



February 24, 2022

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

RE: FY 2022 appropriations for rural health programs

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader McCarthy, Majority Leader Schumer and Minority Leader McConnell:

As Congress continues to work towards a full year, fiscal year (FY) 2022 appropriations package, the National Rural Health Association (NRHA) urges Congress to continue supporting rural communities. Providing necessary funding increases for rural health line items is critical to ensuring stability for rural providers who continue navigating the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

NRHA is a national nonprofit membership organization with more than 21,000 members whose mission is to improve the health and health care of rural Americans and to provide leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications, education, and research. NRHA's membership is a diverse collection of individuals and organizations that share a common interest in ensuring all rural communities have access to quality, affordable health care.

Now, more than ever before, it is critical that Congress fully funds, and supports, the rural health safety net. While COVID-19 has hit the country hard these past few years, it has affected rural communities at a disproportional rate. For instance, in January 2022, the [Daily Yonder](#) reported that new infections in rural America were tallied at 534,000 for the week of January 10. This was more than double the case load recorded at the height of the winter 2021 COVID-19 surge of 232,000 new cases a week. Rural communities face different challenges than their urban counterparts, and COVID-19 has only exacerbated those inequalities. And although the rates of COVID-19 are currently declining, rural communities remain at an immense disadvantage without the necessary relief needed.

NRHA encourages Congress to use the opportunity of a FY 2022 appropriations bill to provide sufficient funding for critical rural health line items to help those in the ongoing fight against COVID-19. To ensure stability, NRHA encourages Congress to support the following FY 2022 priority requests to significantly improve rural health care access and affordability:

Increase funding for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Hospital Technical Assistance (TA) program to \$5 million for FY 2022. The USDA Rural Hospital TA program was developed as a pilot program to help rural hospitals better manage their financial business strategies. With 138



rural hospitals closing since 2010, this program has been a proven solution to allow rural hospitals to avoid closure. The House-passed appropriations packages included \$2 million in funding for this critical program. We encourage Congress to build on the House-passed appropriations bill to provide additional funding for this lifeline program.

Build into the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Rural Health Outreach budget an additional \$10.4 million to support the Rural Maternal and Obstetric Management Strategies (RMOMS) program. Rural communities face worse maternal health outcomes compared to their urban counterparts. The RMOMS program can curb these devastating outcomes in rural communities. NRHA encourages Congress to move forward with the House-passed appropriations funding level which provided \$10.4 million for this critical program.

Reauthorize and modernize the Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility (Flex) Program at \$92.2 million. Flex grants are used by each state to implement specific rural strategies to ensure access to primary care in rural communities. In FY 2021, the Flex Program was funded at \$55.6 million. NRHA urges Congress to increase funding for this critical program to support rural hospitals by adding new elements including \$10 million for technical assistance for the newly created Rural Emergency Hospital (REH) designation, and additional \$21 million for rural provider modernization. In the House-passed appropriations package, \$80 million was provided for the Flex Program. NRHA encourages the final FY 2022 package to build off the House version to ensure rural providers are equipped with the tools they need to ensure stability.

Expand the Rural Residency Planning and Development Program by providing \$12.7 million in FY 2022 appropriations. Workforce shortages have been identified by rural providers as one of the biggest obstacles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Expanding the Rural Residency Planning and Development Program helps expand the number of rural residency training programs and subsequently increase the number of physicians choosing to practice in rural areas. The House-passed appropriations package included \$12.7 million for this important program, NRHA encourages Congress to include this funding level in a final package.

Establish an Office of Rural Health within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with \$1 million appropriated annually to establish and operate the office. Given known rural health disparities, coupled with the devastation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical for CDC to facilitate coordination with rural communities directly and serve as a direct resource for rural providers. To improve CDC oversight and influence in rural America, this office will lead and coordinate activities designed to improve the health of rural populations. NRHA encourages Congress to include funding and report language to ensure rural representation in CDC activities.

Increase funding and expand the authority of the Office for the Advancement of Telehealth (OAT) within the Department of Health and Human Services. In the House-passed appropriations package, \$39 million is provided for the OAT. NRHA encourages Congress to finalize this funding increase to help promote the use of telehealth technologies by administering telehealth grant programs and providing technical assistance to eligible entities. NRHA also requests the enhancement of the authority of OAT to provide a more significant leadership role within HHS.

NRHA believes it is critical to equip rural providers with the tools they need to be stable for the remainder of the pandemic. To do so, it is imperative that Congress passes the FY 2022 appropriations



package. If you have questions on the appropriation needs of rural providers, please contact Josh Jorgensen (jjorgensen@ruralhealth.us). Thank you for your consideration of these requests.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan Morgan", is written over a light gray, textured background.

Alan Morgan
Chief Executive Officer
National Rural Health Association