

Opening Statement of Chairman Robert B. Aderholt

Challenges Faced by Rural America

March 29, 2023

Good morning. I've really been looking forward to our hearing today. First, I would like to thank all our witnesses for taking time to come speak to us today.

I am proud to represent the fourth district of Alabama. My district is comprised of 14 counties which extend from the Mississippi border to the Georgia state line. My district has only three cities with a population over twenty thousand. For perspective, the University of Alabama football team plays in a stadium that holds well over 100,000 people. The fourth district of Alabama is a beautiful and diverse area with much to offer. However, like many rural parts of our country, we face many unique challenges, and I have found that many of our policy debates here in Washington D.C. overlook and disregard the many challenges that rural Americans face.

Many of my colleagues also represent rural areas. Our districts have been challenged by the limited access to health care, workforce opportunities that are insufficient, and an education system that often is not able to meet the needs of students, and especially those with a disability. I intend for today's hearing to shed light on some of these challenges faced by our rural constituents, but also present solutions to address them.

I'd like to start with some basic information. Just under fifty million Americans live in a rural area, making up just under fourteen percent of the US population. A typical rural county contains less than 10 percent of the typical urban county, with just over an average population of twenty thousand.

Access to quality health care, lack of specialty care and nursing shortages, high rates of opioid addictions, lack of facilities and a disproportionate burden of chronic disease relative to the rest of the country are challenges we face daily.

Due to geographic isolation, we also face lack of access to many educational services, such as specialized services for children with disabilities and opportunities for higher education near home.

Unemployment in rural areas reached levels not seen since the Great Depression in the 1930s – and even now rural unemployment continues to be higher than the national average. We face challenges in developing and maintaining a high skilled workforce, with some areas' local economies reliant on a single industry or sector.

And while not the jurisdiction of this subcommittee, I would be remiss if I did not mention the impact of limited access to broadband in rural America and the impact of the pandemic with the move to virtual internet-based platforms. These areas represent a smaller

customer base and more difficult terrain, in addition to a lower adoption rate, this results in higher prices and fewer options. As more services move online, especially in education and healthcare, the gap between urban and rural areas for internet service will only magnify the gap in access between urban and rural populations.

The Departments covered by this subcommittee have several programs targeting rural populations. We have asked witnesses from each agency to come before us today to speak about the work these programs are doing to address the challenges of our communities.

We will also hear from a second panel of experts in the areas of health, education and workforce development who can tell us more about the day to day challenges they face in delivering these important services in rural America.

Rural Americans are the backbone of this country. The small businesses, healthcare workers and educators of my great state of Alabama, and many other rural states, continue to strive to better their own communities, despite the disparities they face. It's past time for us to draw attention to these issues – and take action.

I look forward to hearing about the programs that are working for rural America and see what we can do to help this Committee better serve all Americans.

I would now like to turn to the Committee's Ranking Member for any remarks she would like to make.

[Ranking Member DeLauro makes remarks]

I would now like to introduce our first panel of witnesses for today.

You will each have five minutes to deliver you remarks, your submitted written testimony will be included in full.

Mr. Morris you may begin.