

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 4, 2022

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary
Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Ave S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Secretary Becerra,

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.¹ I have also championed and supported legislation that improves access to mental health care for farmers, first responders, and veterans, so they can better manage the stress related to their jobs. In recent years, I have helped pass the bipartisan *FARMERS FIRST Act* in the 2018 Farm Bill² and the bipartisan *Seeding Rural Resilience Act* in the Fiscal Year 2021 *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA).³ 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.

In implementing the *Seeding Rural Resilience Act*, USDA is required to be working with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to raise mental health public awareness among farmers and ranchers. Earlier this year, Surgeon General Murthy testified before the Senate Committee on Finance on improving youth mental health including in rural America.⁴ Given the Surgeon General's priority on improving youth mental health, I have asked for an update on his efforts, among HHS's broader efforts, to help implement the *Seeding Rural Resilience Act*.⁵ Unfortunately, I am still waiting for a response from the Surgeon General. Given the important interagency work that USDA and HHS must be taking to implement the *Seeding Rural Resilience Act*, I am requesting an update on your implementation efforts.

¹ 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>.

² Public Law 115-334, Division VII, Sec. 7412.

³ Public Law 116-283, Division H, Title C, Sec. 10006.

⁴ 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.

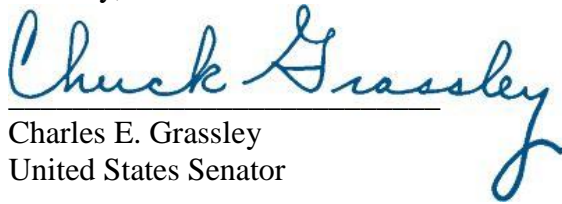
⁵ Office of Senator Charles E. Grassley, "Grassley Presses Surgeon General For Update On Rural Mental Health Resources," June 23, 2022, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/grassley-presses-surgeon-general-for-update-on-rural-mental-health-resources>.

I respectfully ask for timely answers to the following questions:

- Can you confirm USDA and HHS are working collaboratively to ensure *Seeding Rural Resilience Act* is being implemented timely?
- To date, what action have USDA and HHS taken to implemented *Seeding Rural Resilience Act*? Please provide specific interagency actions taken.
- Please provide a copy of the Task Force for Assessment of Causes of Mental Stress and Best Practices for Response report submitted to the Secretary of Agriculture.
- How many training sessions and how many employees of the Farm Service Agency, the Risk Management Agency, and the Natural Resource Conservation Service have conducted the training?
- What mental health experts or stakeholders have you worked with to develop the curriculum for the training?
- Do you view mental health of rural America including farmers and ranchers as an important priority for your respective Departments?

By all accounts, one of the crushing consequences resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and record inflation is the toll on mental wellness among Americans from all walks of life. The USDA expects 2022 net farm income to increase by 5.2 percent.⁶ However, when adjusted for inflation 2022 net farm income is projected to decrease. This decrease in income and rising prices of diesel, fertilizer, and crop protection tools leave many family farmers with feelings of desperation and hopelessness. The timely implementation of the *Seeding Rural Resilience Act* can provide life-saving resources to rural Americans. I would appreciate an update on the work you are doing to improve mental health care access to rural Americans. I would also ask that you share a copy of the report due in December 2022 describing the implementation when you share it with the House and Senate Agriculture Committees.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator

⁶ Department of Agriculture – Economic Research Service, “2022 Farm Sector Income Forecast,” September 1, 2022, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-sector-income-finances/farm-sector-income-forecast/>.