

February 24, 2021

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader, United States Senate
U.S. Capitol Building, Room S-224
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader, United States Senate
U.S. Capitol Building, Room S-230
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Majority Leader Schumer and Minority Leader McConnell:

We serve on the Steering Committee for collectively lead the Rural Network, a coalition of more than 80 national, regional, state, local and grassroots organizations connected working with and in small, rural and tribal communities across the United States. We write to thank you for your continuing support for community economic development and infrastructure investment in rural communities and urge you to prioritize support for underserved communities in future COVID-19 response and recovery packages such as President Biden's Phase 2 Infrastructure Proposal. We appreciate the resources targeted to rural communities in the legislation related to the American Rescue Plan.

As you consider future COVID relief legislation, we urge you to invest resources in the **USDA Rural Development** programs. This suite of infrastructure, housing, small business, and renewable energy programs are tailor made to rural businesses and communities. As a national network reaching rural and small communities in all 50 states plus territories, we know all too well that the economic crisis presented by COVID-19 pandemic has only served to exacerbate the challenges faced by rural and underinvested communities.

As you know, people of color comprise 21 percent of the rural population; rural areas have higher self-employment rates than urban counterparts; and rural assets will be central to modernization and transition underway in several of the nation's key industries. Yet rural people and places also face unique vulnerabilities: Their recovery from the 2008 recession was incomplete before COVID-19 hit and as of 2019, employment in non-metro counties had not yet to returned to those levels, and they lag other areas on indicators of poverty, health, and education. Many distressed rural communities are those where racial inequities dominate. Rural areas have always served as the backbone of this country, and will continue to be the yardstick by which we measure the economic rebound from this pandemic.

Given that families and businesses in rural communities are essential to the success of rebuilding the economy, and that the USDA Rural Development programs are the programs most specifically tailored to the capacity and reality of rural places, we urge you to focus resources on the Rural Development programs, especially grant programs that ensure that the smallest communities among us do not bear the burden of debt financing for their recovery.

We also want to emphasize the opportunity to target resources in ways that will optimize the best long-term outcomes, especially for distressed rural places, including technical assistance, capacity building, and evaluation. Only with these types of strategic investments will people in rural communities be able to access and create locally-led strategies that will keep wealth in the hands of rural people.

The Rural Network works with communities and partners across the country to advocate for and generate economic opportunities and infrastructure investment for rural areas and to ensure that every community has

the resources needed to thrive. The services provided through USDA-Rural Development programs will deliver critical assistance in the small and disadvantaged communities where it is most needed, especially as our country continues to respond to the COVID- 19 Pandemic.

We look forward to working with you and your colleagues to ensure this important funding is included as you craft future COVID-19 response packages.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matthew D. Chase". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Matthew D. Chase
CEO/Executive Director
National Association of Counties

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nathan Ohle". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Nathan Ohle
Chief Executive Officer
Rural Community Assistance Partnership

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Doug O'Brien". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Doug O'Brien
President & CEO
National Cooperative Business Association
CLUSA International

Cc: Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Graham, Chairwoman Stabenow, and Ranking Member Boozman