

# Rural Network – White House Stakeholder Engagement Call

**Date: February 3, 2021**

**Special Guests: Will McIntee, White House Office of Public Engagement & Kelliann Blazek, the White House Domestic Policy Council**

**Subject: To learn about President Biden’s American Rescue Plan and provide initial reactions and comments to White House Staff**

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On February 3, 2021, The Rural Network convened a stakeholder engagement call with Will McIntee from the White House Office of Public Engagement and Kelliann Blazek from the White House Domestic Policy Council. The call was attended by over 200 rural participants representing organizations, advocacy groups, and rural groups from across the nation.

Will McIntee introduced himself as the Associate Director for the White House Office of Public Engagement. Will presented on President Biden’s **American Rescue Plan**, the proposed legislation to address the COVID-19 crisis, as well as take questions on other rural focused topics. Key points he discussed included:

- Focus is to rescue American working families in need during the COVID crisis.
- There is a need to address these issues in order to rebuild our communities suffering the most.
- Several components of the plan are focused on helping families with housing, hunger and employment instability as well as supporting schools, childcare facilities and supporting small businesses.
- Will emphasized his gratitude working with RCAP, NACo, NCBA and the Rural Network and is looking forward to ongoing engagement.

Will introduced his colleague, Kelliann Blazek, serving as the Special Assistant to the President for Ag and Rural Policy on the White House Domestic Policy Council, to discuss specifics of the American Rescue Plan and helped answer stakeholder questions. Her experience growing up in a rural community gives her firsthand insights on the challenges and opportunities that our communities are currently facing. She reviewed some of the main provisions in the American Rescue Plan:

- Emphasized that the plan is to provide immediate relief.
- \$1.9 trillion package that is meant to be the first legislation to aid communities immediately with the idea that future packages will focus on the economic development recovery needs.
- COVID-19 and funding for vaccinations are a large part of this first proposed legislation because getting control of the pandemic is the crucial first step in the recovery efforts.
- \$160 billion to provide the supplies, emergency response, testing and public health officials needed to stop the spread and deploy the vaccine.
  - Mobile vaccination sites will be key for rural and remote areas.
- \$130 billion to help schools reopen and to serve students better with learning.
  - Reducing class sizes, more PPE, improving ventilation
- Recognizing that rural communities are already on tight budgets, the proposal includes \$350 billion in emergency funding to state, local and territorial governments.
  - Help with school reopening logistics.
  - Outreach and technical assistance
  - \$20 billion set aside for Tribes to get PPE, expand internet access, assist with telemedicine.

- Small business relief
  - \$15 billion
  - Helps support minority owned businesses.
  - Emphasized this was meant for restaurants, farmers and others on the food supply change.
- Other community support provisions include:
  - \$1,400/person stimulus check
  - Raise the minimum wage to \$15/hour.
  - \$25 billion to support childcare.
  - \$35 billion in rental, homelessness, and utility assistance.
  - Extending the SNAP benefit increase of 15%, and temporarily removing the state match requirement and \$3 billion to WIC to provide outreach.

The guests invited to submit questions and comments for Will and Kelliann. Stakeholders raised several questions, concerns and support for the American Rescue Plan and other rural focused issues, including:

- Issues with rural broadband access and equitable treatment of minority communities. Kelliann responded that the local funding in the package is fairly flexible and it could go to supporting telehealth access, online learning and broadband. Moving forward, they are interested in looking at not only broadband expansion but exploring technical assistance needs for the communities who are getting left behind. Looking at more comprehensive approaches.
- Issues with food security and distribution to rural, remote and Tribal communities. Kelliann responded that USDA is working diligently on that. Secretary Nominee Vilsack mentioned at his confirmation hearing recently that he is interested in working directly with Governors to ensure that programs like SNAP and WIC are being implemented swiftly and there is guidance and direct outreach to ensure that communities aren't being left out.
- Concerns about the \$15/ hour minimum wage increase and how small businesses will be able to afford that. Question on how we can minimize any potential burdens that this would cause and turn those into positive steps for the community. Will responded that they were still working on how this would roll out and would be interested in engaging on this offline to help rural community businesses mitigate the impact while still ensuring that the workers are supported.
- Questions on what the communication strategy will be to get the money out efficiently and get this money out equitably and how the Rural Network can help. Will responded that this stakeholder group is hopefully the starting place for that communication and getting it out to the most affected communities. He also explained that there will be a lot of communication from the White House directly on the details of the plan to ensure transparency and an equitable distribution on funds. Some organizations have engaged on the plan using social media or showing support in their communications channels as well.
  - Kelliann added that Congress is working on translating these proposals into legislative language which is another area where this group of stakeholders can be engaged and mentioned the possibility of budget reconciliation.
- Requests that in rural economic development discussions, there be an inclusion of "remote communities," in addition to "rural" communities.
- Requests to hear more about their plans to help small businesses with financing and also whether there has been discussion on tax credits for small businesses that do have a \$15/hr wage and are hiring as an incentive. Kelliann said they are looking at all options and are considering every tool they have in the tool box. If there are creative solutions out there, she said they would love to hear from this group on what those opportunities are.
- Concerns that some very small business owners couldn't access the EIDL and PPP because some "mom and pop" small businesses use a Schedule C and the SBA is going off of the net profit line on the Schedule C (for farmers, in contrast, they are going off of the Gross Profits on the

Schedule F). Because of this, they don't qualify for the PPP. They recommended that they consider using a similar method as they do for farmers.

- Comments that the value of technical assistance is important in supporting rural broadband success and other infrastructure. Also that economic development is in the recovery phase and noted that workforce development usually looks at current demand instead of at developing trends for jobs that will see demand in the future.
- Echoed the rural broadband sentiments and added that hotspots aren't always the solution because they don't always work either.
- Asked what the communication strategy is for the \$1.9 trillion invested into the American economy. We sometimes hear in our communities that its too expensive, but the reality is we can't afford *not* to invest in this economy in a big way. We are interested in hearing more communication around this idea so that we can support the Biden Administrations messages and plan.