

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 23, 2022

The Honorable Vice Admiral Vivek Murthy, MD
Office of the Surgeon General
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave S.W.
Humphrey Bldg. Suite 701H
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Surgeon General Murthy,

Thank you for attending the Finance Committee's hearing, "Protecting Youth Mental Health," on February 8, 2022.¹ I appreciate our shared commitment to improve access to mental and behavioral health services in rural America. As Finance Committee chairman, I helped make the mental tele-health benefit under Medicare permanent.² I have also championed and supported legislation that improves access to mental health care for farmers,³ first responders,⁴ and veterans,⁵ so they can better manage the stress related to their jobs. I am writing to ask for an update on our discussion during the February 8, 2022, Finance Committee hearing and status of my questions for the record, which were submitted to your office on February 15, 2022.

As you may recall, during the Finance Committee hearing, I asked you about the importance of ensuring mental health resources are available for youth in rural areas. Your 2021 U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, "Protecting Youth Mental Health," lists youth in rural areas as

¹ Senate Finance Committee, Committee Hearing, "Protecting Youth Mental Health: Part I - An Advisory and Call to Action," February 8, 2022, https://www.finance.senate.gov/hearings/protecting-youth-mental-health-part-i_-an-advisory-and-call-to-action.

² Senate Finance Committee, "Grassley Statement on Year-End Funding and Pandemic Relief Legislation," December 21, 2020, <https://www.finance.senate.gov/chairmans-news/grassley-statement-on-year-end-funding-and-pandemic-relief-legislation>.

³ *FARMERS FIRST Act*: Office of Senator Grassley, "Let's Break Silence And Talk About Mental Health On The Farm," December 26, 2019, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/commentary/grassley-op-ed-lets-break-silence-and-talk-about-mental-health-farm>; *Seeding Rural Resilience Act*: Office of Senator Grassley, "Grassley, Tester Bill To Curb The Rising Rate Of Rural Suicides Headed To The President's Desk," December 11, 2020, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/grassley-tester-bill-curb-rising-rate-rural-suicides-headed-president-s-desk>.

⁴ Office of Senator Chuck Grassley, "Backing The Blue: Grassley-Led Bills Supporting Law Enforcement Signed Into Law," November 18, 2021, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/backing-the-blue-grassley-led-bills-supporting-law-enforcement-signed-into-law>; Office of Senator Chuck Grassley, "Grassley Joins Bipartisan Effort To Help Reduce Police Officer Suicides," October 31, 2019, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/grassley-joins-bipartisan-effort-help-reduce-police-officer-suicides>; Office of Senator Chuck Grassley, "Grassley, Colleagues Introduce Bill To Help First Responders Cope With Stresses Of Serving Communities In Moments Of Crisis," April, 6, 2022, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/grassley-colleagues-introduce-bill-to-help-first-responders-cope-with-stresses-of-serving-communities-in-moments-of-crisis>.

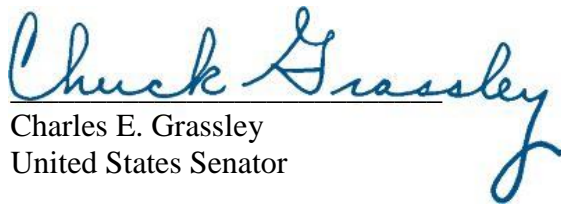
⁵ Office of Senator Chuck Grassley, "Mental Health Matters," May 13, 2022, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/05/13/2022/qanda-mental-health-matters>.

higher risk of mental health challenges during the pandemic.⁶ The report provides specific resources, but it does not list any rural-focused organizations or resources, such as university extension offices,⁷ 4-H,⁸ or Future Farmers of America (FFA).⁹ These organizations all provide rural-focused mental health awareness and resources. I'm glad during the hearing you agreed we need more mental health resources for rural youth. I hope the Biden administration is working with these organization and/or others to improve rural youth mental health care access. Will your office be issuing a rural-focused resource guide demonstrating specific resources and efforts to support the mental health of young people living in rural America?

In recent years, I have helped pass the bipartisan *FARMERS FIRST Act* in the 2018 Farm Bill¹⁰ and the bipartisan *Seeding Rural Resilience Act* in the Fiscal Year 2021 *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA).¹¹ Both laws addressed suicide rates among farmers and the agriculture community. The *FARMERS FIRST Act* made grants available for helplines and support groups. The *Seeding Rural Resilience Act* created a voluntary stress management program that helps train the Department of Agriculture (USDA) employees to detect stress and destigmatize mental health care. USDA is required to be working with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), including your office, to raise mental health public awareness among farmers and ranchers. You indicated in the February 8, 2022, Finance Committee hearing that you will work with the USDA to ensure this effort is developing as urgently as possible and report back to me. To date, I have not heard back from you or your office. Can you confirm you are working with USDA to ensure this effort is developing as urgently as possible? It is important that USDA is coordinating across the interagency, including with your office, to appropriately implement the *Seeding Rural Resilience Act*.

I respectfully ask for your timely attention to these matters discussed at the February 8, 2022, Finance Committee hearing and questions in this letter.

Sincerely,


Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator

CC: The Honorable Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture

⁶ U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, "Protecting Youth Mental Health," 2021, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.

⁷ Iowa State University, "Farm and Ranch Wellbeing," <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/farm-ranch-wellbeing#:~:text=Iowa%20Concern%3A%201%2D800%2D,legal%20education%2C%20and%20financial%20concerns>.

⁸ 4-H, "4-H Youth Mental Health Survey Toolkit," <https://4-h.org/professionals/marketing-resources/4-h-youth-mental-health-survey-toolkit/>.

⁹ Future Farmers of America, "FFA Alumna Shares Her Mental Health Struggle," May 13, 2022, <https://www.ffa.org/the-feed/ffa-alumna-shares-her-mental-health-struggle/>. Future Farmers of America, "FFA Member Combats Farm Stress," February 11, 2020, <https://www.ffa.org/grants/ffa-member-combats-farm-stress/>.

¹⁰ Public Law 115-334, Division VII, Sec. 7412.

¹¹ Public Law 116-283, Division H, Title C, Sec. 10006.