

March 19, 2020

President Donald Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Alex Azar
U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services
330 C St SW
Washington, DC 20416

Dear President Trump and Secretary Azar,

The undersigned organizations representing rural residents urge you to ensure that the rural health care system has adequate resources and support to respond to the novel coronavirus.

To this point, the majority of confirmed coronavirus cases – and correspondingly, the majority of media coverage, testing kits, and safety precautions – have been concentrated in densely populated areas. Though the impact on rural communities may be delayed, epidemiologists and health professionals expect it to be at least as serious, especially because those communities are more vulnerable to the virus and less equipped to treat it.

The greatest risk factors for serious illness from COVID-19 are advanced age and serious chronic medical conditions– both of which disproportionately affect rural Americans. Rural areas are home to the vast majority of counties with more than 20 percent of their population aged 65 years and older. Rural Americans also experience higher rates of heart disease, hypertension, COPD, and diabetes, and are more likely to smoke cigarettes, all of which could increase risk of serious illness.

While rural Americans are more susceptible to coronavirus, they may not be able to easily access testing or medical care if they are exhibiting symptoms. This is, in part, a financial issue; poverty and uninsured rates are elevated in rural counties, meaning that residents of those counties are less likely to be able to afford health care. Those numbers are much higher for farm workers, a particularly concerning fact given the difficulty they may have maintaining social distance at work or at home.

Even when a patient can afford health care, they still may not be able to obtain it. The closure of more than 125 rural hospitals over the past decade has overburdened remaining facilities, which now serve far more people than is ideal. While urban areas have 31.2 physicians per 100,000 people, rural areas have less than half that, at 13.1 per 100,000. The disparity in the number of specialists is even starker, with 263 per 100,000 in urban areas and only 30 per 100,000 in rural areas. To make matters worse, rural health professionals have fewer resources, including fewer beds, less funding, and older medical equipment.

Even in the best circumstances, rural hospitals are often ill-equipped to handle acute medical issues. But in the event of a pandemic, understaffed and underfunded facilities will undoubtedly struggle to meet the needs of every patient. This may be particularly true as high-demand items like testing kits, respirators, and personal protective equipment have already been funneled to urban hospitals and may not be available when rural hospitals need them.

To curtail a rural health crisis, we ask that swift action be taken by the administration. Respirators, testing kits, hospital beds, and other necessary supplies must be made widely available in rural areas to increase the capacity of local facilities. Testing and additional medical fees must be waived in order to eliminate any financial barriers to treatment. Small rural health care providers should be offered priority access to no-interest loans so that they may be able to purchase extra supplies and pay staff throughout the crisis. Furthermore, grants to rural health care providers, made through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program, should be increased and expedited. We also strongly support additional investment in migrant health centers and other rural community health centers in addition to rural hospitals and other rural health care providers because these centers serve as a medical home to many farmworkers and other rural residents.

We are committed to working together, with other organizations, and with the administration to help ease the extreme stress that our rural health care system is likely to face in the coming weeks and months. Thank you for your consideration of these requests.

Sincerely,

American Federation of Teachers
Farm Credit Council
Farmworker Justice
National Association of Counties
National Farmers Union
National Rural Health Association

Cc: The Honorable Sonny Perdue, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture