

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 17, 2020

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

CC: Chairman Hoeven and Ranking Member Merkley,
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture

Dear Chairman Shelby and Ranking Member Leahy,

As Congress works to craft another bipartisan stimulus package, we ask you to consider the urgent need for housing assistance in rural communities. The appropriations division of the bipartisan CARES Act included around \$3 billion in assistance to help housing providers keep low-income renters in their homes during this economic crisis, but no funding was allocated for the Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Rural Rental Assistance Program. USDA's Rural Rental Assistance Program is a vital form of assistance to low-income households, seniors and persons with disabilities residing in USDA-financed rental properties. All across the country, in both urban and rural areas, low-income households are struggling to afford essential payments as their incomes decline. To prevent a wave of housing instability in USDA-financed rental properties in rural areas, future legislation addressing the COVID-19 economic crisis must include emergency funding for rural rental assistance within USDA's Rural Housing Service.

It is imperative that the federal response to the economic fallout of the COVID-19 public health emergency does not leave rural communities behind. Sixty million Americans, or 1 in 5 Americans, live in rural areas¹. We also know that eighty six percent of counties in the United States struggling with persistent poverty are in rural areas², and yet USDA's Rural Housing Service programs received no supplemental funding in the CARES Act. Many of these rural households were already one crisis away from losing stable housing, and now residents' incomes are likely to decline due to illness or unemployment as a result of COVID-19. It is more important than ever to ensure that individuals and families living in small towns and rural areas are not forgotten during this pandemic.

¹ "What is Rural America?" United States Census Bureau, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html>.

² "Persistent Poverty," Housing Assistance Council, accessed April 17, 2020, <http://www.ruralhome.org/sct-initiatives/mn-persistent-poverty>.

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We urge you to provide robust emergency funding for Section 521 Rural Rental Assistance in the next supplemental appropriations package to mitigate the impact of this crisis in rural communities.

Thank you for your work on these important issues.

Sincerely,

Senator Tina Smith
Senator Mike Rounds
Senator Tammy Baldwin
Senator Deb Fischer
Senator Jeanne Shaheen
Senator Roger F. Wicker
Senator Kamala D. Harris
Senator Dianne Feinstein
Senator Catherine Cortez Masto
Senator Sherrod Brown
Senator Ron Wyden
Senator Brian Schatz
Senator Mazie Hirono
Senator Kirsten Gillibrand
Senator Bernard Sanders
Senator Margaret Wood Hassan
Senator Christopher A. Coons