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Contact: HHS Press Office

202-690-6343

media@hhs.gov

HHS Announces Nearly \$1 Billion from American Rescue Plan for Rural COVID-19 Response

Funding Will Help Communities, Hospitals, Health Clinics Respond to the Pandemic and Support Local Efforts to Increase Vaccine Confidence and Uptake in Rural Communities

Today, thanks to the American Rescue Plan, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is announcing the availability of nearly \$1 billion to strengthen COVID-19 response efforts and increase vaccinations in rural communities. As part of the Biden Administration's commitment to expanding access to vaccines and ensuring equity in the COVID-19 response, the Health Resources and Services Administration, a part of HHS, will increase the number of vaccines sent to rural communities, expand testing and other COVID-19 prevention services, and work to increase vaccine confidence by empowering trusted local voices with additional funding for outreach efforts in underserved communities.

"Rural health providers are vital to ensure equity in COVID-19 testing, vaccinations and in making sure rural residents have the information about vaccine safety, especially for populations who are at an increased risk for COVID-19 infection or severe illness due to systemic health and social inequities and geographic isolation," said HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra. "Support to Rural Health Clinics and small rural hospitals for COVID-19 testing, strengthening vaccine allocation and confidence, and vaccine outreach will help rural residents make informed health decisions about COVID-19 to protect themselves and their communities."

HRSA's Rural Health Clinic COVID-19 Testing and Mitigation Program will provide \$460 million to more than 4,600 rural health clinics (RHCs) across the country. RHCs will use the funds to maintain and increase COVID-19 testing, expand access to testing for rural residents, and broaden efforts to mitigate the spread of the virus in ways tailored to their local communities. RHCs are a special certification given to health care practices in underserved rural areas by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to help ensure access to care for rural residents. HRSA will provide up to \$100,000 per RHC-certified clinic site and will issue the funds this summer.

To further support COVID-19 testing in rural areas, HRSA will provide \$398 million to existing grantees of the Small Rural Hospital Improvement Program (SHIP) to work with approximately 1,730 small rural hospitals – those with fewer than 50 beds – and Critical Access Hospitals on COVID-19 testing and mitigation. SHIP state grantees will use the funding to support all eligible rural hospitals, up to \$230,000 per hospital, and will issue the funds later in the year.

"Addressing the health care challenges rural areas face requires a targeted approach that's tailored to the needs of local communities," said HRSA Acting Administrator Diana Espinosa. "This critical funding strengthens our ability to deliver on President Biden's commitment to ensure that the nation's underserved communities and those who are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 get the help they need."

HRSA will also support RHCs to increase the availability of COVID-19 vaccines in rural communities and expand outreach to build vaccine confidence. Working in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), HRSA is inviting Medicare-certified RHCs to join the new Rural Health Clinic COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution (RHCVD) Program to directly receive vaccines from the Biden Administration. HRSA and CDC will continue to enroll interested RHCs to receive COVID-19 vaccines, the allocation for which is separate from jurisdictions' weekly allocations.

In addition, through the Rural Health Clinic Vaccine Confidence (RHCVC) Program, HRSA will make nearly \$100 million available in grants to eligible RHCs nationwide to address health equity gaps by offering support and resources to medically underserved rural communities where COVID-19 vaccine uptake lags in comparison to more populated areas. HRSA will fund all eligible RHCs that apply. The RHCVC Program is the first targeted RHC grant since the passage of the Rural Health Clinic Service Act in 1977.

RHCs will be able to use the funds to increase vaccine confidence, improve health care in rural areas, and reinforce key messages about prevention and treatment of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. Implementation efforts in rural communities will include disseminating information to rural residents about how and where to get vaccinated, and coordinating with existing vaccination sites and public health partners to identify strategies to increase vaccine confidence among key populations. RHCs may also use funding to promote vaccination and bolster patient literacy in rural areas on the benefits of broad vaccination and vaccine safety in support of continued efforts to return to a more normal lifestyle.

For more information about HRSA's rural programs, visit the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy website: <https://www.hrsa.gov/rural-health/index.html>

To learn more about HRSA's allocation to Rural Health Clinics for COVID-19 testing visit: <https://www.hrsa.gov/rural-health/coronavirus/rural-health-clinics-covid-19-testing-fy20-awards>

To learn more about the Small Rural Hospital Improvement Program (SHIP), visit <https://www.hrsa.gov/rural-health/rural-hospitals>.

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