



## Call to Action #2: Improving Quality of Life

Ensuring rural Americans can achieve a high quality of life is the foundation of prosperity. Quality of life is a measure of human well-being that can be identified through economic and social indicators. Modern utilities, affordable housing, efficient transportation and reliable employment are economic indicators that must be integrated with social indicators like access to medical services, public safety, education and community resilience to empower rural communities to thrive. Focusing and delivering key federal reforms will enable rural Americans to flourish and prosper in 21st Century communities.

Rural America offers opportunities to attain a high quality of life often characterized by abundant natural resources, a less hurried pace of life, and an affordable cost of living. As the modern economy becomes more mobile, the places that Americans choose to live is increasingly influenced by the quality of life in their home communities. For example, over the past 40 years, a desire to live close to natural amenities such as lakes, seashores, mountains, and areas with a moderate climate have driven population growth in many rural regions. This is especially seen in the Southeast, Great Lakes, Mountain West, and Pacific Coast regions. Within these outside areas, such features dramatically enhance the quality of life for rural communities and exhibit a large share of employment and earnings in recreation-related activities. Many of these recreation-based economies were hard hit by the Great Recession, slowing in population growth from 4.6 percent during 2002-08 to only by 1.2 percent during 2010-16 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. However, these areas continue to grow faster than other types of rural areas.

Despite the unique quality of life that some rural communities can provide, others face long-standing and emerging challenges. For example, there are two very different types of rural communities that tend to have a consistently high number of people leaving. One type has high poverty rates – more than 25 percent – and is hindered by low educational attainment and high unemployment. The other type is generally prosperous but tends to be remote, thinly settled, and lacking in scenic appeal for prospective residents or tourists. In general, quality of life deficits appear to be a main drawback for these communities.

In some places, housing affordability has become a major challenge, either because housing costs have risen rapidly or because incomes are insufficient for self-supported housing at market rates. These burdens are increasing among rural renters, in both high-amenity areas and in communities with high poverty rates.

In such parts of rural America, addressing the shortage of local jobs and a lack of connection to those job opportunities will be a major factor in overcoming these challenges.

Transportation is often a challenge for many rural communities as well. According to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics, people living below the poverty level are less likely to own or have access to a personal vehicle to get to work. Compared to other commuters, people below the poverty level are more likely to use lower-cost options such as carpooling, taking public transportation, or using other transportation modes, but such options are less available in rural areas. The Department of Transportation's Federal Transportation Administration supports numerous small town and rural transportation systems in connecting their citizens to jobs, healthcare, and other critical destinations through various programs. Additionally, other federal agencies provide funding for rural transit services for specific trip purposes, such as visits to medical facilities. However, the presence of multiple funding streams often results in multiple networks serving the same rural area. Some states and localities around the nation have instituted methods to optimize federal funding programs into coordinated and unified systems to serve their citizens, yet creating and administering such coordination is an arduous task. As a result, many rural transit services remain expensive to subsidize and unable to fill the transportation needs of rural businesses and citizens.



Rural road safety is another quality of life issue that federal, state, and local governments are working to address. According to the Department of Transportation, more than half of all traffic fatalities in 2014 occurred on rural roads. In addition, the fatality rate per vehicle-mile-traveled in rural areas was 2.4 times higher than the fatality rate in urban areas, though that figure decreased by 24 percent between 2005-14. Moreover, almost two-thirds of drivers and passengers in rural crashes died at the scene in 2014, compared to just 35 percent in urban crashes. Such ratios were due in part due to higher speed crashes and increased distances to first responders and hospitals.

The modernization of built infrastructure for rural utilities is also an important component of quality of life and rural prosperity. This includes the full installation of smart grid technology throughout rural power systems. Rural electric cooperatives have begun deploying fiber optic networks throughout their service areas to meet the current, growing, and future demand for smart grid services, such as demand side management, distributed generation and renewable integration, and smart home technologies, as well as increased grid security. The ability to dynamically manage energy use is critical to ensuring network reliability, enhancing system-wide efficiency and keeping electric rates affordable for rural residents and businesses. The high-speed networks, connecting electric system infrastructure and even direct connections to customer locations, can also provide a platform and catalyst for fiber to rural homes.

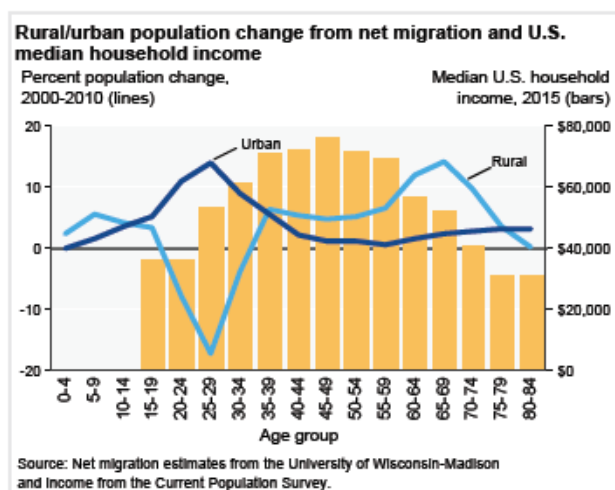
Safe drinking water and sanitary waste disposal systems are vital for achieving a high quality of life. Additionally, water infrastructure is essential to many rural industries, e.g., farming, manufacturing, and mining (Kearney et al., 2014). It is also important to households, with more than 86 percent of the U.S. population relying on public water



supply systems (EPA, 2013). Overall, water infrastructure is increasingly important to making rural areas attractive places to live and as a driver of rural recreation and tourism.

Many poor and remote rural areas also lag in high-speed internet connectivity and easy, fast access to other forms of infrastructure. These often include highways, airports, water and sewer facilities, care centers, housing options, and quality educational facilities. Building water treatment plants, hospitals, schools, homes, transportation systems and other impactful community infrastructure not only creates jobs, but also increases long-term aggregate demand for goods and services within a community as well as contributes to rural prosperity development.

As a byproduct of differing levels of housing and infrastructure, the population of rural America is neither steady nor growing and does not match with its potential. In fact, varying rates of growth and decline in rural America depend on age and other considerations that highlight both the challenges and opportunities related to quality of life in rural communities. In the years after high school, young adults seeking better educational and career opportunities disproportionately leave rural areas for urban destinations. Then, during more advanced periods of personal and professional life, Americans tend to migrate to small cities and rural communities. Therefore, the population loss among those in their twenties is partly regained by adults in their thirties who bring technical and leadership skills back to their rural communities and focus on raising their children.



Such a trend yields a positive migration pattern to rural areas by adults in their late 30s, and also in their mid- 40s and 50s, when median household incomes reach their peak. This pattern further increases among early retirees (ages 65-69), especially focused on areas with features such as natural resource access and healthcare options. The migration of rural residents indicates the critical role that quality of life, access to healthcare, effective schools, and other vital services can play in sustaining rural populations and fostering long-term rural prosperity.

Overall, the rural population is shrinking for the first time on record and it is not just due to the migration of young adults to urban areas.

Fewer births, increased mortality among working-age adults, and an aging population are health factors that are driving numerous other aspects of rural social and economic life. For example, many communities are challenged in terms of access to medical services and primary care due to their relative remoteness from population centers. The recent rise in rural mortality rates among adults ages 35-54 can be tied to a dramatic increase in mortality from natural causes - e.g., heart, liver, and respiratory diseases, or cancer - and to the opioid epidemic.

While the opioid epidemic affects both rural and urban areas, the rise in natural cause mortality is largely a rural problem and represents a growing threat to quality of life and rural prosperity. If these trends are left unaddressed, the rural population will not only continue to decline but the dependency ratio will increase.



As a result, the number of people likely to be not working (children and retirees) will overwhelm the number of people who are likely to be wage earners (working-age adults) and it will become increasingly difficult to achieve a high quality of life.

## Objectives & Recommended Actions

- 1. Advance Educational Opportunities** – Create a strategy for public-private partnerships to complete the connection of all rural Pre-K through Grade 12 and Community/Technical Colleges to high-speed, high-capacity internet to maximize the use of digital learning, especially the deployment of curricula for STEM subjects most relevant to rural economies such as agriculture, manufacturing, military, and business. These opportunities should include the Department of Agriculture, Department of Labor, and Department of Education, and other pertinent agencies aligning on implementation along with key stakeholders. A primary activity should be conducting outreach and designing the optimal set of roles for various government agencies and private sector organizations.
- 2. Modernize Healthcare Access** – Assure that the policies and roles of the federal government support access to medical treatment facilities, including health clinics, telemedicine, vocational and medical rehabilitation facilities, dental clinics, assisted living, nursing homes and memory care facilities. Better coordination of the sources of capital that support high-need providers in rural areas is needed, including current federal funds and potential new private funds. Implementation of best practices can be identified and facilitated to enhance access to primary care and specialty providers through telemedicine. Improved access to mental and behavioral care, particularly access to prevention, treatment, and recovery resources is vital to address the nationwide opioid crisis and other substance misuse in rural communities. The Task Force recommends a multi-agency approach to align federal policies and programs for rural healthcare modernization within the Department of Health & Human Services, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Housing & Urban Development, Department of Interior, Department of Agriculture and other related agencies. The objective would be to prioritize actions and streamline current funds and financing tools of federal, state, tribal and local governments, as well as private sector organizations. Within existing resources, a more efficient deployment of current taxpayer resources can more effectively address the rural healthcare needs.
- 3. Innovate Options for Rural Housing** – Develop a set of shared best practices for increasing homeownership, reducing homelessness in rural communities, and building robust community infrastructure. Such practices should include recommendations for federal, state, tribal and local action to strengthen investments in rural housing and provide technical assistance. The Task Force recommends options such as the Department of Housing & Urban Development, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Agriculture, Department of Labor, and Department of Education jointly evaluating



federal rural housing policies and programs, and targeting existing resources to best support sustainable housing in rural communities. To optimize rural housing options for the workforce needed in the current and future economies, private sector organizations' resource deployment to rural areas can also be incentivized.

4. **Improve Transportation Options** – Targeted investment within current programs that are outcomes-driven can further address the disproportionately high fatality rate on rural roads, including multi-agency collaboration on policies. States and local transit systems can save tax dollars and more effectively serve rural citizens' mobility needs to job sites, education centers, and healthcare facilities, by streamlining federal policies, programs, and funds that support rural public transit systems. Interagency coordination could include the Department of Transportation, the Department of Health & Human Services, the Department of Labor, and other relevant agencies better aligning policies for rural transit services based on locally-created rural community economic development strategies.
5. **Modernize Rural Utilities** – Advance and expedite the important infrastructure modernization and technology investments that can be prioritized for rural communities' electric power and water systems. Existing resources can be utilized to further invest in rural communities' water infrastructure. For smart grid deployment, enhancements to federal financing programs at the Department of Agriculture can be executed in further conjunction with the Department of Energy. In addition, the Federal Communications Commission and the Department of Agriculture can further coordinate programs on the installation of high-speed e-connectivity in rural communities.



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6. **Improve Community Resiliency Planning** – Align federal economic development policy and resources in a manner that enhances rural prosperity. The Task Force recommends that a strategy is built out that includes best practices in site selection, workforce development, utility and transportation infrastructure, and use permitting. It could also encourage community resilience at the local level by requiring that federal planning strategies, such as the Economic Development Administration's Community Economic Development Strategies (CEDS), include identification of strategic industries for rural regions and plans for disaster preparedness and recovery. For example, coordination between the various agencies and programs of the Department of Agriculture can enhance the effectiveness of all federal agencies' efforts to support economic growth and resiliency in rural America, including CEDS, which can be used to drive federal investment in rural areas per these locally-created prosperity plans.