

Yesterday, the Senate Agriculture Committee majority released a detailed [section-by-section summary](#) of the 2024 Farm Bill. Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) put forth the *Rural Prosperity and Food Security Act*, which includes significant investments in rural communities for healthcare, childcare, and broadband. NRHA is pleased to see that many proposals and bills that we advocated for are included in the legislation. This summary represents a major step towards passing a final Farm Bill that provides critical support to rural areas of the nation. NRHA looks forward to seeing the full bill text and more activity out of the Committee, as well as a bipartisan bill from the House Agriculture Committee to strengthen rural communities and healthcare across the country.

Additionally, the House Agriculture Committee majority, led by Chairman G.T. Thompson (R-PA) released a high-level [section-by-section](#).

Highlights from the Rural Prosperity and Food Security Act include:

Rural Development.

For the first time ever, the Farm Bill includes **\$50 million in mandatory funding for FY 2025 and the following years** to carry out Rural Development activities. In addition, the bill **includes a historic \$200 million in mandatory funding for community facility grants** and rural water and waste disposal grants.

In addition, **Farm Credit institutions may finance certain rural community facilities, including hospitals**, in partnerships with local lenders to support healthcare and behavioral health among other facilities.

Behavioral Health

- In the Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant (CFL) program, awards would prioritize healthcare and behavioral health facilities from fiscal years (FY) 2025 to 2031. Additionally, loan and grant flexibilities to **allow awards to be used for medical supplies, increasing telehealth capabilities, and supporting staffing** needs are extended.
- Similarly, under the Distance Learning and Telemedicine program, projects that provide substance use disorder prevention, treatment, or recovery services or provide behavioral health services are prioritized from FYs 2025 – 2031.

Childcare:

- The bill addresses rural childcare needs by prioritizing projects for facilities for childcare programs in CFL. The Secretary would also prioritize projects supporting childcare across various financial assistance programs.
- **At least 10% of appropriations for Business and Industry Guaranteed Loans must go to supporting childcare programs and healthcare.**

Capacity Building:

- The legislation includes various rural capacity building proposals, including new Rural Partnership Program Grants for public and private partnerships. **Rural healthcare facilities would be eligible for the Partnership grants**, as well as nonprofit organizations.
- The Rural Partners Network (RPN) would be permanently authorized and the RPN would develop recommendations to improve federal assistance to rural areas.

Broadband and Telemedicine.

Reauthorizes the ReConnect Program:

- Establishes a grant, loan, and grant/loan combination program for constructing, improving, or acquiring facilities and equipment for broadband service in rural areas. The service must provide speeds of at least 100-Mbps/100-Mbps.
- Requires eligible projects to provide broadband service of at least 100-Mbps/100-Mbps in areas where 75% of households lack access to broadband of at least 100-Mbps/20-Mbps.
- Prioritizes projects in areas where at least 90% of the households lack access to broadband service of at least 100-Mbps/20-Mbps.
- Limits grant-only awards to projects serving Tribal organizations, colonias, persistent poverty counties, and socially vulnerable communities or projects in areas where at least 90% of the households lack access to broadband service of at least 100-Mbps/20-Mbps.

Reauthorizes the Community Connect Grant Program:

- Expands eligible service areas to allow rural areas where broadband service is less than 25-Mbps/3-Mbps.
- Increases build out speed requirements to 100-Mbps/20-Mbps.

Reauthorizes the Distance Learning and Telemedicine program:

- Allows a limited amount of financial assistance to be used for operating expenses.
- Removes the matching funds requirement for grants for Indian Tribes and in cases of demonstrated need.

Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN).

This bill increases the authorization of appropriations for FRSAN to \$15 million, aligning with NRHA's request. **FRSAN grant recipients would be encouraged to establish referral relationships with certain healthcare providers, including rural health clinics and critical access hospitals.** The USDA Secretary would also be required to submit a report to Congress on the state of behavioral and mental health of individuals working in agriculture and opportunities to better serve those individuals through existing national hotlines.

Nutrition.

Changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) include:

- A new provision to require the Secretary of Agriculture to coordinate with the Secretary of Health and Human Services to develop materials to train health care professionals on how to inform their patients about SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs.
- Requiring the Department of Agriculture (USDA) to study the impact of allowing hot foods to be purchased with SNAP benefits and following the study, conducting pilots to test the effect of allowing hot foods on the program.

This legislation would increase mandatory funding for the Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program by \$100 million over 10 years and \$5 million for the Healthy Food Financing Initiative.



The USDA would be directed to create a Senior Nutrition Task Force – an interagency group to identify and promote resources to address food insecurity among older adults. The legislation would also require a study and report on the adequacy and availability of nutrition programs in geographically isolated states and territories compared to continental states.

You can find NRHA's requests to House and Senate Agriculture Committees [here](#) and our Farm Bill one pager [here](#). If you have any questions, please contact NRHA's Government Affairs and Policy Director, Alexa McKinley at amckinley@ruralhealth.us.