

ONE COUNTRY

SECURING OUR COMMUNITIES' SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

A sense of security comprises notions of both safety and certainty. Many rural communities have lost these twin notions. Hospital closures have disrupted communities that are grappling with a mental health crisis and rising substance use disorders. National politicians fan the flames of fear over uncertainty about immigration and crime.

Families in rural America are wrestling with the question of safety, as they consider long drives to health care providers, a lack of private insurance, sparse resources for mental illness and substance abuse. It's not enough, however, to name communities' fears: policymakers need to take tangible steps to address the root causes of these challenges in order to create a sense of security within rural American communities.

One Country seeks to bolster rural residents' sense of safety and well-being in their own community. Policies that support mental health care, provide treatment plans for substance use disorders, and address immigration and crime can build physical health and ease community members' minds about the security of their neighbors, building trust and confidence.

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□ Rural Health Care Access

Access to health care in rural America not only ensures the health and well-being of friends and neighbors, but health care is also an economic driver in our communities. Delaying care due to costs and a lack of access result in poorer health outcomes in rural areas.

Many rural communities lack sufficient providers, clinics and hospitals to serve the entire population. Rural populations are also older than their suburban or urban counterparts and require more specialized care services. This specialized care also causes the cost of care to rise in communities that already struggle to afford basic healthcare services.

For rural America to grow, we must embrace policies that provide economic stability and provide for the health and well-being of rural residents.

What to Say

- Over 30 rural hospitals were forced to close their doors since 2020 due to a myriad of challenges – low reimbursement rates, workforce shortages, aging and complex patient populations.
- The Biden Harris Administration has set forth a plan to secure the future and the viability of these facilities, and Democrats continue to work towards solutions.
- With the COVID public health crisis, telehealth became even more critical to connect patients with care. This has been a gamechanger for rural Americans as flexibilities were implemented to bypass long-standing policies that kept this care out of reach. The Biden Harris Administration and Democrats recognized these policies needed to be made permanent and investments in broadband were crucial to connect rural areas to care.

Endorsements

Rural Hospital Closure Relief Act of 2023

This bill allows additional hospitals to qualify as critical access hospitals (CAHs) that receive special payment under Medicare.

Protecting Rural Telehealth Access Act

This bill expands Medicare coverage of telehealth services.

Rural Health Care Facilities Revitalization Act

The bill authorizes rural health facilities to use Federal agricultural credit assistance for the purpose of refinancing debt obligations, updating necessary services, technology, and equipment, and supporting ancillary needs.

Agricultural Access to Addiction and Mental Health Care Act

This bill directs the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to study the accessibility of addiction and mental health care providers and services for farmers and ranchers impacted by severe and persistent drought, extreme weather events, instability in the commodities market, and misinformation targeting consumers.

Save Rural Hospitals Act of 2023

This bill establishes an area wage adjustment floor for Medicare hospital payments in states that are not frontier states and excludes such adjustments from certain budget neutrality rules.

Mental Health

The COVID public health crisis only exacerbated the shortcomings of our nation's mental health care system and laid bare how we do not adequately connect those in need with care. Democrats have long been advocating for increased access to health care and holding insurance companies accountable for mental health parity in coverage.

Rural communities often lack access to mental health providers locally, and even with the rise of telehealth as an additional mental health option, many rural residents lack basic access to internet connectivity to take advantage of telehealth services.

To adequately address the mental health challenges in rural communities we need changes to policy, investments in the workforce and infrastructure, and a cultural acceptance of mental health holding the same priority as physical health.

What to Say

- The Biden Harris Administration has prioritized funding for programs that address these challenges directly, while Republicans have proposed cutting funding for critical mental health programs.
- To address mental health challenges early and prevent poor outcomes, Democrats have simultaneously focused upstream and provide helpful interventions to children and families in the school setting.
- Democrats have collectively worked to approach criminal justice reform by addressing the underlying issues contributing to mental and behavioral health issues - including childhood trauma and social determinants of health.
- Republicans continue trying to distract from the public health threat of gun violence by claiming the issue is solely unaddressed mental health care. Rather than shifting the focus to mental health and further reinforce the stigma people in need face to seeking care, Republicans need to acknowledge that stronger gun control and background checks are also part of the solution.

Endorsements

[Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act](#)

This bill sets out activities and modifies existing programs to address racial and ethnic mental health disparities.

[To amend title VII of the Public Health Service Act to strengthen the mental health workforce, and for other purposes.](#)

Establish and carry out a mental health provider loan deferment and forgiveness program under which the eligible individual agrees to be employed full-time for a period of at least 5 years (beginning on the date on which the individual graduates from medical school) in providing mental and behavioral health care, including substance abuse prevention and treatment services.

[Mental Health Excellence in Schools Act](#)

This bill establishes a program to expand the mental health services workforce in schools.

[Student Mental Health Helpline Act](#)

This bill authorizes grants to support student mental health and safety helplines.

[Stop Mental Health Stigma in Our Communities Act](#)

This bill requires the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to undertake various activities to address mental and behavioral health issues among the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) populations.

□ Fentanyl and Substance Use

Opioid overdose deaths remain tragically high in our country, particularly in rural America. However, opioid related overdoses have declined for two years, providing hope that the opioid crisis may be improving. At the same time, there has been a rise in overdoses from other drugs, particularly narcotics and psychotropics.

The link between mental health and addiction is clear, and we must support policies that treat people who are addicted and help people with issues they are facing in their lives before they turn to drugs for self-medication.

The recent settlements in the lawsuits against the opioid manufactures that flooded American communities with powerful addictive drugs can provide some resources to help people currently suffering with addiction. Ultimately the prevention of addiction – particularly in rural communities – is part of the broader discussion about securing our communities. We must support our rural communities and provide the opportunities for growth and vitality that prevent the embrace of drugs as an escape from misery and struggle.

What to Say

- The Biden Harris Administration has focused on intercepting fentanyl at the southern border and has seized more fentanyl at the southern border in the past two years than was seized in the entirety of the Trump Administration. Reducing the availability of this dangerous drug has a significant impact on reducing accidental drug overdoses.
- Improving mental health outcomes and the availability of mental health treatment in rural communities is a vital step to reducing drug and alcohol addiction and overdoses.
- Ensuring the wide availability of fentanyl test strips will significantly reduce accidental overdoses in cases where opiates have been unknowingly added to other substances.

Endorsements

Budgeting for Opioid Addiction Treatment Act

This bill imposes an excise tax on the sale of any active opioid. The tax is equal to one cent per milligram so sold and it is imposed on the manufacturer, producer, or importer of the opioid. The bill provides block grants for substance abuse treatment programs.

Protecting Americans from Dangerous Opioids Act

This bill requires the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to revoke approval for an opioid drug for every new opioid drug approved. (Opioids are drugs with effects similar to opium, such as certain pain medications.) In determining the drug for which to revoke approval, the FDA must prioritize revoking approval for drugs that are not abuse deterrent and consider the public health impact of drugs on the market.

Opioid Treatment Providers Act

This bill makes certain opioid treatment programs eligible for the Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program, which provides education and training to low-income individuals for high-demand occupations in the health care field.

Modernizing Opioid Treatment Access Act

This bill expands access to methadone for an individual's unsupervised use to treat opioid use disorder (OUD).

Immigration

There are numerous drivers of immigration across the southern border of the United States.

Political instability in central and south America. Economic disruptions from trade and the impact of the COVID pandemic. High crime rates in south American countries fueled by the deportation policy of the U.S. in previous decades that created street gangs and fueled the violence of the drug trade. The impact of climate change is also displacing many people – particularly in Central America.

Economics are also a driver of immigration, especially to rural areas, with many large companies seeking agricultural workers who will work for lower wages than U.S. citizens. The single largest source of unlawful immigrants inside the U.S. are immigrants who legally entered the country with a visa for work or educational purposes and stayed past its expiration.

Although hardening the southern border and deporting migrants who entered the U.S. unlawfully are viewed as the only answers to immigration, this is not true. To resolve the immigration situation we must address all of the systemic drivers that are disrupting countries in Central and South America and displacing hundreds of thousands of people each year.

What to Say

- After the Biden Harris Administration took executive actions to tighten the rules for asylum in early 2024, border crossings have declined to their lowest levels since 2019. This executive action, combined with working closely with the Mexican government to reduce migrant crossings in southern Mexico have eased the burden on the southern border of the US.
- Restricting or revoking the visas of foreign companies that have aided in human smuggling and human trafficking across the border has led to significant declines in unlawful border crossings.
- In the last year there have been more migrants repatriated to their home countries than in any year since 2010, reducing the burden on community services across the country.

Endorsements

U.S. Citizenship Act

This bill establishes a path to citizenship for certain undocumented individuals. Among other things, the bill establishes a new status of lawful prospective immigrant, establishes grant programs for providing training and services to immigrants, and requires the Department of State to implement a strategy to advance reforms in Central America and address key factors contributing to migration from the region to the United States,

Restricting Solitary Confinement in Immigration Detention Act of 2024

This bill limits the use of solitary confinement and other forms of restrictive housing in immigration detention, and for other purposes, and incorporates reforms including mental health care and screening.

Immigration Court Efficiency and Children's Court Act of 2023

This bill would establish a Children's Court to improve the adjudication of immigration cases involving unaccompanied migrant children, creating a more friendly environment and strengthening due process for vulnerable children, while combating the immigration court backlog and relieving strain on the immigration court system nationwide.

Crime

The societal disruptions brought on by the arrival – and mishandling – of the COVID pandemic during the Trump administration fueled a significant [crime wave](#) across the country. Violent crime, property crime, and theft all soared in the closing months of 2020. The rise in crime was sharper in [red states and rural areas](#) but was under-reported in the national media compared to crime issues in cities.

Many of the drivers of this crime wave were temporary. With schools closed many students were pulled into illegal activities. Some workers who lost their jobs turned to illegal activities to make ends meet. And the social isolation of the extended lockdowns and social distancing exacerbated underlying mental health issues that helped fuel a rise in violent crime.

The Biden Harris Administration inherited this rising crime wave and were forced to take action to ensure the safety of our communities.

What to Say

- The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) was focused on reducing violent crime, ensuring community policing, and limiting access to high powered weapons. In the two years since the BSCA passed there has been an historic decline in the violent crime rate across the country. Violent crime and the murder rate are at their [lowest point in over 50 years](#).
- The Biden Harris Administration issued wide ranging pardons for people arrested for marijuana related non-violent offenses to ensure they could return to work.
- The Biden Harris Administration is assisting states to implement red flag laws to prevent dangerous or unstable individuals [from acquiring guns](#).
- The Biden Harris Administration has expanded background checks, increased penalties for [illegally purchasing guns](#) for people who cannot pass background checks, and restricted access to weapons for domestic abusers. Combined these actions will significantly reduce the number of illegal guns in the hands of dangerous individuals.

Endorsements

[Background Check Expansion Act](#)

This bill establishes new background check requirements for firearm transfers between private parties (i.e., unlicensed individuals). It prohibits a firearm transfer between private parties unless a licensed gun dealer, manufacturer, or importer first takes possession of the firearm to conduct a background check.

[Background Check Completion Act of 2023](#)

This bill prohibits a licensed gun dealer from transferring a firearm to an unlicensed person prior to the completion of a background check. Current law permits a licensed gun dealer to transfer a firearm to an unlicensed person if a submitted background check remains incomplete after three business days.

[Enhanced Background Checks Act of 2023](#)

This bill revises background check requirements applicable to proposed firearm transfers from a federal firearms licensee (e.g., a licensed gun dealer) to an unlicensed person. It would increase the amount of time, from 3 business days to a minimum of 10 business days, that a federal firearms licensee must wait to receive a completed background check prior to transferring a firearm to an unlicensed person.

[Assault Weapons Ban of 2023](#)

This bill makes it a crime to knowingly import, sell, manufacture, transfer, or possess a semiautomatic assault weapon (SAW) or large capacity ammunition feeding device (LCAFD).