

# Opinion



## Healthy communities for the people who power America

BY GREG THOMAS  
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER, USDA

As we celebrate National Rural Health Day this year, we are reminded that a strong community is rooted in its people. The Biden-Harris administration is committed to serving those who live in the rural areas of this country, like the small towns and communities right here in Kentucky. At the United States Department of Agriculture, we are hard at work helping the rural and agricultural communities that feed and fuel our nation and provide the everyday essentials upon which America depends.

As I've traveled across Kentucky, I've seen firsthand the unique challenges people in rural communities and remote parts of the state have in accessing the health resources they need and deserve.

At USDA Rural Development, we are committed to making sure that people, no matter where they live, have access to high-quality and reliable health care services like urgent care, primary care, and dental care. That's why I've been a proud champion of programs like the Emergency Rural Health Care Grants, which was created by President Biden's historic legislative package, the American Rescue Plan Act.

In the last year, we've announced investments that will help rural health care organizations across the state purchase supplies, deliver food assistance, renovate health care facilities and provide people with reliable medical testing and treatment.

For example, God's Pantry Food Bank will use a grant to expand their Mobile Pantry Program to increase food distribution to a total of 16 rural counties in Central and Eastern Kentucky. The program is designed to supply underserved areas with nourishing food directly including meats, starches, fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and 100% fruit juices.

We also know that increasing access to telemedicine and distance learning in rural Kentucky is critical to building healthier and more resilient communities.

**Through programs like the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants Program, we are making it easier for people living in rural areas to access health care services remotely.**

People in remote parts of the commonwealth often need to travel greater distances to see a health care provider, are less likely to have access to high-speed internet to utilize telehealth services and are more likely to live in an area that has a shortage of doctors, nurse practitioners, dentists and mental health providers.

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Health is about much more than medical care. Access to modern, reliable water and wastewater infrastructure is a critical necessity for the health and well-being of every American.

In Kentucky, we continue to work hand-in-hand with our partners and local community leaders to promote a healthy community and environment through our Water and Environmental Programs.

These programs help rural communities obtain the technical assistance and capital financing necessary to develop clean and reliable drinking water and waste disposal systems. Safe drinking water and sanitary waste disposal systems are vital not only to public health, but also to the economic vitality of rural America. Through these programs, we make sure people across the commonwealth have clean water and safe sewer systems.

Whether it's through health care facilities, nutritious food, or clean water, Rural Development is a partner who invests in keeping rural people healthy.

You can learn more about our programs by visiting our website or by calling 859-224-7300.

## Republican national leadership faces a moment of truth

One of the most enduring justifications for a combat operation was uttered by an Army major in the war in Vietnam in 1968: "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it."

In his increasingly bitter conflict with the Republican Party, former president Donald Trump has embraced it.

If left alone, he will surely destroy the party and, if left alone, he will never save it.

Whether recognizing it or not, the party leadership can seize the opportunity to shed a destructive egomaniac who grows more erratic as mounting blame is directed at him for the party's dismal showing in the midterm Congressional elections.

As is customary, Trump cast aside reality in favor of revisionist history, declaring victory, defending his endorsement of candidates chosen for their professed loyalty to him rather than a realistic chance of victory and, to the horror of many, announced he'll seek the party's presidential nomination in two years.

Republican national leadership faces a moment of truth in moving on from Trump.

If found wanting or if fear and timidity lead to indecision, the party will quickly tumble back into the minority in Congress and the White House.

It's impossible to reason with Trump. He has displayed his stubbornness time and again as president and in his personal and business affairs. Appeals to logic or his better angels are futile — he rejects the former and possesses none of the latter. Look no further than his intensified crude rhetorical assaults on anyone he believes stands in his way.

Trump will do what Trump wants to do because his ego will not permit otherwise.

Pockets of criticism have sprung up since the midterm shortfalls, but those with the firmest grip on the party's levers of power have been silent or circumspect when discussing Trump's responsibility for the outcome and what steps should be taken to restore credibility and competitiveness in the 2024 election cycle.

While Trump has managed to cling to a dedicated base of support, for party leadership to bow to it would be a strategic blunder

for the ages, a tacit admission that when push came to shove, top level party weakness triumphed over steely-eyed determination and political reality.

Caving in to Trump in the hope he'll change his style is a disastrous path to be trod only by those who believe his unsubstantiated assertions that the 2020 election was fraudulent. They've been captured by the ex-president's absurd utterances and embellishments.

It is crucial for the party leadership to escape the Trump shadow and convince Republicans who believe in thoughtful, insightful and responsive government led by a president with a precision moral compass there is no silver lining in the Trump cloud.

The questions swirling around President Biden concerning his intention to seek a second term have receded in the wake of what can only be described as a party and personal victory for him.

He's lost little of his executive power and been emboldened by running against the historical political grain and achieving one of the strongest midterm showings in recent history. News accounts of jubilation in the White House on election night

speaks for itself.

Republicans likely will emerge with a bare majority in the House and the distinction of a victory that was more embarrassment than celebration.

The Senate remains in Democratic hands 50-49 pending the outcome of next month's runoff election in Georgia.

Even a loss there would result in continuing the 50-50 deadlock and with Vice President Kamala Harris as the tiebreaker, Democrats will retain control.

The Democratic Party can spend the coming weeks looking on as Republicans splinter along ideological lines, threatening the selection of California Congressman Kevin McCarthy as Speaker, and spilling over into the Senate where, as the winds of change gain strength, Republican leader Mitch McConnell faces demands for his replacement.

While Trump looks for guidance to the 1968 utterances of an Army officer, Republican leadership should respond by looking to the 17th Century and channel its inner English politician Oliver Cromwell who, in an address to Parliament, thundered his judgment: "Depart, I say, and let us be done with you. In the name of God, go!"

## Our time to invest in education is here and our children need it now

As elected officials, our job is not to move Kentucky right or left — it's to move Kentucky forward. One way we can continue to build a better Kentucky is by supporting education and our educators.

Lt. Gov. Coleman and I have always run an education-first administration. As parents and as statewide leaders, we know the best thing we can do for all Kentucky children is to ensure they have access to a world-class education.

That is why I am calling for action to better support our school-aged children, educators and school staff by implementing our Education First Plan. Our time to invest in education is here and our children need it now. The World Health Organization says the end of the pandemic is in sight and my plan will help us advance student learning after this deadly pandemic.

Throughout 2021 and 2022, Kentucky school districts had to make tough decisions, implementing remote learning days when it was necessary to prevent further illness and death. Across the nation, disruptions persisted as staff and students became sick and missed school. Throughout these challenges, our educators

stood strong and did everything they could to continue delivering quality instruction.

But to ensure we are doing everything possible to help each child reach their full potential, we must address the faculty shortages in our schools. Our

teacher shortages are the result of years of cutbacks that have left schools underfunded, the elimination of new teacher pensions and refusals to fund pay raises.

We have nearly 11,000 teacher vacancies across the state right now. It's simple: You can't catch a child up in math if you don't have a math teacher.

Our schools are the backbones of our communities, and our teachers are the foundation of our future. That's why the first thing my Education First Plan does is provide a 5% across-the-board pay increase to every public school teacher, bus driver, cafeteria worker and school employee in the state.

According to the National Education Association, Kentucky now ranks 44th in the nation for starting salaries, with new teachers averaging about \$37,373 per year. We have dropped two spots since last year. In a competitive job market, we're going in the wrong direction.

Over the last two years, Kentucky has had the two biggest budget surpluses in our history. When you combine the strong fiscal management of my administration with the greatest year for economic development in our state's history in 2021 — and more than 14,000 new jobs announced so far this year — we have more than enough to fund this plan. It is time to make a historic investment in our schools, our educators and our students.

Included in our Education First Plan is universal pre-K, the single most effective step we can take to immediately increase

our workforce. We know pre-K provides positive outcomes on children's early literacy and mathematics skills and fosters long-term educational success. To become and stay a top economy in the United States, we have to continue to build a world-class education system, and that starts with pre-K instruction.

We also need to keep teachers in the classroom by helping them with student loan forgiveness. This relief is critical because we want our teachers to complete higher educa-

tion. My plan calls for a maximum \$3,000 award for teachers each year of employment in a public school.

And finally, Team Kentucky has always believed that mental health is just as important as physical health. So, I am proposing to set aside funds to assemble a statewide staff and eight regional social

emotional learning institutes, so educators have access to training on how best to help our students.

We will be providing two new grant programs for school districts to establish wrap-around services for students impacted by violence, substance abuse,

child abuse or parental incarceration, as well as other training and resources that can help.

Kentucky's future of education is not a red or blue issue — it is about our children. We stand a united front, committed to what must be done now to make up for learning loss, coming together to embrace the bright future we have right in front of us. We must invest in our children and educators and move into our rightful place as a national leader. Our children are depending on us.

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### FIRST AMENDMENT

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."