



April 26, 2022

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chair
Appropriations Committee
United States Senate

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Ranking Member
Appropriations Committee
United States Senate

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Chair
Appropriation Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
Appropriations Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

RE: FY 2023 appropriations for rural health programs

Dear Chair Leahy, Ranking Member Shelby, Chair DeLauro, Ranking Member Granger

On behalf of the National Rural Health Association (NRHA), we ask that you continue to support critical rural health programs as you move forward with Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 funding measures. We thank you for your leadership on rural health issues and hope you will continue these important efforts.

NRHA is a non-profit membership organization with more than 21,000 members that provides national leadership on rural health issues. Our membership includes nearly every component of rural America's health care, including rural community hospitals, critical access hospitals, doctors, nurses, and patients. We work to improve rural America's health needs through advocacy, communications, education, and research.

Now, more than ever, it is critical that Congress fully funds and supports the rural health safety net. Rural health care providers, who were struggling to keep their doors open prior to the COVID-19, have been hit hard by the pandemic. As the nation begins to rebuild, continued relief is needed to ensure rural providers can remain in their communities and provide the care that is needed.

While current spending for all rural health discretionary programs is relatively small, it plays a critical role in solidifying the fragile health care infrastructure in rural communities. NRHA urges Congress to support the following FY 2023 priority requests to significantly improve rural health care access and affordability:

Increase funding for the Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility (FLEX) Program to \$68.5 million in FY 2023. FLEX Program grants are used by states to implement specific rural strategies to ensure access to primary care in rural communities. In FY 2022, the FLEX program was funded at \$62.3 million. Included in the FY 2022 budget was \$5 million for the creation of a Rural Emergency Hospital (REH) TA program. NRHA was happy to see this funding allocated for struggling rural hospitals interested in transitioning to the new hospital designation. As Congress begins work on the FY 2023 budget, ensuring stability for providers is necessary. Continued funding for the REH TA, and other important line items within the FLEX budget is necessary.

Establish an Office of Rural Health within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with \$10 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 and patients. To improve CDC oversight and influence in rural America, this office will lead, and coordinate, activities designed to improve the health of rural populations. In the FY 2022 report language, CDC was tasked with evaluating the agency's rural-focused efforts and how to strengthen them. NRHA believes setting up the Office of Rural Health is a logical next step and will be a significant benefit for rural America's health.

Expand the Rural Residency Planning and Development Program by providing \$13 million in FY 2023. Workforce shortages have been identified by rural providers as one of the greatest challenges throughout, and coming out of, the COVID-19 pandemic. Expanding the Rural Residency Planning and Development Program helps expand the number of rural residency training programs and subsequently the number of physicians choosing to practice in rural areas. In order to ensure continued growth for the rural health workforce, NRHA requests \$12.7 million for this valuable program in FY 2023.

Increase funding for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Hospital Technical Assistance program to \$5 million for FY 2023. The USDA Rural Hospital Technical Assistance 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. In FY 2022, Congress appropriated \$2 million for this program. To provide support for the 453 rural hospitals currently operating on margins similar to those that have closed, NRHA requests \$5 million for this lifeline program in FY 2023.

Provide sufficient funding for rural maternal health care programs of \$15 million in FY 2023. With passage of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, Congress included the Rural Maternal and Obstetric Modernization of Services (Rural MOMS) Act. This legislation expands initiatives to address maternal health in rural areas. We request the Committee to provide robust funding to set up and support the programs within the Rural MOMS Act. In FY 2023, NRHA encourages Congress to provide \$10 million for the RMOMS program at HRSA to continue developing financially sustainable and integrated network models to increase access to maternal care in rural communities and to provide full funding of \$5 million to implement the newly authorized Rural Maternal and Obstetric Care Training demonstration to support training and improvements in obstetric training in rural community-based settings.

Fully fund President Biden's request for \$10 million to stand up the Rural Health Clinic (RHC) Behavioral Health Initiative. In the President's FY 2023 budget, \$10 million in funding was included to create the RHC Behavioral Health Initiative. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has only underscored the behavioral health challenges facing our rural communities. NRHA encourages Congress to address this crisis by increasing the pool of behavioral health professionals practicing at RHCs in the rural communities with the most need.

Other rural health line items needing full funding in FY 2023:

- Increase funding for the **State Offices of Rural Health** to \$14 million.
- Increase funding for the **Rural Health Care Services Outreach, Network & Quality Improvement Grant Programs** to \$90 million.
- Increase funding for the **Rural Health Research and Policy Development Program** to \$13 million.
- Increase funding for the **Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP)** to \$165 million.



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- Increase funding for the **340B Drug Pricing Program/Office of Pharmacy Affairs** to \$17 million.
- Increase funding for the **Area Health Education Center (AHEC) program** to \$67 million.
- Increase funding for the **National Health Service Corps (NHSC)** to \$210 million.
- Increase funding for the **Office for the Advancement of Telehealth (OAT)** to \$44 million.
- Increase funding for the **Community Facilities Programs at USDA** to \$3.8 billion.
- Increase funding for the **ReConnect Broadband Program at USDA** to \$700 million.

We believe maintaining fiscal responsibility is a top priority. Consistent with that priority, we hope you will recognize the important role these programs play in ensuring that Americans living in rural communities can access quality, cost-effective health care. Please consider this as you begin to markup FY 2023 funding measures. Thank you for your consideration of these requests.

Sincerely,

Alan Morgan
Chief Executive Officer
National Rural Health Association