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Communicating for America Policy Platform:

Our Vision for Economic Justice for Rural Americans

Our Voice

Communicating for America is a membership organization with agricultural roots. We stand strong as vocal advocates for rural people across America, and we believe in providing valuable policy recommendations that will benefit all Americans.

This policy platform is our means of expressing the voice of rural people, especially farm families, who too often are left behind in critically important social and economic policies.

URGENT POLICY PRIORITIES

Emerging from our policy and data analysis, these are the top four priorities of Communicating for America:

- 1. Rural America suffers from a Digital and Economic Divide. Many of our policy initiatives reflect the urgent need for radically improved rural broadband access, including:**
 - a. Equal access to healthcare, especially telehealth;**
 - b. Equal access to the economic development benefits and business opportunities available only through high-speed internet capability;**
 - c. Equal access to internet-enabled education in rural districts; and**
 - d. Equal opportunity for communication via digital tools.**
- 2. Because of the stunning gap in rural access to health care and health insurance, our country's policymakers must enact legislation to provide equity to rural residents in access to both health insurance and health care.**
- 3. We believe lower-income Americans have been saddled with unsustainable, debilitating levels of medical debt, disproportionately based in rural communities. We support public-private partnerships to relieve this debt and prevent predatory pricing practices by healthcare institutions.**

4. **Rural America needs fair immigration policies to:**
 - a. **Bolster the rural workforce and fill a desperate need for on-farm employment, internship/training programs, and rural economic development; and**
 - b. **Encourage international exchange programs to foster personal growth, education, and international cooperation.**

Policy Platform Cornerstones

Cornerstone #1

Health for Rural Citizens: Care and Insurance

The Situation

When it comes to health care and health insurance, rural people in America stand at a huge disadvantage compared to urban dwellers. Their health and well-being are impacted negatively simply as a function of geography – the places where they live and work. Factors in the rural-urban health gap include:

1. Rural people suffer from a chronic shortage of health care professionals, especially physicians. The number of physicians per 10,000 rural residents is 13.1, compared to 31.2 physicians per 10,000 urban residents.
2. Rural residents tend to be poorer, impacting an individual's or family's access to health insurance, care, health information and healthy foods. Approximately 13.3 percent of rural residents are at or below the U.S. poverty level of \$30,000 per year.
3. Infant, neonatal and post-neonatal mortality rates are higher in rural counties compared to urban counties.
4. Shortage of mental health services is a chronic problem in rural areas.
5. The economic health of rural hospitals is in a crisis stage, with an epidemic of hospital closings resulting in decreased access for rural residents and a threat to rural economic vitality. According to the Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform, 200 rural hospitals have closed since 2005 and 700 additional hospitals – more than 30% -- are at risk of closing.
6. Health insurance choices are frighteningly limited for rural residents. Among the 26 million uninsured individuals in the United States, census data show a disproportionate percentage live in rural areas. Rural residents are *less likely* to have jobs with health coverage and more likely to be uninsured or underinsured.
7. Because of rural broadband insufficiency, telehealth options are often severely limited for many rural residents.
8. Rural Americans are more likely to die from heart disease, cancer, unintentional injury, chronic lower respiratory disease, and stroke than their urban counterparts.

9. Rural children are vulnerable. Children in rural areas are less likely than children in urban areas to have had a checkup and a dentist visit in the past year.

Our Recommendations

1. **Protect the health of rural Americans as federal healthcare policy evolves.** While implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has reduced the rate of uninsured individuals, the results have been uneven for rural people. To make ACA coverage more stable and affordable in rural areas, the federal government needs to address the following:
 - a. Promote ACA Marketplace enrollment in rural areas to increase access to affordable coverage.
 - b. Continue to enable states to use the 1332 waiver process to set up reinsurance programs, which significantly reduce individual premiums.
 - c. Encourage more consumer involvement in making appropriate care and insurance decisions, allowing consumers to shop for high-value care.
 - d. Protect rural children with accessible and reasonably-priced family insurance through the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). For the protection of rural and urban children alike, this program must be preserved.
 - e. Provide health insurance premium subsidies reflecting geographies where there is only one health insurance plan available.
 - f. Encourage state governments to accept Medicaid expansion to protect rural residents and hospitals.
 - g. Provide grants and loans to assist with establishing rural Association Health Plans, allowing farmers and other rural groups to combine purchasing power for health insurance.
 - h. Provide relief to those suffering from crushing medical debt. Make public funds available to partner with private organizations, such as Undue Medical Debt, to erase the financial burden of medical debt through debt forgiveness strategies.
 - i. To reduce the likelihood of future medical debt, provide federal tax deductions or credits for consumer-paid plans that provide coverage to fill gaps in coverage caused by high deductible health plans.
2. **Strengthen the rural health infrastructure.** The unique health care challenges faced by rural people require customized solutions:
 - a. Preserve Medicaid funding for rural residents. Nearly a quarter of individuals under age 65 who live in rural areas are covered by Medicaid.
 - b. Medicare and Medicaid account for nearly 60 percent of gross revenues for rural hospitals. Government reimbursements need to accurately reflect the relatively higher costs of delivering service in rural areas.

- c. Fund grants to help rural hospitals survive. The National Rural Health Association estimates that at the current rate of closure, 25 percent of all rural hospitals will close within less than a decade. For those hospitals threatened with closure, help them convert to Rural Emergency Hospitals.
 - d. Preserve public health programs that focus on rural health research, emergency preparedness, chronic disease prevention, workforce development and training, and disease monitoring.
 - e. Accelerate access to health treatment and information for rural residents through improved high-speed broadband service in rural areas.
 - f. Because women in rural areas experience unique challenges accessing maternal care locally, increase federal programs to support rural maternal and obstetrics care.
3. **Make remote “telehealth,” “telemedicine” “tele-emergency” and “e-consultation” services more available to rural patients.** The lack of availability of physicians, clinics and hospitals in rural areas makes electronic access to care doubly urgent. Many rural people need to drive 100 miles or more to reach a hospital or clinic, making a doctor visit a day-long mission. We recommend:
- a. Establish a national platform for personalized “telehealth” sessions via high-speed internet connection.
 - b. Modify restrictive Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement regulations to authorize telehealth services to both increase access and control costs. It is crucial to aggressively seek regulatory and legislative efforts to accelerate telehealth solutions for the underserved in rural communities.
 - c. There is a lack of consistency for insurance coverage of telehealth sessions. Cure the current patchwork of restrictive insurance rules.
 - d. A particularly acute area of need is in the field of mental health, including substance abuse. We support legislation to enable remote delivery of mental health services.
 - e. Incorporate online patient monitoring and health information services into a telehealth platform.
4. **Address the rural hospital closure crisis.** When rural hospitals close, rural citizens are robbed of accessible care. We recommend legislation and regulation to:
- a. Increase rescue efforts to preserve the network of rural hospitals.
 - b. Recognize that in most rural communities, health care represents the largest or second-largest employer in the community.
5. **Encourage providers to serve in rural areas.** To address the rural health professional shortage:

- a. Provide student debt reduction/forgiveness to health care professionals in return for their commitment to practice in underserved rural communities.
 - b. Expedite H-1B and J-1 (continuing education) visas for foreign-born medical professionals who agree to live and work in underserved rural communities.
6. **Make mental health care available to rural people on an equitable basis.** There is a chronic shortage of mental health services available in rural areas. About 85 percent of US counties have either inadequate mental health services, or none at all. We recommend:
- a. Enable and accelerate use of remote services as a means of helping patients who do not live within reasonable reach of a clinic or provider.
 - b. Preserve Community Mental Health Services Block Grant funds as a means of building rural community mental health infrastructure.
 - c. Develop and expand recruitment and retention incentives for behavioral professionals to serve in rural areas, including loan repayments, bonuses, and other incentives.
 - d. Integrate high quality behavioral health care with ongoing medical care.
7. **Act now to address the severe lack of availability of rural long-term care workers.** The worker shortage is emerging just as the baby boomer cohort is retiring. Workers for in-home care as well as care facilities are critically needed, and the need will become more urgent. Two-thirds of baby boomers will likely need assisted living or in-home care for various durations. We recommend:
- a. Accelerate recruitment into training programs in technical and community colleges.
 - b. Utilize immigration policy as a tool to fill these vital jobs.

Cornerstone #2

Broadband Access for Rural America

The Situation

America has a severe Digital Divide. Equity in economic opportunity and health care delivery for rural residents cannot be available without competitive broadband service. Such service is no longer a luxury. **It is a necessity and a lifeline for full participation in the American economy and American society.** According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, more than 22.3 percent of households in rural areas lack access to broadband, compared with 1.5 percent of metro households. Roughly 19 million rural residents cannot reap the benefits of the digital age. Mobile wireless interconnections in rural areas are generally not fast enough to meet the formal FCC definition of “broadband,” defined as at least 100 megabits per second for downloads and 20 megabits per second for uploads. CA believes that the pandemic has revealed that internet speeds that were previously thought to be sufficient are horribly inadequate.

Universally accessible broadband is the great economic equalizer for rural people and businesses.

Why it's urgent to improve rural broadband access:

1. Innovation and business formation are constricted in rural America without access to high-speed internet service.
2. Educational opportunities are choked off for rural students when they don't have access to technology-based solutions available to urban students. For example, rural schools are less able to assign internet-related homework because students are less likely to have access to technology.
3. Health care options are restricted, including access to health information, access to remote telemedicine and mental health treatment options, and provider access to online resources.
4. Connectivity is crucial for first responders to save rural lives. First responders may not be able to connect with hospitals on a timely basis, putting lives at risk.
5. Rural broadband is essential to modern agriculture. Farmers and ranchers need broadband to access markets and implement new farming technologies.
6. Businesses – especially technology-dependent businesses – will not locate or expand in rural areas that do not have access to high-speed service, exacerbating rural job loss and poverty.
7. Telecommuting options for rural residents are diminished without access to high-speed internet service. This dynamic is a factor in rural population retention and growth.
8. We believe the opportunity to communicate has become a fundamental human right in American society. Without the digital inclusion of broadband, rural communities are isolated from opportunities for economic and civic participation.
9. Even entertainment options are less available to rural residents.

Our Recommendations

- 1. Congress and the Administration should continue to include Rural Broadband in planned national infrastructure enhancements.**
 - a. Investments from recent legislation will improve rural broadband infrastructure significantly, but added investment is required to correct inequities.
 - b. Congress and the Administration should continue to fund efforts along the lines of the ConnectHomeUSA program from HUD to expand highspeed broadband services to the homes of low-income Americans.
 - c. Public/private partnerships for rural broadband development should be encouraged more aggressively. Small service providers, such as

cooperatives, nonprofits, rural telephone companies and municipal providers, need added help and incentives.

- d. Mandate annual reporting and transparency of broadband data.
- e. For areas where traditional wired infrastructure may be cost-prohibitive, Congress and the FCC should fast-track approval of Low Earth Orbit satellite programs for broadband delivery, while also moving forward with other technological innovations, such as next-generation mobile networks.
- f. Restore funding to the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP).
- g. Promote digital literacy training among rural residents to maximize education, healthcare, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement.

2. The Federal Communications Commission should use its power to accelerate rural broadband expansion. The FCC should:

- a. Accelerate the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund to deploy high-speed broadband networks in rural America.
- b. Direct funding to make at least 4G LTE mobile broadband available in parts of rural America currently suffering from inadequate wireless service.
- c. Fund efforts to enhance educational opportunities for rural students by prioritizing broadband accessibility for rural schools.
- d. Implement loans, loan guarantees and grants for broadband infrastructure deployment.

3. Congress and the Administration should incorporate programs for broadband expansion into future iterations of the Farm Bill.

- a. Rural Development programs and funding should urgently address rural broadband insufficiency as a major rural economic development obstacle.
- b. USDA's Rural Utilities Service (RUS) should continue to be funded.

4. Don't leave rural students behind. Broadband can help connect teachers to students, parents, and educational resources. Broadband also helps under-resourced rural schools share classes, curricula, and other resources.

- a. Because a fourth of all U.S. students attend a rural school, the U.S. Department of Education should focus on coordinating with other federal agencies to provide broadband to rural schools.
- b. Technology can bring the world to a rural classroom. To enrich student programs and diminish geographic inequities, schools need the collaborative tools only high-speed internet service can deliver.
- c. Teachers and administrators can improve their skills and effectiveness through virtual networking.

- d. Because many rural schools are resource-poor, states should provide rural schools and districts with the flexibility to develop new models of technology-enhanced staffing and learning.
- 5. National health care legislation and regulation need to address the rural/urban digital divide.**
- a. Technology-driven solutions for health care providers, such as Electronic Health Records (EHR), necessitate broadband infrastructure.
 - b. To enable rural people to achieve fair access to quality health care, technology needs to keep pace with requirements for efficient telemedicine/telehealth/e-consultation. Technology allows rural patients to see specialists without leaving their communities, permits local providers to take advantage of remote training and expertise, and improves timeliness of care.
- 6. Rural communities should establish their own, local broadband initiatives to be in position to access federal and state broadband expansion funds.**
- a. Governments, schools, and businesses (especially telecommunications providers) should pool resources and clout to promote their communities for broadband expansion projects.

Cornerstone #3

Economic Development for Rural America, Especially Family Agriculture

The Situation

Without a vibrant economy in rural America, millions of rural citizens will suffer economically, and the country will fail to achieve its economic potential.

From its founding, the U.S. has maintained policies to advance rural prosperity, making it possible for rural residents to earn a living, raise a family and fairly share in the nation's overall prosperity. However, rural America is falling behind economically. Compared to urbanites, for rural people income is less, unemployment is higher, and opportunity is diminished.

Agriculture is the heartbeat of rural America, and America cannot afford to neglect the enormous social and economic power of production agriculture.

We see several urgent needs for rural economic development:

1. Our government needs to preserve and nurture family-based agriculture.

Because farmers have alarmingly little control over the price at which they sell their products, our government needs to provide special protection for this national resource.

2. National immigration policy must recognize the unique needs of American agriculture, rural businesses, and rural service institutions such as schools and hospitals. Clearly, foreign workers are desperately needed because there is an insufficient labor pool in many rural counties. Without workers, employers move jobs to urban centers, leading to further rural economic displacement and community deterioration.
3. Employment opportunities, innovation and business formation are constricted in rural America without access to high-speed internet service.
4. Economically strong communities are needed to maintain educational opportunities. America cannot afford to leave a generation of students behind.
5. Health care options for rural people will continue to shrink without rural economic vitality. Businesses will not provide jobs and economic opportunity in communities where the health care infrastructure is withering.

Our Recommendations

1. **Encourage family-based agriculture and consumer food policies.** Since the founding of this country, America has preferred family-owned agricultural production.
To preserve family agriculture, the Congress and Administration should:
 - a. Preserve international trading relationships for agricultural products.
 - b. Enact future Farm Bill provisions to:
 - Preserve family-owned farms by extending a common-sense income safety net comprised of family-friendly Price Loss Coverage and Agricultural Risk Coverage programs.
 - Include adequate funding for Federal Crop Insurance, with strong “actively engaged in farming” rules.
 - Improve the Dairy Program to protect family dairy farmers by enhancing the Dairy Margin Coverage program provisions to provide a more adequate safety net, especially for small producers.
 - Energize funding for agricultural research to identify new uses for American agricultural products.
 - Assure infrastructure development in rural communities.
 - Help landowners preserve soil and water quality through conservation programs, especially for marginal and highly erodible land.
 - c. Establish lending policies to encourage the transfer of land from our aging family farmers to a new generation of family farmers.
 - d. Encourage creation of networks to support rural entrepreneurs.

2. **Favorable immigration policies are crucial for rural prosperity.** Farmers and ranchers are experiencing extreme difficulty in obtaining workers who are willing and able to work in ag operations. The U.S. government should encourage immigration programs and exchange programs that will bolster the rural workforce – especially on farms – and revitalize rural communities.
 - a. Because American agriculture needs immigrant workers, keep the door open to guest worker programs that provide pathways for legal immigration and ultimately, citizenship.
 - b. Maintain a federal system that provides timely approval of seasonal H2-A and Agricultural Worker Visa Program (AWP) visas for agricultural workers, avoiding paperwork delays and unreasonable regulation. Fund the Department of Labor at adequate levels to process these applications on a timely basis.
 - c. Non-seasonal agricultural businesses, such as dairy farms, need worker visas to fill jobs which cannot be filled by U.S. citizens. Dairy farm workers in the U.S. simply do not exist in sufficient numbers.
 - d. Recognize that immigrants already are repopulating and invigorating many rural communities. We contend that rural counties with more immigrants tend to perform better economically. Immigrants buy goods, services, housing, and health care – all of which benefit communities.
 - e. Rural communities are desperate for health care professionals and other health care workers. A reasonable and smooth visa process should be established to allow skilled health professionals to enter the U.S. for service in rural areas.
 - f. Encourage and enable international exchange programs – especially in agricultural and rural-based industries and service institutions, such as schools and hospitals.
3. **Tax policy at the state and national levels should promote rural prosperity:**
 - a. Encourage beginning farmers by providing a tax credit to those establishing agricultural production operations. Customize crop insurance, lending, and price support programs to incentivize beginning farmers.
 - b. Maintain a fair Earned Income Tax Credit to help rural working families make ends meet on low wages.
 - c. Enact inheritance tax provisions to allow farm operations to stay in family hands.
4. **Government and private industry should join forces to create business incubators in rural America to foster entrepreneurship and rural economic vitality.** Initiatives to be considered include:
 - a. USDA should aim Rural Development Grants toward small business incubators in rural communities. The structures of rural incubators can vary, from brick-and mortar to a virtual network of advisors and mentors.

- b. Large businesses serving rural customers should participate in rural business incubators to provide leadership for seed capital, mentorship, and expertise for developing businesses.
 - c. With the right support and infrastructure, communities can develop a cadre of small businesses – including technology companies – that can provide an impetus for economic development.
5. **National and state education policy should reflect the special challenges of rural education.** Issues to be considered include:
- a. To build a qualified workforce for rural business, encourage policies that promote a Career Pathways approach that includes secondary and postsecondary institutions.
 - b. Technology infrastructure should be strengthened to equalize learning opportunities compared to urban students.
 - c. Recognize and act upon the challenges in early learning and childcare options for rural residents.
 - d. Create a new classification of education “assistors” through the J1 visa programs administered by the U.S. State Department.
6. **National infrastructure programs must reflect needs in rural America:**
- a. Encourage the development of high-speed broadband infrastructure to bring jobs and economic development to rural America.
 - b. Include rural highways, waterway and wastewater treatment infrastructure projects in national programs.
7. **National energy policies should include rural components.** Rural America can be a national solution for clean, renewable sources of energy with its vast wind, solar and biofuels capabilities.