



# **BLUE DOG COALITION**

**bold leadership. commonsense solutions.**

## **A STRONG RURAL AMERICA**

**THE PATH TO PROSPERITY AND RESTORING  
THE AMERICAN DREAM IN RURAL COMMUNITIES**

**Special Task Force on Rural America  
September 20, 2018**

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## **A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE BLUE DOG COALITION'S SPECIAL TASK FORCE ON RURAL AMERICA**

For too long, rural America hasn't seen results from Washington. From the desert and forests of Arizona to the farmlands of Georgia, hardworking Americans are struggling to make ends meet, veterans are traveling hundreds of miles for basic services, small businesses are struggling to employ skilled workers and grow jobs, and families cannot afford or access lifesaving care.

Many members of the Blue Dog Coalition and I have seen these challenges firsthand. Our diverse districts are home to business owners, agriculture producers, and manufacturers who are working to keep jobs in our communities.

Unfortunately, these hardworking Americans now face even more challenges. Escalating tariffs are closing the doors to markets and making the cost of maintaining a business too high. Families face skyrocketing health care costs due to destabilized insurance markets and gridlock in Congress. It's no wonder these folks feel like no one in Washington is listening to them or working for them. That has to change.

Now more than ever, Washington must focus on the unique needs of our rural communities. Congress has taken a one-size-fits-all approach to economic policy and has failed to address the fact that there are different paths to prosperity for rural and urban communities. Policies that work in big cities often do not work in rural areas of our country. Rural Americans are proud of their tight-knit communities, their hard work, and their way of life. They see a broken Washington more focused on partisan games than practical solutions. They're looking for a level playing field—a fair shot to work their way up the ladder, create prosperity in their communities, and participate in the country's economic growth. They believe, as we do, that opportunity and success in America should not depend on your zip code.

Over the past year, the Blue Dog Coalition's Special Task Force on Rural America held public meetings with stakeholders who represent rural veterans, business owners, infrastructure experts, health care providers, and educators. From these work sessions, the Special Task Force put together an agenda that puts rural America at the forefront of the conversation in Washington. We have created a roadmap to success for rural America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—one that puts aside partisan games and presents real, commonsense solutions.

Our agenda, *A Strong Rural America*, focuses on growing our rural economy, increasing access to affordable health care, empowering the next generation of workers, connecting businesses to global markets, and honoring our promises to rural veterans. These proposals are an important first step to address the longstanding issues affecting rural America. It is long past time for Congress to return to regular order, and get to work on commonsense, bipartisan legislation to move rural America forward. The Blue Dogs are leading the way to make those changes in Congress.

**Rep. Tom O'Halleran (AZ-01)**  
**Chairman, Special Task Force on Rural America**  
**Blue Dog Coalition**



# STRENGTHEN OUR RURAL ECONOMY





# STRENGTHEN OUR RURAL ECONOMY

Rural communities produce the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the homes in which we live, and the energy we need. The path to prosperity for our entire nation runs through rural America. Nearly 72 percent of our nation's land is considered to be rural and 14 percent of the total U.S. population lives in rural communities—creating effective policies for both is vital to improving the health of the overall U.S. economy.

Despite those facts, policies enacted to respond to the Great Recession have exacerbated the divide between rural and urban America. Rural employment has yet to return to its pre-recession levels, and rural job growth continues to trend lower than the urban growth rate. This is partly to blame for the migration of bright, young adults from rural areas, leading to decreasing populations in rural communities. As a result, rural areas are experiencing fewer births and an older population. [In the midst of this, an unnecessary, reckless trade war with China and other international partners threatens American companies that employ about 11 million workers total, including many in rural areas.](#)

Washington should not be part of the problem; it should work alongside our rural communities to find solutions that will preserve the American dream for every American. We must roll up our sleeves and reach across the aisle to pass bipartisan legislation that incentivizes economic growth in rural America and creates good-paying jobs.

It is long past time for Washington to work *for* rural America and the Blue Dogs are here to lead the way.

## **Congress should:**

- ✓ Pass a bipartisan Farm Bill that promotes rural communities, gives America's agriculture producers the support they need to succeed, and does not roll back important rural economic development programs.
- ✓ Oppose efforts to escalate international trade tensions that cost jobs and create uncertainty for farmers, ranchers, food processors, and manufacturers.
- ✓ Increase access to capital for small businesses by cutting red tape and boosting partnerships that incentivize long-term investments in rural communities.
- ✓ Establish a regulatory improvement commission to make recommendations and propose legislation to improve or repeal out-of-date and burdensome regulations.
- ✓ Enhance assistance to communities harmed by the changing economy and job losses through better coordination of federal resources and helping rural communities plan for the future economy.
- ✓ Support rural communities embracing the local jobs and revenues generated by the bioeconomy and outdoor economy.
- ✓ Incentivize growth of small-scale local manufacturing using new technologies.

# ADDRESS THE RURAL HEALTH CARE CRISIS



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Rural America is facing a growing health care crisis. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Americans living in rural communities are more likely to die from five leading, potentially preventable causes: cancer, heart disease, unintentional injuries, chronic lower respiratory disease, and stroke. In rural America, the suicide rate is 45 percent higher than in urban communities. The opioid epidemic continues to ravage rural families, where the rates of drug overdose deaths are higher than the rates in urban communities.

[In 45 states, families could see their health insurance premiums increase by more than 18 percent due to the reckless dismantling of protections under the Affordable Care Act.](#)

Despite these sobering realities, rural communities across the country continue to face financial, geographic, and structural barriers to accessing health care. Over the past eight years, 87 rural hospitals have closed, and today, 673 rural hospitals are on the brink of closure—that's more than one-third of rural hospitals across the United States. If we don't protect rural hospitals, almost 12 million Americans will lose direct access to critical care, rural communities will suffer major economic consequences, and millions of Americans will lose their jobs. A strong health care system is key to a strong economy in rural America. Washington must act with a sense of urgency to address this crisis.

## **Congress should:**

- ✓ Stabilize individual and small business marketplaces to make premiums affordable for working families and increase provider choice in rural communities.
- ✓ Protect coverage gains under Medicaid expansion, a critical source of stabilization for rural hospitals.
- ✓ Increase workforce incentives for health care providers to train and practice in underserved areas with critical shortages—including maternity care, mental health, and substance abuse treatment.
- ✓ Lower prescription drug prices by increasing competition and expediting U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval of generic drugs.
- ✓ Combat the opioid epidemic by protecting Medicaid from funding cuts and increasing the long-term capacity of substance abuse disorder treatment providers.
- ✓ Improve access to emergency care in rural communities by piloting innovative and flexible delivery models.
- ✓ Expand the number of providers eligible to provide telehealth services and increase access to broadband services to remove barriers to telehealth care.



# EMPOWER RURAL WORKERS





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In a digital, knowledge-based economy, it has been said that a four-year college degree is required for success. We know, however, that this is not the only path to success for young adults or mid-career professionals who are looking to succeed in rural America.

The next generation of workers can find success through skills- and trade-based education that prepares them for jobs that let them stay in their communities. In rural America, half of all workers are in middle-skill jobs across a variety of industries, including health care, computer technology, construction, and manufacturing. Middle-skill jobs make up about 53 percent of the total labor market of the United States—more than both high-skill jobs, which require at least a bachelor's degree, and low-skill jobs. Despite that fact, only 43 percent of American workers have the training required to fill these positions. This poses an opportunity in rural America, where a skilled population is key to attracting employers while increasing wages and quality of life.

Building a quality workforce requires not only federal investment, but also state and local investment and public-private partnerships. Rural Americans have a strong work ethic—it's the most important asset of rural communities across the nation. When given the chance, rural workers will be able to invest their skills back into their communities, fueling job creation and economic growth.

## **Congress should:**

- ✓ Increase access to trade schools and eliminate higher education deserts, so rural residents of all ages have opportunities to continue their education and upgrade their skills without having to leave home or struggle to balance work and family.
- ✓ Align federal career and technical education programs with the changing economy in rural America.
- ✓ Improve higher education focus on employability skills and meaningful credentialing, so students are prepared to successfully enter the workforce with skills that will serve them well throughout their career.
- ✓ Support collaboration among career development partners by crossing and combining funding streams, especially in rural communities with limited resources.

# EXPAND 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY INFRASTRUCTURE TO RURAL AMERICA



# EXPAND 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY INFRASTRUCTURE TO RURAL AMERICA

Rural communities often get the short end of the stick when it comes to infrastructure funding, and that can lead to slow economic growth, or even economic decline. If we want to see the rural economy succeed, we must invest in both traditional physical and 21<sup>st</sup> century technological infrastructure projects.

As the development of technology has progressed, internet access has become an essential tool for businesses to grow, students to learn, and patients to receive health care. In some ways, it has become the foundation for attaining a good quality of life. Yet, more than 30 percent of rural residents do not have access to basic, affordable internet. This is much higher than the two percent of urban residents who lack access. Expanding broadband access to these rural communities will require local, state, and federal partners to work together.

If we want to see our rural businesses succeed and create jobs, we must invest in technology to expand access to domestic and international markets. As history has taught us, the key to our country's overall economic success is by expanding new forms of infrastructure to all corners of our nation—particularly in rural areas. President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew this when, in 1936, he established the Rural Electrification Administration as part of the New Deal to deliver electricity to rural communities. President Dwight D. Eisenhower also recognized it when, in 1956, he signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 to build the national interstate highway system. These investments and foresight continue to benefit rural communities and the nation, but they are not enough. We must recognize that we are facing the same crossroads today when it comes to expanding broadband access to rural America.

## **Congress should:**

- ✓ Pass a robust, bipartisan infrastructure bill to create local jobs and rebuild and revitalize rural surface transportation and water infrastructure projects.
- ✓ Expand broadband access and develop a 21<sup>st</sup> century rural telecommunications system through significant public and private investments.
- ✓ Improve coordination of federal telecommunication resources at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and other federal agencies to help unserved communities.
- ✓ Streamline federal and state infrastructure loan procedures for rural communities.



# UPHOLD OUR PROMISE TO RURAL VETERANS



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Anyone who wears our country's uniform deserves the best care, but many of the five million veterans who live in rural communities struggle to get the proper and timely care they need.

With nearly [24 percent](#) of our nation's veterans calling rural America home, it is untenable that they are sometimes required to travel hundreds of miles for routine health exams or long-term nursing care. The barriers to receiving care also include a lack of transportation and health services available in their communities. For those living with chronic illnesses or needing mental and behavioral health care, these barriers are even more drastic.

It is also increasingly difficult for servicemembers returning home to find good-quality jobs, housing, and transportation. Rural veterans of working age (18-64 years old) have an employment rate of about 66 percent, lower than the employment rate of urban veterans, which is about 71 percent.

Congress has passed the buck on this issue while paying lip-service to our veterans for too long. It's no secret that Washington fails to pay attention to their needs and instead spends more time on empty praises rather than solving problems. These men and women have earned the right to access the highest quality care and the best services available. No matter where they live, we have an obligation to step up and fight for our veterans, just as they have fought and sacrificed for us.

## **Congress should:**

- ✓ Connect departing servicemembers with career development training opportunities for jobs in rural America.
- ✓ Create a new rural priority group for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to consider ranking state veterans long-term care facility projects and make long-term care available for Native American veterans on tribal lands.
- ✓ Incentivize the recruitment and retention of VA doctors, nurses and other medical professionals to rural areas with higher pay and enhanced debt forgiveness.
- ✓ Use telemedicine and other technology appropriately to reduce barriers for veterans to access care.
- ✓ Enhance transportation options for rural veterans who have to travel long distances to obtain health care.

# THE BLUE DOG COALITION

The Blue Dog Coalition is an official caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives comprised of 18 fiscally-responsible Democrats, who are leading the way to find commonsense solutions. They represent the center of the political spectrum, appealing to the mainstream values of the American public. The Blue Dogs are dedicated to pursuing fiscally-responsible policies, ensuring a strong national defense for our country, and transcending party lines to get things done for the American people.

## BLUE DOG COALITION LEADERSHIP

Rep. Jim Costa (CA-16), Co-Chair for Administration  
Rep. Henry Cuellar (TX-28), Co-Chair for Communications  
Rep. Daniel Lipinski (IL-03), Co-Chair for Policy

## POLICY TASK FORCE LEADERSHIP

### Special Task Force on Rural America

Rep. Tom O'Halleran (AZ-01), Chairman

### Task Force on Government Reform and Accountability

Rep. Tom O'Halleran (AZ-01), Co-Chair  
Rep. Kurt Schrader (OR-05), Co-Chair

### Task Force on Economic Growth

Rep. Lou Correa (CA-46), Co-Chair  
Rep. Charlie Crist (FL-13), Co-Chair

### Task Force on National Defense

Rep. Vicente Gonzalez (TX-15), Co-Chair  
Rep. Brad Schneider (IL-10), Co-Chair

### Task Force on Fiscal Responsibility

Rep. Josh Gottheimer (NJ-05), Co-Chair  
Rep. Stephanie Murphy (FL-07), Co-Chair

## MEMBERS

Rep. Sanford Bishop (GA-02)  
Rep. Jim Cooper (TN-05)  
Rep. Collin Peterson (MN-07)  
Rep. David Scott (GA-13)  
Rep. Kyrsten Sinema (AZ-09)  
Rep. Mike Thompson (CA-05)  
Rep. Filemon Vela (TX-34)



# SPECIAL TASK FORCE ON RURAL AMERICA

The Blue Dog Coalition's Special Task Force on Rural America is a policy task force charged to produce commonsense solutions for the rural communities across the country that were left behind during the economic recovery after the Great Recession. The Special Task Force is primarily focused on policy solutions in the following key areas: 1) job creation and economic growth, 2) regulatory improvement, 3) increasing access to rural health care and addressing the opioid epidemic, and 4) ensuring that military veterans get the help and support they need when they return home.

## SPECIAL TASK FORCE LEADERSHIP

Rep. Tom O'Halleran (AZ-01), Chairman

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