the salary of one county agent. Most professionals agree that if the cost of using paraprofessionals is increased, then the value of using them would be reduced. However, some professionals contend that a career ladder for paraprofessionals would increase their retention rate and productivity.

From all indications, paraprofessionals will continue to play a major role in Extension programs. Therefore, some consideration should be given to establishing a paraprofessional career ladder or some other form of incentive.