

April 16, 2025

The Honorable Susan Collins
Chair
Appropriations Committee
United States Senate

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Appropriations Committee
United States Senate

The Honorable Tom Cole
Chair
Appropriation Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
Appropriations Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

RE: FY 2026 Rural Health Appropriations Requests

Dear Chair Collins, Ranking Member Murray, Chair Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro,

On behalf of the National Rural Health Association (NRHA), we ask that you continue to support critical rural health programs as you plan Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 funding.

NRHA is a non-profit membership organization with more than 21,000 members nationwide that provides 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 government advocacy, communications, education, and research.

Now, more than ever, it is critical that Congress fully funds and supports the rural health safety net. 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 2026 priority requests to significantly improve rural health care access and affordability.

Devote resources toward rural hospital viability by increasing the Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility (Flex) Program to \$75 million in FY 2026. Flex program grants are used by states to implement specific rural strategies to improve small rural Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs) that work on quality, financial, and performance improvement activities, as well as enhance emergency medical service (EMS) and ensure access to primary care in rural communities.

Invest in the USDA Rural Hospital Technical Assistance Program with an allocation of \$5 million in FY 2026. This pilot technical assistance program improves rural hospitals' financial and operational performance, prevents closures, and strengthens the delivery of health care in rural communities. The program provides direct on-the-ground assistance and is flexible enough to meet the varied needs of rural hospitals under operational and financial stress.

Increase funding for rural health outreach services to \$109 million in FY 2026. The Rural Health Outreach Services programs support rural, community-driven initiatives that promote improved access to care, enhance coordination, and foster sustainable solutions for chronic disease prevention and management in rural areas. In FY 2022, over 475,000 individuals received direct services in over 400 rural counties through these programs, with over 85% of grant recipients demonstrating improvement in one or more clinical measures. NRHA is requested additional funding to establish a *Rural Hospital Network Initiative* to help independent rural hospitals effectively compete in a health care environment in

which size and scale are integral to succeed by fostering collaboration and equipping independent rural hospitals with the resources needed to remain open, expand service lines, and better meet patient needs.

Grow the rural physician workforce by increasing funding for the Rural Residency Planning and Development Program to \$14 million in FY 2026. Workforce shortages are one of the greatest challenges that NRHA members face. Increased funding for the Rural Residency Planning and Development (RRPD) Program helps expand the number of rural residency training programs and subsequently the number of physicians practice in rural areas. Since 2019, RRPD has created 54 new accredited rural residency programs in family medicine, internal medicine, psychiatry, and general surgery and received approval for approximately 587 new residency positions in rural areas.

Increase funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Office of Rural Public Health to \$10 million. Given worsening life expectancy rates in rural communities, it is critical for CDC to facilitate coordination with rural communities and serve as a direct resource for rural public health, providers, and patients. The office will enhance implementation of CDC's rural health portfolio, coordinate efforts across CDC programs, and implement its strategic plan for rural health that maps the way forward. NRHA worked with Congress to create the CDC Office of Rural Health in the FY 2023 appropriations cycle and requests an increase to \$10 million in FY 2026.

Provide sufficient funding for rural behavioral health care and SUD treatment programs of \$155 million in FY 2026. The opioid and behavioral health crisis has hit rural communities hard. Barriers to treatment and prevention services in rural areas limit access to care. The Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP) is a multi-year initiative that addresses barriers to treatment for substance use disorder (SUD), including opioid use disorder (OUD) through planning and implementation efforts related to Medication Assisted Treatment, Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, psychostimulant support, overdose response, and child, adolescent, and adult behavioral health support.

NRHA also asks that Congress fully fund the following programs critical to rural health in FY 2026:

- **Rural Health Research & Policy Development** to \$12.076 million.
- **Rural Hospital Stabilization Pilot Program** to \$15 million.
- **State Offices of Rural Health** to \$15 million.
- **National Health Service Corps (NHSC)** to \$130 million in discretionary plus \$790 million in mandatory funding.
- **Area Health Education Center (AHEC) program** to \$47 million.
- **Nursing Workforce Development** to \$320 million.
- **Oral Health Training Programs** to \$43.673 million.
- **Behavioral Health Workforce Development Programs** to \$261 million.
- **Community Health Center Program** to \$1.858 billion in discretionary plus \$6.34 billion in mandatory funding.
- **Teaching Health Center GME Programs** to \$320 million.
- **340B Drug Pricing Program/Office of Pharmacy Affairs** to \$12.238 million.
- **Office for the Advancement of Telehealth programs** to \$48 million.
- **Community Facilities Programs at USDA** to \$62 million.
- **ReConnect Broadband Program at USDA** to \$112.4 million.
- **Rural Partners Network** to \$10 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 rural Americans can access quality,



cost-effective health care. We thank you for your leadership on rural health issues. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our appropriations requests further, please contact NRHA's Government Affairs and Policy Director Alexa McKinley Abel at amckinley@ruralhealth.us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan Morgan".

Alan Morgan
Chief Executive Officer
National Rural Health Association

CC:

Senator Shelley Moore Capito, Chair, Labor, Health and Human Services Subcommittee
Senator Tammy Baldwin, Ranking Member, Labor, Health and Human Services Subcommittee
Congressman Robert Aderholt, Chair, Labor, Health and Human Services Subcommittee