ONE COUNTRY

LIVING AND WORKING IN RURAL AMERICA

The Farm Bill isn't just a collection of programs — it's America's rural agenda. This year, Congress has the opportunity to use this landmark legislation to go beyond farm and food policy and address the totality of what it means to live, work, and succeed in rural communities.

After years of being deprioritized, rural communities are being left behind as their residents struggle to access services that are widely available in other areas of the country. Disproportionate gaps in the ability to access high-speed internet, childcare, health care, housing, and more threaten to leave a population of 46 million further and further behind.

To ensure people can continue to live and work in rural America, the Farm Bill should enable communities to preserve the rural way of life and connect to resources that expand opportunities for success.

THE PROBLEM AT HAND

The U.S. is one of only seven countries in the world that does not provide some guarantee of paid maternity leave, or other paid family medical leave. This lack of paid leave has a disproportionate impact on workers in rural America who typically work for smaller firms that offer limited or no benefits, are at a significant distance from medical care facilities, are more isolated from family and other support networks, and are often in communities with a population significantly older than the rest of the country.

American workers lose an estimated $22.5 billion in wages every year by being forced to take unpaid medical leave or outright leave the workforce to care for family members. The lack of paid leave decreases workforce participation for families with children, increases employee attrition for firms without benefits, and creates an overall drag on the national economic productivity.

A POLICY SOLUTION

FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE YEARLY (FAMLY) PROGRAM

One Country supports a 12-week paid family and medical leave program.

To achieve this goal, we propose the creation of a **Family and Medical Leave Yearly Program (FAMLY Program).** The FAMLY Program is a new social insurance benefit program paid for by employers and employees. Wages would be subject to a new 1 percent tax – **25 percent paid by the employee, 75 percent paid by the employer** – levied against all income up to 150 percent of the Social Security tax limit.

All firms with more than 25 employees would be subject to the tax. All employees, regardless of the size of the employer, would be subject to the tax.

Workers making up to 200 percent of the poverty line, based on their household size, would receive **100 percent wage replacement for up to 12 weeks of time off in any one calendar year.** Workers making between 200 percent and 400 percent of the poverty line would have their wage replacement reduced incrementally. Workers making above 400 percent of the poverty line would receive **70 percent wage replacement.**

Under the FAMLY Program, a worker can take off **as little as 25 percent of one workday** or **up to 12 continuous weeks off.**

After an employee exhausts their 12 weeks of paid leave under the FAMLY program, they would be able to access **up to 12 weeks of additional unpaid leave** under the existing Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provisions. **No worker covered under the combined 24 weeks of family and medical leave may be fired, demoted, or otherwise denied return to their job by their employer.**

To qualify for the FAMLY program workers must be experiencing one of the following conditions: **the birth or adoption of a child; the illness or death of a child, spouse, partner, or parent; or the worker's own illness.**

THE BENEFITS

A national paid family and medical leave policy would **improve worker retention** for employers, **increase productivity,** and **provide an overall increase in workforce participation**.

The benefits of paid family and medical leave for working families are well established. Providing new parents with paid time off to care for newborns or newly adopted children contributes to **healthy development, improves maternal health,** and **enhances economic security**. Paid leave allows workers to care for themselves and loved ones when sick or injured. **The reduction in financial stress and insecurity increases the likelihood of a return to the workforce and ensures greater family stability.**

ENDORSEMENTS

Rural Housing Service Reform Act

Introduced by Sens. Tina Smith (MN) and Mike Rounds (SD).

Housing in rural regions is in dire need of improvement: over 30 percent of housing units lacking basic plumbing are in Native America, rural, and small town communities. Quality housing is in short supply and unaffordable, making it difficult to attract new workers to the area. Families without a safe and affordable place to live risk their health, education, job opportunities, and ability to build wealth.

This bill would improve and build upon a number of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) rural housing programs that would fix Sec. 515 properties to allow non-profits to acquire them and decouple rental assistance; permanently establish a program to make mortgage loans available in Native communities by partnering with local CDFIs; bring the USDA income measurement in line with U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's practices; modernize the USDA's foreclosure process to cut red tape, better protect homeowners, and ensure USDA-owned properties stay affordable; update home repair loan program rules to ease the process of getting smaller loans; and invest in IT so USDA can more quickly process loans.

Expanding Childcare in Rural America (ECRA) Act of 2023

Introduced by Sens. Tina Smith (MN), Sherrod Brown (OH), Roger Marshall (KS), and Mike Braun (IN), as well as Reps. Marie Gluesenkamp Perez (WA-3), Lori Chavez-DeRemer (OR-5), Tracey Mann (KS-1), and Yadira Caraveo (CO-8).

Childcare is increasingly unaffordable and unavailable for rural families: rural communities often lack necessary transportation infrastructure, work non-traditional hours, and don't have enough high-quality childcare providers nearby.

The ECRA Act would direct USDA Rural Development to create the following programs: The Community Facilities Program, Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training Grant, The Business & Industry Loan Guarantee Program, Rural Business Development Grant Program, Rural Innovation Strong Economy Grant Program, and Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program.

Save Rural Hospitals Act

Introduced by Sens. Mark Warner (VA), Marsha Blackburn (TN), Tim Kaine (VA), John Cornyn (TX), Rev. Raphael Warnock (GA), John Boozman (AR), Cindy Hyde-Smith (MS), and Roger Wicker (MS); and Reps. Drew Ferguson (GA-3), Terri Sewell (AL-7), Diana Harshbarger (TN-1), Tracey Mann (KS-1), Rick Allen (GA-12), Earl Carter (GA-1), Bennie Thompson (MS-2), and Joe Neguse (CO-2).

Rural communities are often in health care deserts, where residents lack access to physical and mental health care. This issue was exacerbated by the pandemic, which saw a record number of rural hospitals close due to a lack of financial resources to stay afloat and offer competitive salaries to physicians, nurses, and other hospital staff. Due to those salary differences, rural hospitals receive lower reimbursements from the federal government, perpetuating a lack of resources and a staffing crisis.

This bill would establish a national minimum of 0.85 for the Medicare Area Wage Index, which is used to adjust a hospital's overall payment from the Medicare program on the basis of geographic differences in labor costs to ensure rural hospitals receive fair payment for the care they provide and can recruit and retain high-quality professionals to serve their communities.