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Unique Coalition Seeks Administration's Support on Rural Health Care in COVID-19 Crisis

WASHINGTON - As rural communities brace for the arrival of the novel coronavirus, a coalition of organizations representing rural communities is urging the administration to ensure that the rural health care system has adequate resources and support to respond to this crisis.

In a [letter](#) sent to President Donald Trump and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar, National Farmers Union, the American Federation of Teachers, Farm Credit Council, Farmworker Justice, the National Association of Counties, and the National Rural Health Association noted that while COVID-19 may be slower to spread to rural areas, its impact is expected to be at least as serious as it has been in urban areas. This is, in part, because rural Americans are more vulnerable to the virus but are less able to access treatment. "The greatest risk factors for severe illness from COVID-19 are advanced age and serious chronic medical conditions— both of which disproportionately affect rural Americans," the coalition wrote. At the same time, those individuals are more likely to be poor and uninsured, making it difficult for them to afford testing and treatment services.

But because a spate of rural hospital closures over the past decade has left communities with a shortage of medical professionals, hospital beds, equipment, and funding, even patients who can afford treatment still may not be able to access it. "Even in the best circumstances, rural hospitals are often ill-equipped to handle acute medical issues," the letter reads. "But in the event of a pandemic, understaffed and underfunded facilities will undoubtedly struggle to meet the needs of every patient."

Farmworker Justice President Bruce Goldstein said, "Farmworkers -- people who labor on farms and ranches -- and their family members experience disproportionately poor health and inadequate access to health care. The COVID-19 pandemic creates tremendous risks for farmworker families due to their low wages, lack of employer-provided health insurance and limited resources of migrant health centers."

In anticipation of an influx of patients, the coalition outlined a list of recommendations that would expand the capacity of rural facilities, such as increasing the availability of necessary medical supplies and funding for hospitals, migrant health centers, and other community health providers. Such efforts will help rural Americans access necessary medical services during this crisis.

A copy of the letter is [available here](#).

Farmworker Justice is a national advocacy organization based in Washington, DC, serving the nation's farmworkers. www.farmworkerjustice.org