

119<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS  
2<sup>D</sup> SESSION

# H. R. 7579

To improve access to Department of Agriculture Rural Development discretionary grant programs by establishing a technical assistance set-aside to support low-capacity rural communities, and for other purposes.

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## IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FEBRUARY 13, 2026

Ms. LETLOW introduced the following bill; which was referred to the  
Committee on Agriculture

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## A BILL

To improve access to Department of Agriculture Rural Development discretionary grant programs by establishing a technical assistance set-aside to support low-capacity rural communities, and for other purposes.

1       *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*  
2       *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3       **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4       This Act may be cited as the “Empowering Rural  
5       Communities Act”.

1 **SEC. 2. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SET-ASIDE FOR RURAL DE-**  
2 **VELOPMENT DISCRETIONARY GRANT PRO-**  
3 **GRAMS.**

4 (a) SET-ASIDE ESTABLISHED.—The Secretary shall  
5 reserve not less than 2.5 percent of the total amount made  
6 available in appropriations Acts for each Rural Develop-  
7 ment discretionary grant program, to support technical as-  
8 sistance activities under this Act.

9 (b) USE OF FUNDS.—The Secretary shall use funds  
10 reserved under subsection (a) for—

11 (1) technical assistance, including training,  
12 project scoping, application development support,  
13 pre-award planning, post-award compliance assist-  
14 ance, and long-term administrative capacity-building;

15 (2) pre-development support, including engi-  
16 neering, environmental review preparation, and fi-  
17 nancial feasibility analysis necessary to prepare com-  
18 plete applications;

19 (3) outreach activities, including workshops,  
20 webinars, and direct community engagement; or

21 (4) the development of project-ready grant ap-  
22 plications for broadband, water and wastewater sys-  
23 tems, community facilities, housing, business devel-  
24 opment, and other rural development priorities.

25 (c) METHOD OF DELIVERY.—The Secretary may  
26 carry out this section through—

1 (1) cooperative agreements;

2 (2) grants or subgrants; or

3 (3) contracts with eligible entities.

4 (d) PRIORITY FOR ASSISTANCE.—In carrying out this  
5 section, the Secretary shall give priority to an entity serv-  
6 ing a community that—

7 (1) lacks full-time grant writing or administra-  
8 tive staff;

9 (2) has historically low participation rates in  
10 Rural Development discretionary grant programs; or

11 (3) is located in a persistent poverty, under-  
12 served, or high-need rural area.

13 (e) COORDINATION WITH STATE OFFICES.—Each  
14 State office of Rural Development shall—

15 (1) identify high-need communities;

16 (2) collaborate with technical assistance pro-  
17 viders; and

18 (3) ensure services are delivered in a geographi-  
19 cally balanced and equitable manner.

20 (f) ADMINISTRATIVE EXPENSE LIMITATION.—Funds  
21 reserved under subsection (a) shall not be taken into ac-  
22 count in applying a statutory limitation on administrative  
23 expenses applicable to a Rural Development program.

1 **SEC. 3. ANNUAL REPORT.**

2 (a) REPORT TO CONGRESS.—The Secretary shall  
3 submit to the Committee on Agriculture of the House of  
4 Representatives and the Committee on Agriculture, Nutri-  
5 tion, and Forestry of the Senate a report describing—

6 (1) the amounts reserved and expended under  
7 this Act;

8 (2) the number, type, and geographic distribu-  
9 tion of communities assisted under this Act;

10 (3) measurable outcomes, including increased  
11 application completion rates and award success, of  
12 measures taken under this Act; and

13 (4) any recommendations for improving the  
14 framework for delivery of technical assistance activi-  
15 ties under this Act.

16 (b) PUBLIC AVAILABILITY.—The Secretary shall  
17 make the report publicly available on the Department of  
18 Agriculture website.

19 **SEC. 4. NO ADDITIONAL FUNDS AUTHORIZED.**

20 The Secretary may use amounts otherwise appro-  
21 priated to carry out this Act. This Act shall not be inter-  
22 preted to authorize or require an additional appropriation.

23 **SEC. 5. DEFINITIONS.**

24 In this Act:

25 (1) DISCRETIONARY GRANT PROGRAM.—The  
26 term “discretionary grant program” means any

1 grant program for which funds are made available in  
2 an appropriations Act.

3 (2) ELIGIBLE ENTITY.—The term “eligible enti-  
4 ty” means—

5 (A) a unit of local government, parish, or  
6 Tribal government;

7 (B) a nonprofit organization;

8 (C) a rural electric or telephone coopera-  
9 tive;

10 (D) an institution of higher education (as  
11 defined in section 101 of the Higher Education  
12 Act of 1965);

13 (E) a private-sector firm with dem-  
14 onstrated experience in planning, financing, de-  
15 veloping, administering, or implementing rural  
16 development or infrastructure projects, includ-  
17 ing broadband, water and wastewater systems,  
18 housing, energy, transportation, or community  
19 facilities, as evidenced by prior project delivery,  
20 grants, or contracts; or

21 (F) a State or territory cooperative exten-  
22 sion service authorized under the Smith-Lever  
23 Act, including such a service operated by a  
24 land-grant institution.

1           (3) HIGH-NEED AREA.—The term “high-need  
2           area” means an area that demonstrates economic  
3           distress or limited local capacity, including 1 or  
4           more of the following, as determined by the Sec-  
5           retary:

6                   (A) High poverty or unemployment rates.

7                   (B) Population loss or long-term economic  
8           decline.

9                   (C) Inadequate access to basic infrastruc-  
10          ture or essential services.

11                  (D) Limited staffing or administrative ca-  
12          pacity to compete for Federal assistance.

13           (4) HIGH-NEED COMMUNITY.—The term “high-  
14           need community” means a community experiencing  
15           economic distress, limited administrative capacity, or  
16           significant infrastructure deficiencies, as determined  
17           by the Secretary, consistent with criteria used by  
18           Rural Development and the Economic Development  
19           Administration.

20           (5) LAND-GRANT INSTITUTION.—The term  
21           “land-grant institution” means land-grant colleges  
22           and universities (as defined in section 1404 of the  
23           National Agricultural Research, Extension, and  
24           Teaching Policy Act of 1977).

1           (6) LOW-CAPACITY COMMUNITY.—The term  
2 “low-capacity community” means a community in a  
3 rural area, that—

4           (A) has a population of not more than  
5 20,000 individuals; or

6           (B) lacks full-time grant writing or admin-  
7 istrative staff, as determined by the Secretary.

8           (7) PERSISTENT POVERTY AREA.—The term  
9 “persistent poverty area” means a county or equiva-  
10 lent jurisdiction in which 20 percent or more of the  
11 population has lived in poverty for a period of at  
12 least 30 years, as measured by the decennial census  
13 and other data sources used by the Office of Man-  
14 agement and Budget, the Census Bureau, or the De-  
15 partment of Agriculture.

16           (8) RURAL AREA.—The term “rural area” has  
17 the meaning set forth in section 343(a)(13)(A) of  
18 the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act,  
19 without regard to section 343(a)(13)(I) of such Act.

20           (9) RURAL DEVELOPMENT.—The term “Rural  
21 Development” means the mission area of the De-  
22 partment of Agriculture that includes the Rural  
23 Utilities Service, the Rural Business–Cooperative  
24 Service, and the Rural Housing Service.

1           (10) SECRETARY.—The term “Secretary”  
2 means the Secretary of Agriculture.

3           (11) UNDERSERVED AREA.—The term “under-  
4 served area” means a community that has histori-  
5 cally experienced barriers to accessing Federal pro-  
6 grams, funding, or technical assistance, including  
7 due to geographic isolation, limited administrative  
8 capacity, insufficient local resources, or historic  
9 underinvestment, as determined by the Secretary.

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