



## HEALTHCARE

Many rural communities face a health care crisis, and rural residents face mounting hurdles to seeking adequate health care. Rural Americans are older, poorer and sicker on average than their urban counterparts. They are more likely to suffer from chronic diseases that require frequent monitoring and follow-up care. Rural America's employment rate continues to lag behind urban areas and fewer jobs exist than 10 years ago, negatively impacting the overall rural economy. This contributes to rural depopulation and impacts rural health care services' financial viability.

Unfortunately, 128 rural hospitals have closed since 2010, and nearly 700 more are vulnerable to closure. The potential economic fallout from the closure of all the vulnerable facilities would increase rural unemployment 1.6 percent and decrease per-capita yearly income in rural communities by \$703. Rural America also would lose more than \$277 billion in GDP over ten years, along with 99,000 direct health care jobs and 137,000 community jobs.

Action must be taken to strengthen and rebuild our critical rural health infrastructure. Rural hospitals can provide both the physical and fiscal remedies that rural communities desperately need. The average Critical Access Hospital employs 195 individuals and its average payroll is \$8.4 million. In most rural communities, the hospital is the first- or second-largest employer, underscoring the dual benefit rural hospitals offer to residents and their local economies.

To support the future of rural America, the Rebuild Rural Coalition urges policymakers to provide flexibility for the creation of new health care delivery models. Programs seeking to address rural infrastructure must include broadband investment, and an accompanying investment in telehealth. Telehealth can transform rural health care by decreasing transportation burdens for patients, increasing the convenience of rural physicians' consultations to urban providers, avoiding lost wages for travel to distant facilities, lowering health care costs by facilitating easier patient care and creating an avenue for effective patient education.

Looking to the future, we must prioritize support for the next generation of rural physicians and continue funding for rural health workforce programs. The growth of rural health care networks requires federal flexibility and telecom networks to support innovative telehealth strategies. Such networks would identify strategies to expand services to all residents through access to quality care at the local, integrated level. These networks also would lower costs and improve the patient experience.

Rebuild Rural urges policymakers to support public/private partnerships dedicated to expanding health care technology infrastructure and trainings on new technology as well as creative solutions to renovate and expand existing facilities. Sound broadband infrastructure that supports telemedicine – coupled with local facilities that can provide critically needed care – will lower health care costs, improve patient outcomes and create a stronger rural America.

## REBUILD RURAL COALITION

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