



September 25th, 2019

Dear Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Wyden:

As members of the Rebuild Rural Coalition — comprised of more than 250 organizations from across the country dedicated to advocating for increased investment in rural America's infrastructure — we write to urge your immediate consideration of meaningful rural healthcare infrastructure legislation. Our focus is to support healthy rural communities, agricultural producers, rural businesses and cooperatives and rural families. Access to healthcare is critical to rural Americans, and equally critical to the economic vitality of rural communities. However, rural America is facing an access to care crisis: 113 rural hospitals have closed since 2010. When rural hospitals close, patients lose access to life-saving emergency care and rural industries and economies suffer.

Our Coalition works to promote policies that will keep rural hospitals open by stopping payment cuts and investing in sustainable new delivery models. Additionally, programs seeking to address rural infrastructure must include an investment in affordable broadband. Only then can telehealth services transform rural healthcare delivery. For these reasons, the Rebuild Rural Coalition calls for the following policies:

Stop Rural Hospital Payment Cuts

Forty-six percent of rural hospitals are operating at a financial loss nationwide, leaving them vulnerable to closure. Hundreds more rural hospitals will likely close in the near future if Medicare and Medicaid payments continue to be cut. Specifically, Medicare Sequestration cuts and Medicare bad-debt cuts make it all but impossible for rural hospitals to invest in and improve their facilities and have led to many rural hospitals closures. Legislation is needed to prevent these harmful cuts to rural providers who cannot sustain the continued losses.

Support New Delivery Models

A sustainable new rural health delivery model is needed in rural America. The rural hospital closure crisis will continue if new rural tailored models are not adopted. Models included in legislation such as the REACH Act, the Save Rural Hospitals Act and the Rural Hospitals Sustainability Act must be implemented. Communities must be afforded the flexibility to select a model that will meet the needs of their unique rural community.

Improve Workforce Shortages

Supporting legislation that improves healthcare workforce shortages in rural America is critical. There are daunting shortages in primary care, mental health care, and maternal care in rural areas. Access to these essential services are dwindling for the Americans living in shortage areas. It is imperative to invest in medical education in rural institutions while innovating programs to keep an adequate workforce in rural communities. Priority must be placed on attracting and retaining physicians in rural areas.

Improve Broadband and Telehealth

Broadband infrastructure is important to all parts of rural America, including health care. Small businesses and healthcare providers alike are adjusting to the internet-based society. Reliable and high-speed broadband not only promotes economic growth for small towns but allows healthcare providers to use new technologies for innovative methods of healthcare delivery. A quality broadband connection brings opportunities in telemedicine to increase and ease access of care for rural Americans. Investment is needed in broadband infrastructure to ensure rural areas can use new and innovative technology.

Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Wyden, we respectfully request that the Senate Finance Committee, a Committee with a lengthy and important history of focusing on the great needs of rural America, act quickly to address these concerns. The people of rural American deserve no less.

Sincerely,

