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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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April 6, 2017

The Honorable Tom E. Price  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am writing to request information regarding the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) implementation and oversight of federal programs aimed at ensuring access to health care in rural areas as well as the Department's plans to ensure that rural communities in my state and across the country can thrive.

Numerous reports have noted that promoting access to health care in rural communities remains critical. For example, earlier this year, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that rural Americans are at higher risk of death from five leading potentially preventable causes, including heart disease, cancer, unintentional injuries, chronic lower respiratory disease, and stroke.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Missouri and many other states are facing an opioid addiction crisis.<sup>2</sup> Hospital closures in rural areas also reduce access to health care and can have other dramatic negative effects on these communities including significant job losses.<sup>3</sup> As the *St. Louis Dispatch* recently reported, rural hospitals face "a nationwide trend toward outpatient care, trouble recruiting staff, industry consolidation, low-patient volume, and a preference by private-insurance clients for newer hospitals."<sup>4</sup> In February, I met with leadership

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *Rural Americans at Higher Risk of Death from Five Leading Causes* (Jan. 2017) (online [www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2017/p0112-rural-death-risk.html](http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2017/p0112-rural-death-risk.html)).

<sup>2</sup> *Even in Trump Country, Rural Hospitals Brace for Damage From Health Law's Repeal*, Kaiser Health News (Jan. 11, 2017) (online [khn.org/news/even-in-trump-country-rural-hospitals-brace-for-damage-from-the-health-laws-repeal/](http://khn.org/news/even-in-trump-country-rural-hospitals-brace-for-damage-from-the-health-laws-repeal/)).

<sup>3</sup> *A Look at Rural Hospital Closures and Implications for Access to Care: Three Case Studies*, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (July 7, 2016) (online [kff.org/report-section/a-look-at-rural-hospital-closures-and-implications-for-access-to-care-three-case-studies-issue-brief/](http://kff.org/report-section/a-look-at-rural-hospital-closures-and-implications-for-access-to-care-three-case-studies-issue-brief/)).

<sup>4</sup> *Already in Peril, Rural Hospitals Unsure on Health Care Bill*, *St. Louis Dispatch* (Mar. 20, 2017) (online [www.stltoday.com/business/local/already-in-peril-rural-hospitals-unsure-on-health-care-bill/article\\_944c7c99-c1e3-5632-9067-9db84cf23480.html](http://www.stltoday.com/business/local/already-in-peril-rural-hospitals-unsure-on-health-care-bill/article_944c7c99-c1e3-5632-9067-9db84cf23480.html)).

from several of Missouri's rural hospitals and health care providers to discuss their critical work on behalf of patients in rural communities across the state and the challenges they confront in performing that work. Addressing these challenges must be a priority for the Trump Administration, but it remains unclear how HHS will do so given the President's proposed 17.9% cut to the Department's budget.<sup>5</sup>

The Department does have existing resources designed to focus on rural health including the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy within the HHS operating division of Health Resources and Services Administration.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in 1987, the HHS Secretary Otis Bowen chartered the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services (NACRHHS) to provide recommendations on ways to address health care problems in rural America.<sup>7</sup> The committee is comprised of a 21-member panel that includes individuals with expertise in a range of rural-focused health programs and fields of rural human and social services.<sup>8</sup>

NACRHHS produces reports and letters on key rural issues along with recommendations for consideration by the HHS Secretary.<sup>9</sup> Most recently, the NACRHHS released a report on the "Social Determinants of Health" which examined how HHS can best contribute to addressing the social determinants of health in rural communities.<sup>10</sup> The report made five recommendations including, among others; that HHS should facilitate coordination and collaboration among hospitals, health systems, and human service providers on Community Health Needs Assessments and Community Benefit Agreements to support the development of local strategies to address the social determinants of health, and offer technical assistance and Funding Opportunity Announcements which highlight ways rural organizations can factor in the administrative costs of effectively managing grants into their budgets and project plans.<sup>11</sup> Although the report does not include any written response from HHS leadership, understanding any remedial action taken by the Department to address recommendations made in this and other

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<sup>5</sup> *Federal Health Department Would Face a Nearly 18 Percent Cut*, Washington Post (Mar. 16, 2017) (online [www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/federal-health-department-would-face-a-nearly-18-percent-cut/2017/03/15/b2a51242-09a2-11e7-b77c-0047d15a24e0\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.bb7c86560e0c](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/federal-health-department-would-face-a-nearly-18-percent-cut/2017/03/15/b2a51242-09a2-11e7-b77c-0047d15a24e0_story.html?utm_term=.bb7c86560e0c)).

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (online at <https://hrsa.gov/ruralhealth/>).

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Advisory Committee on Rural Health & Human Services (online [www.hrsa.gov/advisorycommittees/advisorycmte.html](http://www.hrsa.gov/advisorycommittees/advisorycmte.html)) (accessed Mar. 28, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services (NACRHHS), *Social Determinants of Health* (Jan. 2017) (online [www.hrsa.gov/advisorycommittees/rural/publications/nac\\_brief\\_social\\_determinants\\_health.pdf](http://www.hrsa.gov/advisorycommittees/rural/publications/nac_brief_social_determinants_health.pdf))

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

advisory committee reports is important to assessing the agency's commitment to supporting rural health care.

In order to better understand how the Department uses the information provided by its advisory committees including NACRHHS as well as the Department's current and going efforts to support access to healthcare in rural communities, please provide a written response to the following questions to my office not later than close of business on April 20, 2017:

1. Is HHS required to implement or otherwise respond to recommendations made by NACRHHS or other advisory committees? Does HHS have any internal guidelines for the review and implementation of advisory committee recommendations?
2. What is the status of the Department's implementation of NACRHHS's recommendations from its report *Social Determinants of Health*? Please include a list of those recommendations that HSS has implemented, the date when any of those recommendations was closed, a list of the recommendations that HHS has not yet closed and the Department's estimated timetable for their closure.
3. Please describe what steps the Department has or will take to mitigate the impact of the Trump Administration's proposed cuts to Department initiatives that support access to health care in rural communities?
4. Please describe what additional steps the Department has taken or will take to address the social determinants of health and access to healthcare in rural communities?
5. How has the federal hiring freeze impacted the Department's ability to meet its goal in supporting access to health care in rural communities?

Should you have any questions regarding this inquiry, please contact Donald Sherman on my staff at [Donald\\_Sherman@hsgac.senate.gov](mailto:Donald_Sherman@hsgac.senate.gov) or by phone at (202) 224-2627. Please send any official correspondence relating to this request to [Amanda\\_Trosen@hsgac.senate.gov](mailto:Amanda_Trosen@hsgac.senate.gov). Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this request. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill  
Ranking Member

cc: Ron Johnson  
Chairman