



WORKING TOGETHER TO ADDRESS THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC IN RURAL AMERICA

By Secretary Tom Vilsack, U.S. Department of Agriculture and Chair, White House Rural Council

Background

More Americans now die every year from drug overdoses than in motor vehicle crashes. The majority of those overdoses involve prescription medications. Kaiser Family Foundation recently reported that 44 percent of Americans personally know someone who has been addicted to prescription painkillers. In 2014, opioids – a class of drugs that includes prescription pain medications and heroin – were involved in 28,648 deaths. This public health crisis is hitting rural America particularly hard. In January, President Obama asked me to lead a federal interagency effort to address the opioid epidemic in rural communities.

Issues/Challenges and Opportunities

Communities across the nation are struggling to deal with the opioid epidemic. Departments across the Administration are using all available tools to combat it. At USDA, for example, we are using the Rural Health and Safety Education grant program to increase substance use disorder awareness; the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Program to increase access to treatment; and the Community Facilities Grants and Loans Program to build treatment and recovery facilities.

Despite these efforts, great challenges remain, including the extreme shortage of transitional housing for those in treatment and recovery that has been expressed to me by community leaders from around the country. Stable quality housing is essential for the recovery of those suffering from substance use disorder and for enabling them to become contributing members of our communities again. In August, USDA launched an initiative to use Rural Housing Service resources to help fill the need for transitional housing. Actions include encouraging the use of Community Facilities financing for transitional housing projects; making vacant USDA-owned properties in 22 states available for sale or lease to nonprofits to convert into transitional housing; and a pilot in four states (Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, and Vermont) to make vacant multifamily rental housing units available to tenants participating in drug court

programs. However, more must be done and we must continue to work creatively with housing and community development practitioners to provide homes and align other essential services for those in treatment and recovery.

This issue is a critical part of USDA's greater call for safe, affordable housing options. We must all come together to protect the stock of USDA-financed affordable rental housing properties across the United States, which is vital for the stability and well-being not just of people recovering from substance use disorder but of entire rural communities. Many of these properties are at risk of paying off their mortgages, exiting USDA's programs, and losing their affordable status in the coming years. USDA is working hard to preserve and revitalize them through our existing program tools and partnerships, but Congressional action is needed to provide additional funding for preservation and new construction.

Discussion Questions

- Who are the key partners and stakeholders who can play a role in addressing the transitional housing issue in rural communities related to the opioid epidemic?
- Beyond USDA Rural Housing Service programs, what other housing assets can be utilized to address this challenge?
- How can prevention and treatment programs and other essential services be integrated with housing?
- What additional data and analysis could be helpful in targeting limited resources to alleviate the issue?