

2025 RURAL CENTER ADVOCACY PLATFORM

The NC Rural Center's mission is to develop, promote, and implement sound economic strategies to improve the quality of life of rural North Carolinians. We serve the state's 78 rural counties, with a special focus on individuals with low to moderate incomes and communities with limited resources.

Every rural community has inherent value and is vital to the overall economic health of our state. We recognize the opportunities and challenges facing rural North Carolina may vary by region and community, and we support public policies that acknowledge these differences and invest in all communities fully, regardless of geographic, demographic or other considerations.

EDUCATION and WORKFORCE

As the North Carolina economy becomes increasingly specialized, our state must continue to develop, educate and train a resilient workforce to keep up with market demands. The Rural Center believes workforce development starts by ensuring children have access to quality primary and secondary education that continues into apprenticeships, certifications, community colleges, higher education and beyond. A highly educated and skilled workforce attracts greater economic opportunities that benefit local and regional communities and economies. The Rural Center champions policies that develop a highly competent workforce who lives, works, and thrives in rural North Carolina:

- The workforce of tomorrow begins early in life, and the Rural Center believes every resident in this state deserves safe, affordable, accessible and high-quality early childhood education to promote cognitive and social development for primary school readiness. Additionally, all North Carolina families need access to safe, affordable, high-quality child care options to remain active in the workforce.
- As a foundation for lifelong learning and success, our state's public schools must have protected and increased funding to educate our children. North Carolina has one of the lowest per-pupil expenditures rankings of all fifty states. Public schools are often the only option for students in rural communities. Increased and equitable funding to all public schools, rural and urban, is necessary to ensure proper academic and soft skill development for tomorrow's workforce. We must ensure that we have safe, sound facilities and skilled, resourced teachers and administrators for the benefit of every student.
- Every member of our future workforce deserves every opportunity to succeed, and it is critical that access to apprenticeships, industry certifications, community colleges, public and private higher education institutions and beyond are equitable among our state's urban and rural students. As one of the most robust systems in the nation, the North Carolina Community College System must have funding and flexibility to assess and reorganize their programming to fit workforce demands. Furthermore, to ensure an adaptable, resilient workforce among today and tomorrow's participants, opportunities for continuing education and advancements must be present, readily available, and affordable.

HEALTH

Rural communities tend to have worse health outcomes than urban communities, in part, due to a large aging population. A number of factors contribute to this challenge, one of which is access to affordable, quality healthcare options. Beyond access to quality care, however, are social determinants of health that present barriers to positive health outcomes. These include socioeconomic factors, individual behavior, and even community infrastructure. The Rural Center recognizes the need to improve health outcomes of rural people throughout the state and advocates for policies that grow the healthcare workforce, access to care, and overall healthier communities.

- While the state has moved forward to expand Medicaid, there is still much work left to dependably deliver rural communities accessible, affordable care that meets demand. With rural populations growing older, the Rural Center believes our residents deserve access to care to tend to their needs, just as we must offer young families the appropriate care and expertise that will enable their growth.
 - Access to care meets seemingly insurmountable challenges in rural North Carolina, as invariably rural counties find themselves in Healthcare Professional Shortage Areas across the spectrum of care- from primary to dentistry to specialty services. It is crucial we reevaluate burdensome red tape and regulations that stand in the way of our healthcare workforce operating at its fullest capacity and maintaining the highest patient safety standards. The time is now to take bold steps to encourage and incentivize the recruitment and long-term retainment of physicians and other health care providers to learn, live and practice in rural communities. We must also make career pathways to healthcare jobs at all levels more accessible to people of all ages in the communities where they live.
 - Healthcare is changing rapidly, but rural communities are left behind in receiving the greatest care. Payment obstacles, lack of a healthcare workforce, and operational costs are driving the closure of critically needed facilities and the disappearance of specialty services. The Rural Center recognizes these trends, and advocates for sustainable, long term innovation and policies to equip rural communities with the workforce and facilities to deliver quality healthcare.
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INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure plays a critical role in the lives of all people. Communities with infrastructure that is safe, modern, affordable, and resilient tend to have better economic and health outcomes, and lead to communities having greater qualities of life. Unfortunately, extensive data shows that many rural North Carolina communities have outdated infrastructure in need of maintenance, repair or replacement. Many of our rural communities face the brunt of natural disasters, exacerbating current infrastructure challenges. The Rural Center believes every North Carolinian should have access to all necessary infrastructure for the betterment of their livelihoods, their work, and their communities.

- Water and wastewater systems are crucial for the economic, health and operations of communities. Rural North Carolina communities have challenges with existing, dated systems that are failing to effectively serve and treat water for household and business entities. Rural communities' strained and limited resources are outpaced by needed upgrades – and replacements – for their existing systems. The Rural Center supports funding and innovative solutions for the advancement and improved sustainability of water and wastewater management systems.
- Adequate, safe, affordable modern housing is an absolute necessity: it provides familial and workforce stability; generates economic wealth and opportunities for economic advancement; and drives community cohesion. North Carolina's rural communities are suffering their own housing crises, and we believe investing in and developing affordable housing, rental and owned, in our rural communities.
- The internet has changed modern life. Unfortunately, persistent barriers exist to ensure everyone has access to what has become a critical utility – as well as the tools to use and understand the internet. The Rural Center believes and supports the timely build out of broadband internet as a critical, necessary infrastructure alongside efforts to assist individuals in using this technology to improve their lives. We promote the effective collaboration between large and small service providers, municipalities and government, to ensure that every rural North Carolinian is properly “connected.”
- The majesty and natural beauty of North Carolina is accessible to everyone thanks to our state's extensive transportation systems. These systems also facilitate commerce and trade, promote job creation and advance regional economies, and allow others to tour and travel throughout our state. Many of our roadways and bridges, however, are in need of repair, and some were destroyed due to Hurricane Helene. We must ensure our transportation systems are safe, up to date, and provide opportune access from the mountains to the coast. We must also upgrade strategic transportation corridors to improve connectivity between rural, suburban, and urban communities within North Carolina and with our neighboring states.
- Our state has been battered by natural disasters, and many of our rural communities lack the rainy-day funds necessary to rebuild quickly. The North Carolina Rural Center believes extensive resource dedication to rebuild and strategically plan and develop for more resilient communities, is critical to rebuilding and revitalizing our rural economies. Every region and community in our state is different, and each of them deserves adequate resources and policies that are informed, intentional and specific to their respective needs.



BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Agriculture, business and industry are the backbone of North Carolina's economy. However, our state is diverse in every sense of the word, it has the second largest rural population in the United States, and the business and economic development needs and priorities of rural, suburban and urban places are unique. Statewide economic development policy must account for this uniqueness. The Rural Center advocates for legislation that prioritizes rural economic success and well-being, and economic development initiatives tailored to rural North Carolina's needs and opportunities.

- Agriculture has traditionally been – and continues to be – one of North Carolina's leading industries. However, the nature of the industry is changing; most workers are Hispanic, farmers are aging, costs have increased and we are experiencing more severe weather impacts. Farms are getting larger, and there are fewer of them. As a commitment to food production and security, economic stability, and environmental and cultural stewardship, the Rural Center believes in smart planning and development to ensure adequate agricultural spaces and production.
 - Small businesses are the largest employers collectively in rural North Carolina, and they play an essential role in providing jobs and growing local economies. The Rural Center believes deeply that our small businesses need to be prioritized, and we support greater access to transparent, affordable small business capital; mentorship opportunities, and access to resources, especially those in our rural communities.
 - We support rectifying the limitations of definitions for small businesses in public programs, statutes, and regulations (typically <500 employees) that can contribute to local establishments (often with <50 employees) being outcompeted for limited resources designated for small businesses.
 - The Rural Center recognizes the importance of a multi-pronged approach to business development that includes support for start ups and small businesses, support for retention of existing businesses and support for recruitment of larger businesses and industries. We believe this is accomplished through access to capital, resources and technical assistance., We believe in building communities that are business friendly, have strong educational and healthcare systems and provide cultural and natural amenities for all residents to enjoy.
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