



A Union of Professionals

AFT COVID-19 Response Priorities for Rural and Small-Town America

The AFT is committed to ensuring the health and safety of frontline providers, our members and our communities, and to buffering the economic impacts of this national emergency. As the coronavirus pandemic unfolds, we will continue to advocate for solutions that benefit all of our members—including those who live in small towns and rural communities.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act, S. 3548) signed into law March 27th, allocates roughly \$2 trillion and made significant gains for rural communities, but there is much more work to be done, including expanding rural communities' access to healthcare providers, expanding broadband to rural schools and communities, and making sure rural voters' right to vote is not compromised in the future.

Individuals, families, and state and local governments need federal investment and supports to weather the coronavirus pandemic. Our commitment as a union is to make sure that rural communities and small towns and the people who reside there have the resources they need to ensure that no school, hospital or clinic closes because of the pandemic.

Rural Healthcare

The greatest risk factors for serious illness from the coronavirus are advanced age and the chronic medical conditions that disproportionately affect rural Americans. The CARES Act makes crucial investments in healthcare and the safety of healthcare providers, providing more than \$150 billion for hospitals and billions for personal protective equipment. It directs funding to coronavirus testing, research, healthcare facility construction, shoring up the national stockpile of critical medical supplies and Medicare. The CARES Act also designates roughly \$10 billion for the Indian Health Service, \$1.3 billion for community health centers and \$3.5 billion for child care for frontline workers right now. It also requires that health insurance companies cover the costs of coronavirus testing and any future vaccine as part of their coverage. We must remain vigilant to ensure these resources make it to rural communities and small towns.

These new healthcare investments to help fight the coronavirus are crucial, but much work still needs to be done to ensure rural America has affordable, universal healthcare. Rural America has some of the highest rates of uninsured and underinsured residents, and even those with coverage face challenges in accessing care. Over the last decade, 125 rural hospitals and clinics have closed—including desperately needed facilities in Kansas and Texas in recent weeks. Even before the pandemic, one in four rural hospitals was vulnerable to closure.

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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In any future federal package on the coronavirus, the Trump administration must prioritize the following strategies to meet the healthcare needs of rural America:

- Funding for all rural healthcare professionals to receive:
 - Training on COVID-19 response in all healthcare settings, and
 - Protections in place to address workplace violence, safe patient handling, safe staffing levels, loan forgiveness and non-exploitative international recruitment.
- Covering all state Medicaid spending for the next year.
- Increasing funding for existing programs, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Prevention and Public Health Fund and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program.

Rural Education

The CARES Act includes a \$30 billion emergency education fund to help states meet the coronavirus challenge. It also includes an additional \$8.8 billion for crucial nutrition programs to feed hungry children. Rural communities have unique needs in gaining equal access to educational opportunities, so the federal government should increase funding for preK-12 education in subsequent stimulus packages and explicitly include:

- Resources for rural school districts struggling with infrastructure needs, as well as additional funding for the Rural Low-Income School program and the Full-Service Community Schools program;
- Dedicated funding to clean and sanitize educational facilities and train educators and staff on how to prepare buildings for students' safe return, in coordination with local health departments; and
- Increased funding for the National Child Traumatic Stress Network to address mental health needs.

With indefinite, widespread school closures impacting the vast majority of public school students in America, the challenge of accessing reliable access to broadband—a prerequisite for effective, sustained distance learning—is particularly acute for rural students. The CARE Act's inclusion of \$25 million for broadband expansion to facilitate distance learning and telehealth is a positive development, but more needs to be done. We urge the federal government to take additional steps to expand the Federal Communications Commission's E-Rate program, the government's largest educational technology program, which helps connect the nation's schools and libraries to broadband. In this crisis, the federal government must rapidly identify how to expand this program to reach kids at home.

The federal government has a special obligation to ensure that the Indian schools, which it operates and funds through the Bureau of Indian Education, have the resources needed to weather the coronavirus crisis. The \$69 million provided in the CARES Act is an important gain, but more needs to be done.

Economic Supports for Working Families and State and Local Governments

Individuals and families who see their incomes drop because of job loss or a decline in hours worked will *cut spending*, even on necessities like food and housing. This has the potential to hollow out family businesses that are the economic lifeblood of small towns. Providing direct support will help people maintain this spending, which will boost the economy and preserve the rural way of life. The CARES Act expands and extends unemployment insurance benefits so that the majority of workers are covered for up to four months, and receive an additional \$600 per week. It also includes \$15 billion for food stamps.

Much more remains to be done to strengthen paid family and sick leave provisions so that all workers impacted by the coronavirus, including those in small towns, can take the leave they need. The federal government must also provide student debt relief, rather than short deferrals, so that rural college graduates can return to their communities and contribute to the local economy.

The CARE Act also provides nearly \$150 billion in vital support for states and local governments, all of which will face stressed tax revenues, as they try to provide on-the-ground services, including basic democratic functions like elections in rural communities. The act also provides \$400 million in election assistance to help states prepare for the 2020 election cycle by increasing vote-by-mail access; however, close to \$2 billion is needed.