

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2309

November 15, 2011

The Honorable Patty Murray
Co-Chair, Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction
448 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jeb Hensarling
Co-Chair, Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction
129 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Murray and Chairman Hensarling:

Across the country, millions of Americans living in rural areas depend on Critical Access Hospitals for their health care. As many as 72 million Americans live in a rural area, and for many communities, the hospital is not only key to providing health care but is also central to maintaining the local economy and providing high-quality jobs. Additionally, these hospitals are often the sole provider of a range of services, including social work and other community outreach, as well as providing structural and financial support for physician practice groups and health clinics.

Rural hospitals face unique barriers. Remote locations, small economies of scale, and provider shortages are a few challenges that small, rural hospitals face that are distinct from the difficulties faced by suburban and urban hospitals. The Critical Access Hospital designation created by Congress in the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 developed a reimbursement system that recognized both the importance of small, rural hospitals and the challenges associated with maintaining them.

As the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction considers a variety of proposals to cut health care costs, I urge you to consider the importance of Critical Access Hospitals and also their tenuous financial state. Critical Access Hospitals serve some of our most vulnerable populations, including rural seniors, and ensure that emergency rooms and life-saving hospital services remain available to rural residents. Any reduction in Critical Access Hospital Medicare reimbursements or changes to designation could seriously endanger the health of rural communities that depend on their services. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

