

Relief, Recovery and Reimagination

**A Federal Policy Agenda to Meet this
Moment in Rural and Small Town America**



**PEOPLE'S
ACTION**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Members of the People's Action Rural and Small Town Organizing Cohort and many other allied organizations guided the creation of this report and contributed their stories, their experience and their vision for their communities. We also thank those who contributed photos for the report, including Tracy Skaggs, Kasey Badgley, Tracey Mofle, Arianne Peterson, Jules Reynolds, Rob McClure, Hannah Bernhardt, Daniel Wiersgalla, Missouri Rural Crisis Center, and Treasure People Photography.

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People's Action is a national network of [40 state and local grassroots, power-building organizations](#) united in [fighting for justice](#). We operate [the largest progressive rural organizing project in the country](#).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the 2016 election, a major topic of political news coverage has been speculation about rural communities: who lives there, what they think and who they vote for. Running through most of these stories is a prediction that the polarization of the current political moment has hardened into a permanent urban-rural divide. Many in the political establishment seem to assume that it isn't worth the effort to compete for rural votes.

We don't think that needs to be the case.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic collapse it triggered have made it impossible to ignore some basic truths about our economic and political systems – they don't take care of anyone but big corporations and the wealthy few. As we enter an election season trying to navigate the worst economic and health crisis in a century, it's time for a real debate about what kind of system we build to replace what just collapsed in rural communities and small towns.

We aren't willing to let the politics of resentment and hate take over our communities. We reject the tired old right-wing narratives about letting the free market decide what we deserve, that the wealthiest country in the world can't afford to meet people's basic needs, and that the government shouldn't even bother to try to address big problems.

In an era when races are won on the narrowest of margins, [rural communities are important to elections](#) up and down the ballot. In 2020, rural communities can make a difference not only in the Presidential race, but also in deciding control of the Senate.

We see the potential that exists in our communities, and it's time for candidates for every level of office to see it too. But a quick campaign stop or scenic rural photo-op is not enough to meet the moment rural communities and small towns face – and neither is promising a return to the pre-pandemic status quo. Rural communities need candidates who will work with us on a new approach, based on our vision for what our communities can be: anchored by thriving small towns with diversified economies, strong safety nets that meet people's needs, a family farm food system, a plan to rapidly transition to a renewable energy future and a jobs guarantee that invests in us to rebuild our communities and take care of each other.

The COVID-19 crisis laid bare that, for decades, politicians chose to sacrifice rural livelihoods and poison rural communities for the profits of a few corporate monopolies, creating brittle systems that are now irrevocably broken. As we provide people what they need to survive this crisis and invest in what rural communities deserve for the future, we will create millions of good jobs doing the work that needs to get done: feeding people, caring for people, and making and building all the things that rural communities have needed for decades.

This is our vision for Relief, Recovery and Reimagination for rural communities and small towns:

RELIEF:

Immediate help to respond to the unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19. We need to bail out people, not corporations, and follow the principles outlined in [The People's Bailout](#).

- Provide economic relief directly to people, including direct payments to individuals and expanded unemployment insurance, increased food assistance such as SNAP, WIC and school feeding programs, housing assistance, affordable childcare, student debt relief and broadband access.
- Establish a moratorium on evictions, foreclosures and shut-offs of water and electricity.
- Provide financial help to local and state governments, which are facing devastating budget cuts because of increased costs and decreased tax revenues.
- Don't make people choose between their health and their vote, by expanding vote by mail and protecting the U.S. Postal Service, and providing funding and support to keep polls safe and accessible.

Healthcare and the Overdose Crisis:

- Free testing, treatment and vaccines.
- Eliminate all out-of-pocket health costs for every person in America during the COVID-19 crisis by passing [the Health Care Emergency Guarantee Act](#).
- Provide emergency funding for rural healthcare systems.
- Provide [support for patients seeking drug treatment](#) during the pandemic.

Energy:

- Establish a moratorium on utility shutoffs, late fees, and negative credit reporting for all utilities including rural electric cooperatives and community-owned utilities.
- Increase funding for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program.
- Increase funding for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service programs that support rural electric cooperatives and energy efficiency loans programs as well as the Rural Energy for America Program.

Housing:

- Establish a nationwide eviction and foreclosure moratorium, including for public housing.
- Provide homes and expanded services for people experiencing homelessness.
- [Suspend rent payments and mortgage payments for the duration of the crisis](#).
- Stop utility and [water shutoffs](#).

Agriculture:

- Prioritize help for farms and independent food businesses, not multinational corporations that should be prohibited from accessing pandemic relief funding.
- Require enforceable standards to protect all food chain workers, including migrant workers, forbid employers from retaliating against workers for reporting infection control problems or taking sick leave, and require tracking and public reporting of COVID-19 outbreaks in workplaces.
- Prohibit federal loans or loan guarantees for new or expanding factory farms.
- Enact a moratorium on farm foreclosures until the immediate COVID-19 crisis is under control.

RECOVERY:

Once the immediate crisis of COVID-19 has passed, what we need to do next.

- Increase the minimum wage.
- Establish a federal Jobs Guarantee.
- Require paid sick leave for all workers.
- Expand access to affordable childcare and invest in rural education systems.
- Invest in rebuilding our infrastructure, including [water systems](#), [broadband internet access](#), schools, and roads and transportation infrastructure.
- Establish a [postal banking system](#) to provide services to underbanked rural communities.

Healthcare and the Overdose Crisis:

- Protect existing health care infrastructure by blocking any attempts to repeal or undermine the Affordable Care Act and any budget cuts to Medicare, Medicaid, the Child Health Insurance Program, ensuring access to coverage for everyone, regardless of immigration status, and ensuring coverage for reproductive care.
- Expand Medicaid in all 50 states.
- Invest in rural hospitals, the rural healthcare workforce, telehealth capacity, community health centers and technical assistance for rural healthcare providers.
- Use Medicaid to [expand access to medication-assisted treatment, overdose prevention techniques \(naloxone\) and harm reduction services like sanctioned safe injection sites](#).
- [Provide federal funding for states and communities](#) to provide a continuum of care and treat addiction like a public health crisis.

Energy:

- To speed their transition to clean power sources, forgive rural electric cooperatives' debt for fossil fueled plants on the condition that future funding is dedicated to investments in energy efficiency and clean energy.
- Increase funding and create new financing programs for energy efficiency and distributed renewable energy systems.
- Provide technical assistance to utilities to implement inclusive financing programs for energy efficiency and distributed generation and storage, such as the Pay As You Save concept.
- Increase funding for the Weatherization Assistance Program to reduce energy costs for low-income families by improving the energy efficiency of their homes.

Housing:

- Fund shelters and housing for people experiencing homelessness.
- Fund USDA housing programs, especially Section 515 rental housing financing.
- Fund new public housing and rehabilitation of existing units, and help local governments use federal money to rehabilitate private rentals with affordability requirements.

Agriculture:

- Take on corporate control of the food system with a [food and agribusiness merger moratorium](#).
- Enforce the Packers and Stockyards Act to allow independent livestock producers and small and mid-sized packing plants to compete on a level playing field.
- Rebuild regional food infrastructure with funding for programs like the Local Agriculture Market Program.
- Enact the provisions of the [HEAL Food Alliance platform to Ensure Dignity for Food Workers and their Families](#).
- Enact the list of reforms on Senator Warren's plan [for addressing discrimination and ensuring equity for farmers of color](#) and increase funding for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmer programs.
- Invest in the regenerative and organic agriculture practices we need to make farming part of the solution to climate change, with research into soil health, technical assistance and cost-sharing, and new markets for products from longer crop rotations.
- Reinstate and expand mandatory Country of Origin Labeling for meat, dairy, and seafood.

REIMAGINATION:

Policies we need to build resilient rural communities for the long haul.

Healthcare and the Overdose Crisis:

- Replace the broken patchwork of private, for-profit insurance and supplemental public programs with [Medicare for All](#).
- Create a new approach to the overdose crisis that redirects government resources away from criminalization and towards public health interventions.

Energy:

- Transition as soon as possible to a renewable energy system led by publicly-owned energy utilities and rural electric cooperatives.
- [Ban all new fossil fuel and extractive energy projects](#).
- Require fossil fuel companies to pay for the cleanup of their former mines and drilling sites.
- Fund a just transition so that fossil fuel industry workers have access to opportunities in the clean energy, weatherization and energy efficiency sectors.
- Expand access to broadband internet as part of the transition to renewable energy, with rural broadband cooperatives and coordinated energy and broadband infrastructure projects.

Housing:

- Establish a [Homes Guarantee](#) to provide everyone safe, accessible, sustainable and permanently affordable housing, by passing the [Homes for All Act](#) and the [Green New Deal for Public Housing Act](#).

Agriculture:

- Establish a moratorium on factory farms, with support for the transition of existing operations to more sustainable production methods.
- Establish supply management programs, including grain reserves and parity pricing programs for commodity crops.



INTRODUCTION

Since the 2016 election, a major topic of political news coverage has been speculation about rural communities: who lives there, what they think and who they vote for. Running through most of these stories (right after the obligatory opening scene of a small-town coffee shop) is a prediction that the polarization of the current political moment has hardened into a permanent urban-rural divide.

[We don't think that needs to be the case.](#)

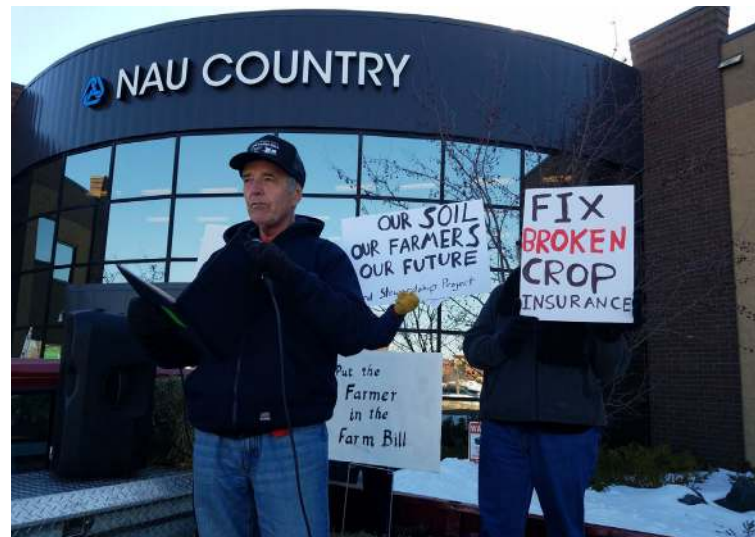
Just like our friends who live in cities and suburbs, those of us who live in rural communities and small towns want a healthy environment, a healthy economy and governments that make these things possible. There are also things that make our communities different from cities and suburbs. That means that when policy and funding decisions are being made, we need to be at the table to make sure those decisions work for us too.

Just like cities or suburbs, each rural community has its own unique characteristics. But in discussions about policy and investment, rural needs often get lumped together, if they are addressed at all. And even worse, when the political establishment thinks about rural people, many assume that it isn't worth the effort to compete for rural votes.

That is a bad assumption. There is opportunity to build political power in rural communities, if we talk with people about the things our communities need and how we can work together to get them. We'll need everyone's help to build healthy, resilient communities and we will create millions of jobs to do it, resulting in abundant opportunities to not only survive in rural America, but to put down roots, raise families, and thrive.

What's Different About Rural?

The number of people living in rural communities depends on who's counting – according to the U.S. Census Bureau, almost 1 in 5 Americans live in a rural area. That's about 60 million people,¹ or 47 million adults over 18.² The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) uses a different classification and says 46

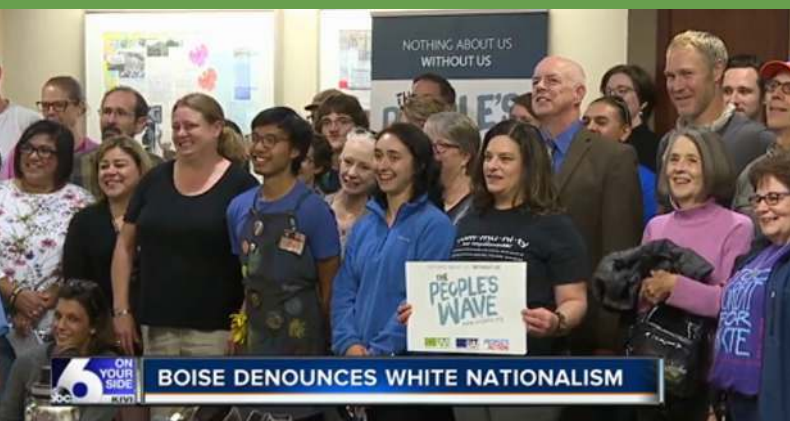


What's At Stake - Investing in Rural Organizing

Adrienne Evans, Executive Director, United Vision for Idaho

For years, organizers have been sounding the alarm about the lack of investment in progressive organizing in rural America. The void this divestment created was quickly filled by alt-right and extremist hate groups who intensified their efforts in many rural areas across the country.

Why were many rural communities so vulnerable to these extremist messages? Years with no visible improvement in the realities their communities face – extreme poverty, lack of access to affordable healthcare, wages that fail meet basic needs, diminishing job opportunities, and unattainable higher education. As rural people look for ways to make meaning of these overwhelming realities, in many communities the only political message they hear is to blame “other” people. Rather than examining the complexities of a political and economic system that was designed to subjugate people based on race, gender and class, they are told again and again that immigrants or people of color are to blame.



A 2020 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that white nationalist hate groups in the U.S. have increased throughout the Trump era, driven by “a deep fear of demographic change.”¹² And the Trump Administration works hard to advance the narrative of rural folks as a homogenous group in lock step with their agenda. But this problem didn’t start with the 2016 election. The widespread distrust of government is a

product of decades of increasing alienation people feel from the political process, and a fundamental tenet of white supremacy - rugged individualism. By exploiting the economic struggle and personal pain of the poor and working class, hate groups are offering people an analysis that not only offers the cause of their problems, but also the antidote. Beyond organizing communities, they have groomed candidates to run for office and successfully elected local and state leaders to represent their interests and advance extremist, draconian legislation.

Taking on the threat of white nationalist and hate groups is not something that can be taken care of from inside the Beltway or on the coasts. We need to reinvest in progressive organizing in rural places, on the ground and in local communities across the country, and really talk with people in rural communities about their lives.

When [United Vision for Idaho](#) talks with people in rural communities across the state, it quickly becomes clear that we can’t win this fight if we focus on what divides us. The embers of hate are fueled by a good vs. bad binary that provides little room for people to change what they think. To defeat hate, we have to engage people on their pain and build relationships and community.

We need to approach voters with openness and nuanced approaches that allow for learning about how the social and political system is rigged and that those they have been told to blame did not create this unfair system, nor are they benefiting from it.

People’s Action is working with state-based organizations in places that have been fertile ground for extremist groups. We want to change the trajectory and organize people around a race-conscious, working- class agenda. To succeed in making this shift, we have to make organizing in rural communities a priority and never again cede power to the far right by defunding the progressive efforts in the places we now understand are critical to our collective liberation.

million people live in “non-metropolitan counties” (which range from completely rural, sparsely populated counties to those that are mostly rural but also contain small cities).³ No matter who’s counting, rural communities and small towns are home to a lot of people, and cover a huge expanse. Rural counties cover 97 percent of the land in the U.S., and these communities provide not only food, energy, and water to their suburban and urban neighbors, but also recreation and cultural opportunities.⁴

While rural communities are less diverse than urban communities, they are not homogenous. As of the 2010 Census, about one-fifth of rural residents are people of color, including about 40 percent who are Black, 35 percent who are nonwhite Hispanic, and 25 percent who are Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander or multiracial.⁵ Some regions of the country have more diverse rural communities, including the Southeast, which has a concentrated rural Black population.⁶ Texas, parts of Idaho, North Carolina and western Kansas have higher than average percentages of rural county residents who are foreign-born.⁷ South Dakota has six rural counties where Native Americans made up more than 50 percent of the population.⁸

A study by Headwaters Economics found that in two of every five rural counties in the West, growth in minority populations slowed or reversed population decrease and that 99 percent of rural western counties experienced growth in minority populations in the last 35 years.⁹ The Pew Research Center found that since 2000, immigrants were responsible for a larger share of population growth in rural counties than suburban counties.¹⁰

According to a report by the Movement Advancement Project, surveys of rural areas find that the percentage of the rural population who identifies as LGBT is consistent with estimates for the overall U.S. population, including that rural youth are just as likely as urban youth to identify as LGBT. Their report estimates that 15 to 20 percent of the total U.S. LGBT population live in rural areas.¹¹



Organizing to Transform the South

Justin Vest, Executive Director, Hometown Action

Economic elites have long used the South as a testing ground for oppressive policies and institutions, primarily by exploiting the fears of rural whites. From the institution of slavery to mass incarceration, abortion bans and anti-trans legislation, or the refusal to invest in healthcare, living wage jobs, or renewable energy, the South sets the cap on what is politically possible across the country. Now, as mass unemployment, an out-of-step government response to the COVID-19 pandemic and mass uprisings in defense of Black lives create a turning point in American history, the path to radical transformation on these and other issues runs through our region.

Sixty percent of the nation's rural population lives east of the Mississippi River, with almost half of all rural people living in the South.¹³ The South is the fastest growing region of the country, accounting for half of all population growth since 2011 and controlling a third of electoral college votes – a number that could increase after the next Census. The region is home to half of the Black population with a significant share residing in Deep Southern states like Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. Seven of the top ten states with the fastest growing Latinx population are located in the South along with four states with the fastest growing Asian

population.¹⁴ According to the Williams Institute, the South has the largest share of LGBT residents with 3.8 million LGBT adults¹⁵ and is home to more trans adults and youth than any other region.¹⁶ (Although we know that this is probably an underestimate, because not everyone is comfortable answering questions about their sexual orientation and many surveys don't capture the full range of how people identify themselves.)

The stakes for our communities are incredibly high. Southern states are predicted to see the greatest impact from climate change¹⁷ and are already being ravaged by the coronavirus at a rate that outpaces other parts of the country.

The effectiveness of oppressive forces comes from their ability to sow divisions between people across race, class, gender, sexuality, and geography, cementing the narrative of the hopelessly backward South. [Hometown Action, Down Home North Carolina](#) and [West Virginia Citizen Action Group](#) are directly confronting this generations-long strategy to maintain white supremacy by shifting narratives and building a truly intersectional movement to transform the possibilities of this region and beyond.



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While there is a widely held assumption that rural economies are dominated by agriculture or natural resource extraction, [that isn't always the case](#). Many rural counties do have agriculture or natural resource industries like mining or forestry as major economic drivers, but many do not. Manufacturing, recreation and retail also employ significant numbers of rural people. One constant in all types of rural communities is that the biggest sector of the civilian workforce is what the Census Bureau calls “education services, and health care and social assistance industry,” which includes schools, health care providers, and government agencies.¹⁸ Another industry that is often overlooked in discussions of rural economies is manufacturing. While not all rural communities have significant manufacturing operations, the share of local earnings and jobs from manufacturing is higher in rural communities than urban, so the decline in manufacturing over the last two decades has been felt more severely.¹⁹

While rural economies may be diverse in what drives them, too many of them are struggling. According to the USDA, 1 out of 4 rural counties is a “high poverty county” (in which an average of 20 percent or more of the population lives below the federal poverty line, which is \$26,200 for a family of four),²⁰ compared to 1 out of 10 urban counties. And all of the counties considered to be “extreme poverty areas,” where the poverty rate is over 40 percent, were rural in 2018. These counties are not evenly distributed, they are concentrated in regions with above-average populations of racial minorities.²¹ According to the Food Research and Action Center, in 2016, rural households were more likely to experience food insecurity (hunger) than households in metropolitan areas.²²

Decades of disinvestment and struggling economies have had an impact on the social fabric of many rural communities. Rural areas have had lower population growth rates than urban areas since the mid-1990's, and after the recession, rural counties overall experienced a seven-year stretch of population loss that ended only in 2018. But the population trends in rural counties are not uniform. They vary by region, with rural counties in the Northeast and Midwest tending to lose population, while those in the South and West gain. Another variable is whether energy extraction (particularly natural gas) created boom and bust cycles, as seen in places like North Dakota. Recreation and

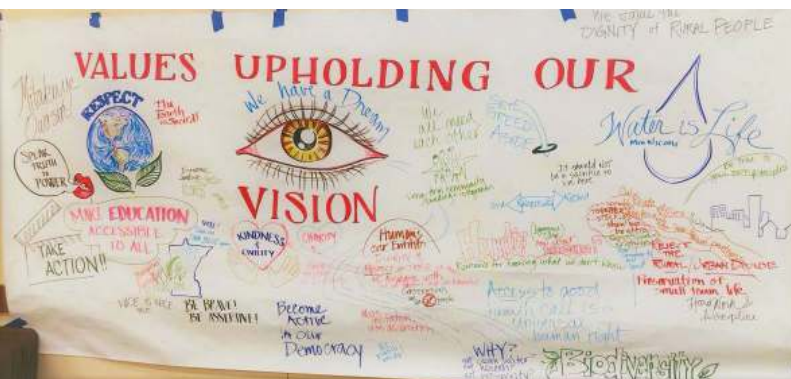


other amenities can attract new residents and retirees, driving population trends in places like the southern Appalachian region and the northern Rockies.²³ In many areas, declining population has led to reduced numbers of government service providers, schools or post office branches, forcing people to travel further to access these services. And many rural communities do not have adequate access to a bank that can provide accounts for individuals or financing for local businesses.²⁴

How Rural Communities Are Doing

Statistics don't tell the full story of how our communities are doing. While some communities are growing and thriving, many rural people talk about interconnected challenges that add up to a feeling that their communities are being hollowed out. They describe a slow but steady chain reaction that cuts vital threads in the web that makes up a community: when a local manufacturer shuts its doors or many small farms give way to just a few massive corporate-run factory farms, there are fewer people shopping in local stores or using the post office, schools or hospital. Once one of those local services closes, it makes the community less attractive for someone new to move there and makes it harder for current residents to stay, especially younger adults. And on and on, in a cycle that drains our main streets, schools and civic life.

Bad political decisions and bipartisan neglect have contributed to interconnected economic, public health and environmental crises, with serious consequences for rural people, who are poorer, sicker and older than our urban neighbors. [Wealth extraction, resource](#)



COVID-19

As we release this report, the global COVID-19 pandemic continues to do unprecedented harm to communities across the world, both to people's health and to their livelihoods. The need for our rural communities to have strong safety nets, healthcare systems and economies was always clear, but the pandemic has shown that it is urgent.

While the initial impact of COVID-19 in the U.S. was in cities, several aspects of rural communities make them extremely vulnerable: people in rural communities tend to be older, have less access to medical care, and have less access to the good internet connections necessary for distance learning, telemedicine, and telecommuting.²⁵ And many rural communities are home to facilities, like large-scale meat processing plants and prisons, that have turned into hotspots for the disease.²⁶

The problems that make rural America so susceptible to this pandemic and the economic disruption it triggered are pre-existing conditions. To help our communities recover from the pandemic, and be stronger for what comes next, we need our elected officials to focus on what our communities need. The first thing they should do is provide immediate relief, as outlined by [*The People's Bailout*](#).



REIMAGINING RURAL COMMUNITIES

The path to a sustainable economic recovery in rural America is not to turn our communities into sacrifice zones for Big Agriculture, Big Oil and private prisons. The things we need – better healthcare, education, infrastructure and housing – also provide opportunities to create well-paid jobs and economic stability.

The list of needs – and opportunities – for rural communities is long. We can't cover all of them in this report. But we will examine a few in depth, with stories of groups on the ground fighting for what they need, and suggest others that are part of our long-term vision. And we offer these guiding principles for how we choose which policies and plans work best for our communities.

Principles for a Rural Recovery

1

The big bold policies that urban and suburban communities are fighting for, like [Medicare For All](#), [the Homes Guarantee](#) and [the Jobs Guarantee](#),²⁷ are what we are fighting for too. The details might need to be a little different to suit rural communities' needs, but the core commitments are the same.

2

A rural recovery must value and protect all workers and allow all people to work with dignity, livable wages and strong labor protections that are actually enforced, and end the exploitation of incarcerated people for food production, fighting forest fires or other work in rural communities.

3

Our recovery needs to include immigration reform that creates pathways to legalization for all undocumented people, including pathways to citizenship for those that want it, and an end to deportations until a comprehensive policy is in place.

4

Economic diversity makes our communities stronger. We need to build economies based on a mix of industries, including recreation and tourism that depend on preserving our natural environment, and value the economic opportunity we can create by taking care of each other through well-funded universal healthcare, education, and childcare systems.



5

Rural communities know what we need. We need to be involved when new programs, new industries or new funding are being considered.

6

We need access to government services. Declining populations have led to the closure or consolidation of an array of government services in small towns and rural areas – from schools to post offices to the USDA offices that farmers need to visit to connect with programs they rely on. Any recovery plan for rural communities needs to restore reasonable access, without long distance travel, to essential government services.

7

The federal government is the best option to fund the infrastructure that rural communities need. Wall St. won't finance our rural revival. Rural communities usually can't attract affordable private financing because of the extra expenses involved in many rural projects and because there are not enough ratepayers in rural areas for private investors to get a return on their investment. Private investment in public services like roads or water systems doesn't make sense in any community, because communities need public control over these vital public services.

8

Don't make rural communities compete with cities and suburbs for federal dollars. Spreading the high costs of complicated rural infrastructure projects over a relatively small number of residents means the "bang for the buck" factor of rural grant proposals can suffer in comparison with urban and suburban projects, and rural areas and small towns often lack the staffing and technical expertise to have projects planned far in advance. Any federal investment in infrastructure cannot punish rural communities if they are not immediately ready to propose "shovel-ready" projects. Instead, federal funding should include technical assistance for rural areas to develop project proposals and set-asides for these communities to ensure they can access funding.

Rural communities need candidates who will work with us on a new approach, based on our bold agenda and a vision for what our communities can be, anchored by thriving small towns with diversified economies, strong safety nets that meet people's needs, a family farm food system, a plan to rapidly transition to a renewable energy future, and a jobs guarantee that invests in us to rebuild our communities and take care of each other.



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RELIEF: *Immediate help to respond to the unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19. We need to bail out people, not corporations, and follow the principles outlined in [The People's Bailout](#).*

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- Don't make people choose between their health and their vote, by expanding vote by mail and protecting the U.S. Postal Service, and providing funding and support to keep polls safe and accessible.

RECOVERY: *Once the immediate crisis of COVID-19 has passed, what we need to do next.*

- Increase the minimum wage.
- Establish a federal Jobs Guarantee.
- Require paid sick leave for all workers.
- Expand access to affordable childcare and invest in rural education systems.
- Invest in rebuilding our infrastructure, including [water systems](#), [broadband internet access](#), schools, roads and transportation infrastructure.
- Establish a [postal banking system](#) to provide services to underbanked rural communities.

REIMAGINATION: *Policies we need to build resilient rural communities for the long haul.*

- Replace the broken patchwork of private, for-profit insurance and supplemental public programs with [Medicare for All](#).
- Create a new approach to the overdose crisis that redirects government resources away from criminalization and towards public health interventions.
- Transition as soon as possible to a renewable energy system led by publicly-owned energy utilities and rural electric cooperatives.
- [Ban all new fossil fuel and extractive energy projects](#).
- Require fossil fuel companies to pay for the cleanup of their former mines and drilling sites.
- Fund a just transition so that fossil fuel industry workers have access to opportunities in the clean energy, weatherization and energy efficiency sectors.
- Expand access to broadband internet as part of the transition to renewable energy, with [rural broadband cooperative providers](#) and coordinated energy and broadband infrastructure projects.
- Rapidly transition to a renewable energy system led by publicly-owned energy utilities and rural electric cooperatives.
- Establish a [Homes Guarantee](#) to provide everyone safe, accessible, sustainable and permanently affordable housing, by passing the [Homes for All Act](#) and the [Green New Deal for Public Housing Act](#).
- Establish a moratorium on factory farms, with support for the transition of existing operations to more sustainable production methods.
- Establish supply management programs, including grain reserves and parity pricing programs for commodity crops.

HEALTHCARE

While the initial impact of COVID-19 in the U.S. was in cities, rural communities are now home to some of the most dramatic rates of infection and emerging hotspots.²⁸ Several things about rural communities make them extremely vulnerable to the pandemic: people in rural communities tend to be older, already face a higher risk of death from conditions like heart and respiratory disease, have less access to medical care, and have less access to the fast internet connections necessary for telemedicine, distance learning and telecommuting.²⁹ There are also worries that the medical system in rural communities cannot absorb the influx of critically ill people that can come from a COVID-19 outbreak,³⁰ or for already financially-strapped rural hospitals and clinics to bear the additional costs of preparation and missed revenue from postponing routine services.³¹

But this is just the latest round of trouble for rural healthcare, which was already in a fragile state before any of us had heard about the novel coronavirus. Polling done in 2020 by Ruralorganizing.org found that healthcare access and insurance were the top issues identified by rural Americans, with 42 percent of respondents saying “being able to pay for health insurance or health care costs” was one of their top four concerns. A third of rural Americans reported having been “extremely” negatively impacted by the healthcare system.³²

One reason for this stress is that rural residents are less likely to have employer-provided health insurance coverage, and many predominantly rural states have not yet expanded Medicaid to cover all low-income people who qualify under federal law.³³

Healthcare workforce shortages are prevalent throughout rural America, with a small percentage of physicians and surgeons choosing to practice in rural settings and less available specialty services. Access to reliable transportation to travel potentially long distances to get to healthcare facilities can create yet another obstacle.³⁴

Rural hospitals are very dependent on federal programs such as Medicare and Medicaid. A study in 2018 found that states that did not expand Medicaid to cover more people under the Affordable Care Act suffered a significant increase in hospital closures. “It underscores how important the [Medicaid] expansion has been for rural communities,” Andrea Callow, associate director of Medicaid initiatives at Families USA, told STAT in 2018. “Rural hospitals rely on Medicaid and Medicare as primary payers.”³⁵

In response to tough economic trends, independent nonprofit hospitals nationwide have been selling themselves to for-profit chains or private-equity firms, or consolidating into regional health systems. For facilities serving small towns and rural communities, consolidation can mean reduced services, longer travel and loss of jobs at what may be one of the bigger and best-paying employers in the area.³⁶ And sometimes the result of the bad economics facing rural hospitals is outright closure. Across the country, at least 170 rural hospitals have closed since 2005, according to the North Carolina Rural Health Research Program.³⁷ Hospital closures since 2005 have removed an estimated 3,500 hospital beds in the rural South alone.³⁸ Over half of the rural hospitals that close stop providing any type of health care,³⁹ and when a typical rural hospital that served an entire county closes, there is a decrease of about \$1,400 in per capita income in the county.⁴⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic could be the final straw for many rural hospitals that were already struggling



financially, unless federal funding arrives soon. An analysis of hospital financial reporting by USA TODAY found that almost half of the counties with coronavirus cases are served by a hospital that reported a net loss in 2017. For 640 of these struggling medical centers, there is no other hospital in town.⁴¹

A 2019 survey of rural communities found that more than four in ten rural adults without health insurance reported not getting care when they needed it and about one in four with health insurance reported that they did not get care when they needed it.⁴² This lack of access takes a toll on rural people's health. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, rural communities have much higher rates of excess deaths (a measure of health disparities based on deaths that happen at a younger age than expected and may have been preventable) than metropolitan areas for the heart disease, cancer, unintentional injury, chronic lower respiratory disease, and stroke. Four of the five leading causes of death in rural areas are associated with chronic disease and rural life expectancy is generally lower in rural than metropolitan counties.⁴³ The mortality rate for people in rural areas is higher than those in urban areas, and the gap between urban and rural mortality is growing bigger since 2007.⁴⁴ Minority communities in rural areas often face additional challenges that can impact their health, including chronic poverty, lack of consistent medical care for

migrant workers or others who move frequently, or language barriers, and some rural regions of the country have even more severe health disparities.⁴⁵

In many rural communities, chronic lack of access to mental health care, prolonged economic distress and cultural norms around self-reliance serve as “social determinants” of mental health that drive yet another challenge for rural communities. “There are mental health problems in urban areas, but they’re much worse in rural areas,” Ronald Manderscheid, a researcher at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health told *Psychology Today* in 2018. “If the urban areas have a cold, rural areas have pneumonia.”⁴⁶ In 2015, two Princeton economists coined the phrase “deaths of despair” to describe increases in premature deaths from suicide and misuse of drugs and alcohol, which they attribute to underlying economic and social pressures and the lack of a social safety net.⁴⁷ These types of deaths are blamed for an increase in the death rate for white non-Hispanics relative to other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., much of which is occurring in rural counties.⁴⁸ In the last several years, as a prolonged economic crisis grips most sectors of U.S. agriculture, concern has grown about farmer suicides,⁴⁹ to the point that one of the most bipartisan issues in the most recent Farm Bill was funding for an outreach network to assist farmers under stress.⁵⁰



Medicaid Expansion

The 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) created the option for states to expand who can qualify for Medicaid, the primary insurance program for low-income people, and offered significant federal funding to pay for the costs of expanded coverage.⁵¹ By July 2020, 14 states had still not expanded Medicaid coverage, in effect declining federal funding to support rural healthcare. The 14 states without expanded Medicaid include many with significant rural populations: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin (the state has expanded eligibility for Medicaid but does not accept the federal funding offered under the Affordable Care Act⁵²) and Wyoming.⁵³ The issue will appear on the ballot this summer in Missouri and in June, 2020, Oklahoma voters narrowly approved a state constitutional amendment to expand Medicaid in 2021.⁵⁴

Because the ACA was originally supposed to cover low-income people through Medicaid, the subsidies the law provides to help people buy private insurance are not available to many low-income people. In 2012, when the Supreme Court made Medicaid expansion voluntary for the states, it undercut this key assumption in the design of the ACA and created a gap in coverage for low-income people in states that did not expand Medicaid, which the Kaiser Family Foundation estimates includes 2 million people nationwide.⁵⁵

States that have expanded Medicaid coverage are generating proof that Medicaid expansion not only provides desperately-needed care for low-income people, but that the cost to states of expanded coverage is manageable and comes with significant economic benefits. A study by the University of Montana estimated that expanded coverage for 94,000 residents added more than \$500 million to the state's economy per year and generated 5,000 new jobs. An Iowa State University economist described that state's Medicaid expansion as "a nice shot in the arm to the state's economy in terms of expanding the health care industry and the health supplies and prescription drugs and other health-providing industries," in addition to the creation of \$500 million in additional income for workers.⁵⁶



This summer, voters in Missouri will have the opportunity to expand Medicaid coverage for an estimated 230,000 people in their state when they vote on an initiative put on the ballot by Missouri citizens. Missouri Rural Crisis Center (MRCC), which has been organizing since the 1980's in rural communities across the state, will be mobilizing their members and rural Missourians, in coordination with groups like Missouri Jobs With Justice Vote Action.

MRCC's program director Rhonda Perry explains why they are fighting for Medicaid expansion this way: "In rural Missouri, we're pretty independent, but we also watch out for each other in a crisis. We help drive our neighbors to the doctor, we hold fundraisers for their medical bills, we help take care of their cows when they are in the hospital, we take food to their house when they get home and we pray for them. But there are some things that we cannot do for our neighbors no matter how much we would like to. We can't order the CAT scan, or the ultrasound-guided biopsy, or the PET scan, or the MRI. We can't provide the chemo or radiation or other necessary treatments to save their lives. Those things require access to affordable health insurance and healthcare infrastructure in rural communities including hospitals, doctors, nurses and critical care facilities. Medicaid Expansion is an opportunity for Missouri to create rural healthcare jobs and ensure that we have access to healthcare services that save lives."

What Rural Communities Need

RELIEF: Immediate help to respond to the unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19.

- Free testing, treatment and vaccines.
- Eliminate all out-of-pocket health costs for every person in America during the COVID-19 crisis by passing [the Health Care Emergency Guarantee Act](#).
- Provide [emergency support for rural healthcare](#) systems with funding to increase rural communities' capacity to respond, including no-interest loans and USDA grants to rural healthcare providers, migrant health centers and other rural community healthcare services for equipment, supplies and staffing.

RECOVERY: Once the immediate crisis of COVID-19 has passed, what we need to do next.

- [Protect existing health care infrastructure](#) by blocking any attempts to repeal or undermine the Affordable Care Act or any budget cuts to Medicare, Medicaid, or the Child Health Insurance Program, ensuring access to coverage for everyone, regardless of immigration status, and ensuring coverage for reproductive care.
- Expand Medicaid in all 50 states.
- [Invest in rural hospitals, the rural healthcare workforce, telehealth capacity, community health centers and technical assistance.](#)

REIMAGINATION: Policies we need to build resilient rural communities for the long haul.

- We need to replace the broken patchwork of private, for-profit insurance and supplemental public programs with a universal, single-payer system guaranteed by the government to provide care for everyone. [Rural communities](#) need [Medicare for All](#).



THE OVERDOSE CRISIS

The long-running “War on Drugs” has made our nation the global leader in both incarceration and overdose deaths. It has cost trillions of dollars, while doing nothing to reduce the harms associated with drug misuse but allowed large corporations to reap billions from prescription drugs like opioids that have exacerbated the overdose crisis in rural communities.⁵⁷ The well-documented prevalence of opioid, methamphetamine and alcohol misuse in rural communities⁵⁸ has often been met with the same misguided approach as strategies used in urban communities – criminalizing the user. But as many states pursue settlements in court against opioid manufacturers and distributors, it has become clear that many rural regions of the country were targeted by this industry, with devastating consequences. A recent analysis by the Washington Post found that tribal communities were not spared, and that distributors shipped nearly as many pills per person to states with large tribal communities like Oklahoma as the so-called “opioid belt” around Appalachia.⁵⁹

The lack of access to medical care in rural communities is also true for access to drug treatment.⁶⁰ Some people in rural communities may hesitate to seek treatment due to stigma and concerns about privacy in small towns and rural communities. Even if that isn’t a barrier, treatment services may be so far away that getting there for regular appointments is not feasible.⁶¹ Although no community has enough accessible programs to treat opioid use disorder with behavioral therapy and medication, the shortage of these programs is severe in rural communities. Eighty-eight percent of large rural counties lack a sufficient number of opioid treatment programs, where patients go, sometimes daily, to take medications and receive other services.⁶²

Fighting for a New Approach in Indiana

Tracy Skaggs, Hoosier Action



I am a lifelong resident of New Albany, Indiana and a recovering heroin addict of five years. My drug use began at the age of 4, when my mother introduced me to marijuana. By the age of 13, my mother stuck the straw up my nose with a big line of cocaine at the other end, a shot of whiskey to chase it down and school the next morning. Through her choices, my life was literally put in jeopardy. I have had my share of struggles with every drug as an adult. Pain pills became my drug of choice, which led to heroin. By the grace of God, I was delivered from the grips of heroin addiction on March 10, 2015.

Even though I began a new journey in recovery, I continued to watch my community struggle. I have watched loved ones go in and out of the criminal justice system and the child welfare system, ripping children out of the arms of their parents because of their

substance use disorder. I have known many who have entered treatment, with some finding recovery, many who were lost in the gaps of the healthcare system and many others whose “just one more time” was their last.

This is the same system that creates more barriers for those who are already at a social disadvantage by incarcerating people instead of connecting them to resources that would help them guide their life into a positive direction and reunify families so that communities can begin to thrive.

Over the last five years, the opioid epidemic has continued to rise, which has placed a huge strain on Indiana’s economy, criminal justice, social services, and healthcare system. The pandemic has made it worse! In order for Indiana to recover, our leaders must take active steps towards ensuring Hoosiers have access to affordable and safe housing, healthcare coverage through Medicaid so people can receive medical & addiction treatment, criminal justice reform that would end systemic racism, and equality for all.

What Rural Communities Need

RELIEF: Immediate help to respond to the unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19.

- Provide [support for patients seeking drug treatment](#) during the pandemic. Several immediate reforms are needed to make sure that COVID-19 crisis does not make the overdose crisis worse by making people take unnecessary risks to receive treatment.

RECOVERY: Once the immediate crisis of COVID-19 has passed, what we need to do next.

- Use Medicaid to [expand access to medication-assisted treatment, overdose prevention techniques \(naloxone\) and harm reduction services like sanctioned safe injection sites](#).
- [Provide federal funding for states and communities](#) to provide a continuum of care and treat addiction like a public health crisis.

REIMAGINATION: Policies we need to build resilient rural communities for the long haul.

- We need a new approach to the overdose crisis that redirects government resources away from criminalization and towards public health interventions, while taxing big pharmaceutical companies for the public health impacts of their products.



We Know What We Need

Kasey Badgley, UnHarming Ohio

In 2016, a photo was released by a small town police department that it still used all over the country as an illustration of the “opioid epidemic.” It depicts three humans in a car, a couple in the front seat and a little boy in the backseat. The two in the front are suffering from an obvious overdose, but rather than jumping to their rescue, the East Liverpool Ohio Police Department took a photo. This is my hometown and this photo exemplifies how the very few resources that small town and rural communities provide have consistently failed to help us.

In a place where the police respond to every single call, and are also some of the most well-revered citizens, it’s very hard to call them in the case of medical emergency or overdose without fear of police or criminal justice intervention. The rate of recreational drug use is so high that nearly everybody I know has been a recreational drug user at one point or another. And yet the tactics used by the very services who are called to save our lives are outdated, explicitly harmful and deadly to people in active addiction. People in East Liverpool have adjusted by creating drug-user led street action teams, who distribute Narcan, train people to use it and also make themselves available to respond to overdose calls rather than the police.

The moral of the story is that folks in small-town and rural America do not need policing to solve this overdose epidemic. We need access to adequate healthcare, including telemedicine. We need less police intervention and more community-led initiatives. We know what we need – we just need access to the resources to do it.



ENERGY

To address the existential crisis of climate change, we need a rapid transition to a 100 percent just energy economy that is based on the most efficient uses of electricity sourced from renewable energy. A just energy economy goes far beyond simply replacing fossil fuels because it is based on truly renewable fuels, provides good green jobs, democratizes the grid and does not allow any community to become a sacrifice zone. We have an opportunity – and an obligation – to put people and the planet before profits in order to transform our economy overall and the energy that fuels it.

Many rural communities have been shaped for decades by fossil fuel extraction, including coal mining, oil drilling and, more recently, fracked natural gas. Rural electrical cooperatives that provide power in many rural areas were born in the New Deal-era as a method for bringing electricity to rural places that investor-owned utilities determined were unprofitable to serve. Today, rural electric coops are still the major player in the power industry in rural parts of the country, serving 42 million people in 48 states.⁶³

Unfortunately, rural electric coops are very reliant on coal for electricity generation. Over 60 percent of the electricity generated by rural coops in 2017 came from coal-fired power plants.⁶⁴ Many rural electric coops may be stuck with expensive coal-fired power plants and long-term contracts with fossil fuel providers. Federal

funding could alleviate this problem by forgiving billions in outstanding Rural Utilities Service loans for fossil fuel power plants on the condition that the resources be devoted to bill relief for customers as well as reinvestment in clean energy, broadband, and other infrastructure our rural economies need. This would allow coops to shut down these coal, gas, and oil-fueled power plants and more quickly transition to energy efficiency and renewable power sources.⁶⁵

Shifting rural electric coops to cleaner energy sources is a priority for groups organizing around the country. This spring, after years of engagement and advocacy by member-owners, the Great River Energy coop serving 700,000 customers in Minnesota announced plans to close the largest coal-fired power plant in North Dakota and replace it with renewable sources.⁶⁶

This transition to clean energy is possible for rural communities, and could be a key pathway for economic recovery. Rather than bail out or prop up fossil fuel companies, we need federal investment in the transition to a clean energy future. A 2020 analysis commissioned by the Sierra Club found that investments in clean energy could provide over 647,000 good jobs per year nationwide, including over 61,000 manufacturing jobs. The study estimated that investing \$41.5 billion over five years in tax credits for clean energy like wind, solar, battery storage and energy efficiency could put 100,000 people to work and that 83,000 more jobs could be



created by investing in clean energy, energy storage and transmission projects. It projected that 190,000 jobs could be created for former fossil fuel workers to close and remediate oil and gas wells (a task which largely falls to states if companies fail to meet their cleanup obligations because they go bankrupt).⁶⁷ While these are national figures, a share of this investment in rural communities, especially as part of a just transition for people who used to work in fossil fuel extraction dependent communities, could be transformative.

Rural communities have great potential to be a source of renewable energy, for their own needs as well as urban and suburban areas. Wind energy now reliably delivers over 20 percent of the electricity produced in six states with significant rural areas: Kansas, Iowa, Oklahoma, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Maine.⁶⁸

A critical variable in whether rural communities can quickly and fairly transition to a clean energy economy will be how engaged we are in demanding this transition and making sure electric utilities are held accountable. The transition to renewable energy should not be driven by the wealthy few so they can control this new industry. We need [active community participation in democratically run cooperatives](#) or community-owned power utilities.

Fighting for a Fair Clean Energy Future in Maine

Jesse Graham, Co-Director, Maine People's Alliance

Maine's location, ecology and the importance of tourism and natural-resource-based industries mean that our state is both uniquely vulnerable to a rapidly warming planet and uniquely well-positioned to make some of the big economic and societal changes we need to confront a changing climate. Maine People's Alliance (MPA) works for community ownership of power, toward a state-level Green New Deal and against the fossil fuel and other corporate interests that continue to profit from sabotaging the climate.

We are fighting for a state-level Green New Deal that would employ workers to design, produce, and install renewable energy systems, while prohibiting new fossil fuel infrastructure.⁶⁹ And we are working to create a consumer-owned power grid in place of the one currently owned by Central Maine Power (CMP) and Emera Maine, two of the worst-performing utilities in the country, owned by multinational corporations.

With corporate electric utilities, ratepayers are not just paying for the cost of providing the electricity they use, but also dividends to company investors — who have no motivation to invest in our clean energy future. MPA member John Costin explained the difference between a consumer-owned utility and an investor-owned utility this way: “Between 2001 and 2017, I operated

my custom woodworking business in Kennebunk with electric power supplied by Kennebunk Light and Power — one of only two consumer-owned electric utilities in Maine. In 2017, I moved my business to Sanford and became a customer of CMP. Each unit of energy delivered is now costing me nearly two-and-a-half times as much as it did from the consumer-owned utility.”⁷⁰ These companies also struggle with reliability and inaccurate billing that burden consumers. As MPA member Rob DuPaul points out, “For countless Mainers, a sudden inexplicable rise in their electricity bills means they have to choose between going hungry and keeping the lights on. That's just not a choice that Mainers should have to make.”⁷¹





”

If this model were brought to scale nationwide, we could create thousands of local construction jobs that pay for themselves through consumer energy savings and we could have a significant impact on climate change!”

Working for an Energy-Efficient Future in Wisconsin

*Tracey Mofle and Arianne Peterson,
Citizen Action of Wisconsin*

We live on a farm in Barron County outside of Rice Lake, Wisconsin. Rural communities are feeling the impacts of climate change, from excessive heat to flooding to increasingly frequent severe storms, and these threaten to disrupt our livelihoods that are largely dependent on agriculture and tourism. People living in small towns like ours are also more likely to get our energy from more expensive and less efficient sources like fuel oil, propane, or electric space and water heating, meaning we produce more carbon emissions and pay more per capita for our energy than urban residents. We also see our local economies struggling to provide the kind of meaningful, well-paying jobs needed to support upcoming generations of young families.

All of these challenges provide a major opportunity for rural residents like us to make a difference. We are proud to join with many others through Citizen Action of Wisconsin to urge communities of all sizes to reinvest in our home and energy infrastructure through solar panels, weatherization, and energy efficiency upgrades. These are not only powerful tools for cutting carbon emissions, but they also reduce our utility bills and create quality careers right in our neighborhoods.

We worked with Citizen Action of Wisconsin to convince financial institutions to finance solar panels and other energy upgrades. If this model were brought to scale nationwide, we could create thousands of local construction jobs that pay for themselves through consumer energy savings and we could have a significant impact on climate change! The New Deal electrified rural America. Now, it's time for rural America to invest in a renewable and energy-efficient future, for ourselves and for our planet.

What Rural Communities Need

Instead of bailing out oil, gas and coal corporations, federal money should go towards financing the transition to clean energy sources, prioritizing communities that have long been dependent on fossil fuel extraction. All jobs created by the transition must be living wage jobs with benefits and the freedom to collectively bargain.

As the rural energy sector transitions to clean energy, our communities will need to make good choices to avoid falling into the same old pattern of rural communities serving as sources of energy sources for urban and suburban communities, without sharing in benefits or ensuring that our health and environment are protected. There are already controversies about power lines in rural communities across the country, and if this type of infrastructure is sited unfairly, without the involvement and consent of local people, it doesn't matter if the power being transmitted comes from a renewable source. To avoid repeating past mistakes, rural communities need to be involved in planning and decision-making from the beginning and retain some level of local control over zoning and other regulatory decisions about how these facilities are sited and operated.

RELIEF: Immediate help to respond to the unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19.

- Establish a moratorium on utility shutoffs, deposits, customer late fees, and negative credit reporting, [for all utilities including cooperatives and community-owned utilities](#). Utilities must also reinstate services that have already been cut off due to nonpayment.
- Increased federal funding for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program to assist low-income families in paying their utility bills.
- Increased funding for the USDA Rural Utilities Service programs that support rural electric cooperatives and energy efficiency loans programs as well as the Rural Energy for America Program, which provides grants to rural businesses and farms for energy audits, energy efficiency and renewable energy projects.

RECOVERY: Once the immediate crisis of COVID-19 has passed, what we need to do next.

- To speed their transition to clean power sources, forgive rural electric cooperatives' debt for fossil fuel plants on the condition that future funding from the Rural Utilities Service is dedicated to investments in energy efficiency and clean energy.
- Increase funding and create new financing programs for energy efficiency and distributed renewable energy systems.
- Provide technical assistance to utilities to implement inclusive financing programs for energy efficiency and distributed generation and storage, such as the Pay As You Save concept, in order to assure that any household can access cost effective energy upgrades regardless of income, credit score, or renter status.
- Increase funding for the Weatherization Assistance Program to reduce energy costs for low-income families' by improving the energy efficiency of their homes.

REIMAGINATION: Policies we need to build resilient rural communities for the long haul.

- Transition as soon as possible to a renewable energy system led by publicly-owned energy utilities and rural electric cooperatives.
- [Ban all new fossil fuel and extractive energy projects.](#)
- Invest in public and community ownership of renewable energy.
- Require fossil fuel companies to pay for the cleanup of their former mines and drilling sites.
- Fund a just transition so that fossil fuel industry workers have access to educational and training opportunities of their choice, as well as paths to new jobs in the clean energy, weatherization and energy efficiency sectors.
- Building clean energy infrastructure should also include connecting rural communities to broadband internet. [Rural broadband cooperative providers](#) can follow the model of rural electric coops and coordinating energy and broadband infrastructure could streamline both processes.

HOUSING

There is an affordable housing crisis across America, and rural communities have not been spared. In 2016, 47 percent of rural renters (2.6 million people) were “rent-burdened,” meaning they pay a third or more of their income in rent, only slightly below the rate in urban areas.⁷² For people looking to buy homes in many rural communities, affordable and adequate existing houses can be almost impossible to find, and rates of new home construction in many areas are quite low.

The tight supply of housing in many rural communities is the result of several factors: rural areas tend to have older housing stock, people tend to stay in their houses longer without moving, and lack of labor and lending for new housing construction have slowed the growth in the housing supply. And in some areas, people visiting or relocating for recreation, tourism or as retirees can make rural housing shortages even more severe when new residents from more expensive markets are able to pay higher prices for scarce homes in their new community.⁷³

For the rental housing supply, decades of shrinking funding for public and rental housing support have taken a dramatic toll in rural communities and housing advocates are raising the alarm that the supply of affordable rental housing units in rural areas is disappearing. Since the 1950's, the USDA has provided financing for construction, repair and affordability of rural housing, and there are over 13,000 USDA rental

properties providing more than 415,000 homes across rural America. No new USDA direct-financed rental housing has been developed in years, but a USDA program called Section 515 subsidizes new affordable housing in rural areas by giving construction loans and ongoing support to landlords until the mortgage for the property is paid off. But the Housing Assistance Council estimates that Section 515 could lose an average of 1,700 housing units a year over the next few decades as more properties age out of the program.⁷⁴

The shortage of rental housing is exacerbated by the fact that many rural people have lower incomes, making it hard to afford the high cost of scarce rental housing. While people in rural communities have long worried about whether they could find housing that was in good enough condition to be safe and adequate for their needs, now many rural people are also worried about how to pay rents that are too high for their income. Lance George, director of research and information at the Housing Assistance Council, told CBS News, “You think it’s often just with big cities. Housing costs are lower in rural areas, but incomes are pretty low too.”

Just like urban and suburban communities, public housing has not met the needs of rural communities. Limits on new construction, years of shrinking budgets and failure to maintain existing public housing facilities have created an enormous backlog of maintenance and shortages of available units.⁷⁵



The affordability crisis means that some rural people do not have housing at all. Estimating the number of people experiencing homelessness in rural communities can be difficult, due to lack of shelters where people are likely to be counted and the large areas to cover during official counting efforts. This difficulty in counting people experiencing homelessness in rural communities creates another disadvantage for local governments seeking federal funding to address the problem, and many rural communities rely heavily on private institutions like churches to provide assistance.⁷⁶ When asked about homelessness, one-third of rural adults said in a 2019 survey that homelessness is a problem in their local community, including 15 percent who said it is a major problem, with some regions like the rural Pacific West coming in at even higher levels of concern.⁷⁷

The housing crisis in rural communities also holds us back in other ways. It's hard to attract people to move to a new community if they can't find somewhere to live. The housing shortage can make it difficult for teachers, healthcare workers, local government employees or others who work in rural communities to live near where they work, burdening them with long commutes.

What is the Homes Guarantee?

Everyone living in the United States should have safe, accessible, sustainable, and permanently affordable housing: a Homes Guarantee. A federal Homes Guarantee means that every household in the United States—whether they rent or own—has a dignified and affordable home. Today, both renters and owners are subject to the instability of unregulated and predatory industries that cause evictions, displacement and foreclosure. A fully realized Homes Guarantee balances the power between people who own buildings and those who live in them.

The vision for a national Homes Guarantee comes straight from people who are impacted by the nation's housing crisis, and builds from a long tradition of tenant organizing. Grassroots leaders, as a part of the People's Action housing justice cohort, developed the Homes Guarantee framework.

The federal government has not made a large scale investment to address affordable housing shortages since Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which created public housing for civilians. Now, we need action beyond that scale. The country's housing crisis is untenable, and it must end. We need a Homes Guarantee that will:

BUILD

12 million social housing units and eradicate homelessness

REINVEST

in existing public housing

PROTECT

renters and bank tenants

PAY

reparations for centuries of racist housing policies

END

land/real estate speculation and de-commodify housing

Fully realized, this proposal will guarantee homes for all. Rents will be set based on tenants' needs and real costs to local government, rather than speculative market prices. Land will be stewarded by and on behalf of everyday people instead of financialized by developers and landlords. A Homes Guarantee will offer both reparative and proactive approaches, including restorative justice to communities impacted by decades of discriminatory housing policy, as well as investments that slash carbon emissions and support resiliency from ongoing climate breakdown.

What Rural Communities Need

Rural communities need more affordable housing. Providing more housing in our communities would not only address a critical need, it could also create new jobs. The USDA estimated in 2016 that for every 100 apartment units built in rural communities, 116 jobs are created, generating more than \$3.3 million in federal, state and local revenue.⁷⁸

RELIEF: Immediate help to respond to the unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19.

- [Establish a nationwide eviction and foreclosure moratorium](#), including for public housing.
- Provide homes and expanded services for people experiencing homelessness
- [Suspend rent payments and mortgage payments for the duration of the crisis](#), including late fees.
- Stop utility and [water shutoffs](#).

RECOVERY: Once the immediate crisis of COVID-19 has passed, what we need to do next.

- Fund shelters and housing for people experiencing homelessness.
- Fund USDA housing programs, especially [Section 515 rental housing financing](#).
- Fund new public housing (including repealing a [decades-old ban on new public housing](#)) and rehabilitation of existing units, and help local governments use federal money to rehabilitate private rentals with affordability requirements

REIMAGINATION: Policies we need to build resilient rural communities for the long haul.

- Establish a [Homes Guarantee](#) to provide everyone safe, accessible, sustainable and permanently affordable housing, by passing the [Homes for All Act](#) and the [Green New Deal for Public Housing Act](#).



AGRICULTURE

The COVID-19 pandemic removed any illusion that our food system was resilient, sustainable, or fair. The system is propped up by dysfunctional farm policy, lack of enforcement of antitrust rules that has strengthened agribusiness market power, unfair trade agreements, failure by regulators to enforce environmental laws or protect workers from dangerous and exploitive workplaces, and marketing deception and secrecy that separates farmers from consumers. To fix our food system and make it work for independent family farms, rural communities, food chain workers and consumers, we have to address the stranglehold multinational corporations have on every step of our food system.

Feeding Community During COVID-19

Bobbi Wilson

Government Relations Associate, Wisconsin Farmers Union

As highly consolidated agricultural supply chains buckled under the economic strain of a global pandemic this spring, small farms and food businesses quickly demonstrated how nimble and resilient they can be. Brix Cider is a farm to table restaurant in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin that sources from over 20 area farms. When they closed their doors on Friday, March 13th to take precautions against the spread of COVID-19, they had no idea when it would be safe to reopen. Their farm vendors, who are also neighbors and friends, worried what closures of restaurants like Brix would mean for their farms. But restaurant owners Marie and Matt Raboin were determined to shift their business model to keep everyone afloat. Within two days they launched an online store and home delivery service to bring their own house made ciders as well as local meats, cheeses, and fresh produce right to their customers' doorsteps. Using their restaurant as a distribution hub, the Raboins created a local food supply chain at a time when the community needed it most. They combined creativity, collaboration, and a commitment to public health to help everyone weather the storm.

Erin Schneider and Rob McClure own Hilltop Community Farm in La Valle, Wisconsin. They specialize in fresh-cut flowers for weddings and grow a variety of fruits and vegetables for their Community Supported Agriculture program. Flower sales account for 80 percent of their income, so when COVID-19 canceled weddings, they knew it would be a challenging season. They also knew essential workers were at increased risk of illness simply because of their jobs. They decided to honor those workers by inviting customers to buy bouquets that they would deliver to hospitals, libraries, utilities, post offices, and other essential businesses. Later, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, customers bought bouquets for activists. Rob and Erin turned a challenging growing season into an opportunity to uplift their community during a time of grief and uncertainty. While their farm still suffered a loss, flower sales during the month of June doubled their projected wedding flower sales. Their story is one of resilience, community, and the essential role of beauty during times of struggle.



Building Rural Power During the Iowa Caucus

Cherie Mortice
Board President, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement Action Fund

Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement has been fighting against corporate power and standing up for rural communities, clean water, and economic justice in Iowa for decades. Part of that fight is taking on the factory farms that have popped up in every corner of the state, polluting our environment and driving family farms out of business. We're working across the state to get the state legislature to pass a moratorium on new or expanding factory farms.

But on top of this ongoing work we do every day, every four years, Iowa is in the national political spotlight. In the buildup to the 2020 Iowa Caucus, we used the opportunity to build our power and use our voice to make presidential candidates offer more than the usual platitudes about family farms while they got their photo taken at the state fair.

Our member-led endorsement team worked for months before the Caucus. We conducted a candidate survey that, for the first time, got presidential candidates to call for a moratorium on factory farms and put leading candidates on the record calling for farm policies that provide a safety net for farmers. We also covered health care, immigration, racial profiling, climate change, higher education, labor, and movement politics, creating a comprehensive issue guide for progressive Iowans, no matter where they live. And we organized an inspirational day-long candidate forum with People's Action, where candidates weren't allowed to give stump speeches but instead had to answer questions from our members.

The Iowa Caucus was the first step on the long journey to the 2020 presidential election. But our organizing to call out factory farms and corporate polluters didn't stop once the caucus was over. We used the Caucus to do politics differently – to lift up our issues and pull more people into our long-haul work of building a people's movement to win a future that works for everyone.

Bad farm policy and low prices have been hurting family farmers for decades, and recent years have been particularly painful for many independent family farmers who are now fighting for their survival. Five years of sinking prices for most crops (often below the cost of production), mounting debt, rising bankruptcies and a series of extreme weather events have taken a toll. While the trade war started by President Trump made an already bad situation worse for many types of crops, the current crisis will not disappear with new or reopened export markets. Net farm income has dropped nearly 50 percent since 2013. The multi-year drop in dairy prices has been devastating – the country lost over 2,700 dairy farms in 2018 alone.⁷⁹

Current farm policy does little to limit vertical integration (when one company controls every step in the chain of production) and corporate-controlled markets do not to pay farmers fairly for what they produce. Congress has repeatedly refused to deal with the root causes of low prices for farmers, instead accepting that many will lose money and trying to fill in the gaps with a variety of inadequate insurance programs. The winners in this system are global agribusiness firms and large-scale factory farm livestock operations that benefit from cheap commodities – not people living in rural communities and those working the land.

The change in who farms and how they farm has been dramatic. An analysis of the USDA's Census of Agriculture by Food & Water Watch found that in 2017, 190 million more animals were living on factory farms (a 14 percent increase) than five years earlier, and that the average size of large factory farms (officially called Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, or CAFOs) continues to grow. The growth in factory farms over that period created 82 billion tons of manure annually – equivalent to the human sewage generated by a city of 60 million residents. When this manure is spread, it overwhelms the farmland and can pollute local water supplies. This shift to factory farm livestock production squeezes out smaller independent family farm operations, as the processing and slaughter steps of the supply chain are increasingly controlled by the biggest companies who will only buy from large factory farms. For example, in the dairy sector, there were nearly 10,000 fewer dairies of any size in 2017 compared

to 2012 (a nearly 15 percent decrease). And in dairy-heavy Michigan, the number of factory dairy operations quadrupled between 1997 and 2017, while the state's small-and medium-sized dairies dropped to fewer than half as many as 20 years ago.⁸⁰

When a family farm goes out of business, the land they farmed often ends up under the control of a larger operation. This consolidation doesn't just impact the family that got out of farming, but also weakens the economy of the surrounding community. Contrary to what gets celebrated by politicians and Big Ag, the economic health of a community is not determined solely by the volume of crops or livestock that are raised there. It's the number of farms that are generating that yield can actually make a community more economically vibrant. A long-studied phenomenon called the "multiplier effect" explains why. When independent farmers buy their supplies locally, that money stays within the community. But larger, more industrialized farms are more likely to purchase farm supplies from outside the local community, and these operations are more likely to have outside investors or owners that will siphon off a larger share of the profits.

The trend towards fewer, larger farms has had devastating effects in rural communities across the country, both in the money that flows to local merchants and businesses and also in tax revenue to local governments to fund services like schools and roads. For example, an analysis commissioned by Food & Water Watch found that as concentration in the hog-

packing sector increased over a 25-year period in Iowa, the number of farms producing hogs decreased dramatically, while the farms that did produce hogs grew much larger. The study found that during this period, an increase in the number of hogs raised in a county in Iowa actually made that county less wealthy, and the average number of non-farm small businesses per county declined in counties with high hog sales and counties with large hog farms (in contrast with increases statewide during the same time period).⁸¹

Agriculture and the Climate Crisis

Agriculture is currently a major contributor to the greenhouse gases driving climate change. But agriculture could also become part of the solution.⁸² [Some family farmers around the country have been building a movement for soil health for years](#), developing techniques that have dramatic results, often with little help from agriculture research institutions or government funding. Soil health advocates focus on "continuous living cover" that protects and builds soil, the use of cover crops planted between the regular corn-soybean growing seasons, longer crop rotations that include small grains and perennial legumes, integrating trees into pastures, and the integration of crops with livestock in well-managed grazing systems. To expand these practices across more farms, we need to fund research into soil health practices, provide technical assistance and cost-sharing programs through federal farm programs, and develop markets for new products such as small grains and perennials that are part of longer crop rotations.⁸³



Regenerative Farming at Medicine Creek Farm

Hannah Bernhardt, member, Land Stewardship Project and Minnesota Farmers Union

I grew up on a corn and soybean farm in southern Minnesota in the '80s, and did not exactly get the message that farming was a highly desirable way to try to make a living. As I learned more about direct-market local food systems, I began to see a glimmer of hope that there could be a way for farmers to get out from under the hold of large agribusiness corporations and volatile commodity markets. When I began learning more about soil health and how properly managed, rotationally grazed livestock can actually build healthy soils and root structures that sequester carbon and fight climate change, I was convinced to make my way back to agriculture.

Since 2016, I have been raising grass fed beef and lamb and pastured pork on 160 acres of land in Northeastern Minnesota with my husband and son. Soil health is central to the mission of our farm. Regenerative agriculture uses practices like cover crops, no-till planting, and diverse crop mixes to build the health of the soil. We focus on management-intensive rotational grazing of perennial pasture. Instead of allowing continuous grazing of one big pasture which often leads to overgrazing and erosion, we create small paddocks out of temporary fencing and move our cows and sheep daily to fresh grass. We have five livestock guardian dogs who protect our livestock from predators and allow us to keep animals on pasture 365 days a year in an ecosystem that includes wolves and coyotes.

We direct-market our meat through our website and social media, and it's been amazing to grow a community of customers who buy from us because they care about humane treatment of livestock, the health of the food they eat and transparency of our practices, and our care for the environment, wildlife, and watershed. This relationship with our customers shows that once they know the difference between what we do and what big agribusiness does, most people would push for federal policies that support regenerative agriculture instead of corporate control of the food supply.



Supply Management and Fair Prices

Independent family-scale farmers do not have enough market power to negotiate their input costs or the price of what they sell. Multinational agribusiness corporations use overproduction of crops like corn, wheat or milk to their advantage because they can buy at low prices, sometimes less than it cost to produce the crops. This approach has dominated the last four decades of corporate-driven farm policy, removing fair price protections for small and mid-scale operations and decimating America's rural economies. Chronic overproduction of commodity crops makes it virtually impossible for farmers to get a fair price from the market, leaving many reliant on convoluted and expensive government programs that attempt to make up for low prices.⁸⁴

There are proven policies to ensure a fair price for farmers that covers the cost of production and basic living costs, called parity and supply management. We still use a variation of this approach in our sugar program and countries like Canada use supply management successfully for their dairy and poultry markets. The core elements of a parity-based supply management system are:

- Scale-appropriate price floors and ceilings (adjusted for inflation) targeting family farmers living and working on the land.
- Farmer-owned grain reserves to reduce market fluctuations.
- Acreage set asides (combined with soil conservation and health requirements) to reduce overproduction.
- Managed imports to prevent undercutting farmer incomes in the U.S.
- Strong antitrust enforcement, to limit vertical integration and corporate capture.

Price floors in combination with disincentives for overproduction (and reserves to smooth out market volatility) would mean that farmers will produce less but earn more, more predictably. This predictability removes a major obstacle to making environmental improvements in agriculture – the yearly pressure just to make ends meet. With the safety net of a fair price, producers could make improvements to their practices such as integrating livestock with sustainable, managed grazing, reducing production on fragile land to protect



water quality and integrating soil health practices that have longer-term payoffs.

Groups that fight factory farms also want supply management because companies that raise tens of thousands of animals in one place depend on being able to pay less than what it actually cost to grow the corn and soybeans they use as feed. But a system based on fair prices and supply management could allow independent family farmers to transition to more diversified operations that return livestock to the land. Tackling overproduction through supply management could also serve as an important insurance policy for climate disruption. A grain reserve not only protects farmers against low prices, it also protects against

supply disruptions from droughts or extreme weather, which will only increase in a changing climate.

Supply management and parity pricing would provide a stable market for the next generation of farmers, creating an opportunity for kids to return to the farm. And input from farmers of color and others who have faced historical discrimination within farm programs could ensure that these programs provide fair access for everyone.

What Rural Communities Need

We need farm policies that keep family farmers in business. A family-farm centered system, with more farmers on the land, is best suited to revitalize rural communities, produce a healthy and sustainable food supply and respond to climate change and other disruptions. A food system built around family farms receiving a fair price for their crops and livestock is the best way to ensure that farmworkers and other food chain workers are paid living wages and are treated well, and to provide healthy affordable food for everyone.

Independent family farmers, including livestock producers, must be at the center of any effort on farm policy and the path forward must include targeted support for farmers of color and indigenous farmers whose land has been systematically taken from them

for many years. We must include farms and food chain workers as we design the transition to better farming methods and to make sure a new system includes strong enforceable standards and safety nets for workers.

We cannot fix what is broken in agriculture without addressing the tremendous level of corporate control over every aspect of our food system. For example, the top four firms control 86 percent of corn processing, 85 percent of cattle slaughter, 71 percent of pork packing and 79 percent of soybean crushing. Virtually every type of agriculture and every step in the supply chain, from farm inputs to food processing to retailing, suffers from this level of consolidation, driving up the price farmers pay for supplies and driving down the prices they receive for their crops and livestock.⁸⁵

And we cannot fix what is wrong with the food system without addressing historic inequities in government farm programs.⁸⁶ Any new farm policy or investment must be accessible and fair to all types of farmers, which has not been the case for many years. Black, indigenous and people of color, as well as beginning farmers, must be guaranteed access to new and existing farm programs, fair access to credit and other initiatives, and be prioritized in the [transfer of land](#) as older farmers retire.



RELIEF: Immediate help to respond to the unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19.

- Prioritize help for farms and independent food businesses, not multinational corporations which should be prohibited from accessing pandemic relief funding.
- Require enforceable standards to protect all food chain workers, including migrant workers, forbid employers from retaliating against workers for reporting infection control problems or taking sick leave, and require tracking and public reporting of COVID-19 outbreaks in workplaces.
- Prohibit USDA loans or loan guarantees for new or expanding factory farms.
- Enact a moratorium on farm foreclosures until the immediate COVID-19 crisis is under control.

RECOVERY: Once the immediate crisis of COVID-19 has passed, what we need to do next.

- Take on corporate control of the food system with a [food and agribusiness merger moratorium](#).
- Enforce the Packers and Stockyards Act to allow independent livestock producers and small and mid-sized packing plants to compete on a level playing field. A good first step would be to bring back the USDA Farmer Fair Practice Rules that were killed by the Trump Administration.
- Rebuild regional food infrastructure with funding for programs like the Local Agriculture Market Program.
- Enact the provisions of the [HEAL Food Alliance platform](#) to Ensure Dignity for Food Workers and their Families.
- Enact the list of reforms on Senator Warren's plan [for addressing discrimination and ensuring equity for farmers of color](#), as well as increasing support for programs for Black, Indigenous and immigrant farmers of color, such as the Farmer Opportunities, Training and Outreach Program.
- Invest in the regenerative and organic agriculture practices we need to make farming part of the solution to climate change, with research into soil health, technical assistance and cost-sharing, and new markets for products from longer crop rotations.
- Reinstate and expand mandatory Country of Origin Labeling for meat, dairy, and seafood.

REIMAGINATION: Policies we need to build resilient rural communities for the long haul.

- Establish a moratorium on factory farms, with support for the transition of existing operations to more sustainable production methods.
- Establish supply management programs, including grain reserves and parity pricing programs for commodity crops, using the mechanisms outlined in [Senator Warren's plan for farm policy](#) and the [Food from Family Farms Act](#).



CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic collapse it triggered have made it impossible to ignore some basic truths about our economic and political system – they don't take care of anyone but big corporations and the wealthy few. As we enter an election season trying to navigate the worst economic and health crisis in a century, it's time for a real debate about what kind of system we build to replace what just collapsed in rural communities and small towns.

We aren't willing to let the politics of resentment and hate take over our communities. We reject the tired right-wing narratives about letting the free market decide what we deserve, that the wealthiest country in the world can't afford to meet people's basic needs, and that the government shouldn't even bother to try to address big problems. In this way, rural communities and small towns are no different than our friends and family in cities or suburbs – we want systems that work for us, not just the 1 percent.

Which is why we are part of the nationwide movement working to create a [new social contract](#), one that rejects politics as usual and puts power in the hands of everyday people. We are working in rural communities and small towns across the country to build a multi-racial working-class progressive movement that transforms the next generation of American politics.

In an era when races are won on the narrowest of margins, [rural communities are important to elections](#) up and down the ballot. And in 2020, rural communities can make a difference not only in the Presidential race, but also in deciding control of the Senate. We see the potential that exists in our communities, and it's time for candidates running for every level of office to see it too.

All elections are important. But the outcome of the 2020 election is critical because it will determine how – or if – we recover from the epic collapse we experienced this year. It's not enough to just patch the old system back together. Instead we need a response that reimagines what our communities can be: thriving small towns with diversified economies, strong safety nets to meet people's needs, a family farm food system, a plan to rapidly transition to a renewable energy future, and a jobs guarantee that invests in us to rebuild our communities and take care of each other.

A quick campaign stop or rural photo-op is not enough to meet the moment rural communities are in. Neither is promising a return to the pre-pandemic status quo. Rural communities need candidates who will work with us on a new approach. We invite candidates and elected officials to join with us in our work to transform politics and reimagine what rural and small town America can be.



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