Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

February 25, 2021

Mr. Jeffrey Zients
COVID-19 Response Coordinator
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

Norris Cochran
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Mr. Zients and Acting Secretary Cochran,

We write today to urge you to take swift action to ensure that federal information campaigns to encourage Americans to take the COVID-19 vaccine reach rural communities. Overcoming high rates of vaccine hesitancy among rural residents, who often have limited access to broadband services, will require a tailored federal strategy. As part of this strategy, we encourage you to consider leveraging independent broadcasters in small radio markets.

Vaccine hesitancy is particularly high among people living in rural parts of the United States and communities of color. This may have devastating consequences for our national effort to curb the spread of COVID-19 and bring an end to the pandemic. Recent public opinion polls show that 35 percent of rural residents probably or definitely will not receive a COVID-19 vaccine, even if it is made available for free and deemed safe an effective by scientists.[1]

In December, the Department of Health and Human Services launched the COVID-19 Public Education Campaign to promote vaccine acceptance and reinforce practices to stop the spread of COVID-19. The campaign leverages radio, television, print, and social media advertisements to encourage vaccination among the "moveable middle"—Americans who are neither committed nor adamantly opposed to receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. While we applaud the Department's efforts to provide fact-based information about the COVID-19 vaccine, we urge you to further tailor the campaign to reach rural communities.

Lack of access to broadband services will further complicate efforts to reach people living in rural areas. Today, about 25 percent of rural residents—about 14.5 million people—lack adequate access to broadband services. This means that targeted social media advertisements and other web-based information could fail to reach people in rural communities. We are pleased that the COVID-19 Public Education Campaign includes radio advertisements and print media to reach residents with limited broadband access. However, about 20 percent of people in the United States live in non-metropolitan radio markets. It is critical that the campaign includes independent local broadcasters in small radio markets to reach rural residents.

Further, a one-size-fits-all approach will fail to address vaccine hesitancy in America. Information campaigns must be targeted to individual communities, acknowledging the factors that motivate people and barriers to receiving a vaccine. It is also critical that these

[1] https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/report/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-december-2020/

advertisements feature local health and community leaders who have trusted relationships with local residents.[2]

As the vaccine becomes available to more people, it is critical that the federal government takes steps to share evidence-based information to encourage Americans to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Rural communities cannot be forgotten during this stage of the COVID-19 response. We urge you to take swift steps to address vaccine hesitancy in these communities and to consider leveraging broadcasters in small radio markets as one avenue achieve that aim.

Sincerely,

Ron Kind
Member of Congress

Brad Wenstrup, D.P.M.
Member of Congress

[2] https://khn.org/news/article/trusted-messengers-may-help-disenfranchised-communities-overcome-vaccine-hesitancy/