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November 24, 2025

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Mehmet Oz, M.D.
Administrator
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Kennedy and Dr. Oz,

Earlier this year, under President Trump's leadership and in close coordination with you, congressional Republicans passed the working families tax cuts, giving American families the largest tax relief in our nation's history. One key element of the law is the **Rural Health Transformation Program** (RHTP), which provides \$50 billion of new funding for rural communities to improve health care infrastructure and delivery and expand access to care. Missouri is the definitive example of the rural setting my Republican colleagues and I had in mind when we crafted the RHTP, with 40 percent of Missourians living in rural areas, many of those in the southeast Missouri communities I represent. In its application for RHTP funds, Missouri proposes to fight chronic disease and coordinate patient care through an innovative model which will foster sustainable investments in rural care delivery, deploy cutting-edge technology to improve care coordination, provide broader telehealth access, and hold providers accountable for better managing patients' health. This model has already proven successful as a pilot project in my own congressional district, and I write today to strongly endorse Missouri's application and ask that you give it full consideration.

As I detailed in my letter to you dated August 21, 2025, Missouri has experienced significant rural hospital closures and reduced access to primary and specialty care, worsening outcomes for chronic diseases like obesity and hypertension and contributing to a nearly two-year reduction in life expectancy for rural Missourians relative to their urban counterparts.¹ However, while rural Missourians face undeniable challenges, we are resilient and creative. This creativity shines in Missouri's RHTP application, which thoughtfully describes how the state plans to leverage the RHTP funding to expand the state's successful **Transformation of Rural Community Health (ToRCH)** pilot project into a new initiative called **TorchLink**.

¹ [Letter from Chairman Jason Smith to Secretary Kennedy and Dr. Oz, August 21, 2025.](#)

Missouri launched ToRCH in 2023 as a hub-and-spoke care coordination model under which hospitals function as hubs connecting primary care, behavioral care health clinics, and community-based social care organizations with all rural patients – from those living on main streets to remote family farms. ToRCH incentivizes better health outcomes for rural patients by empowering participating providers with performance-based shared savings. Two of the six initial hospitals selected as ToRCH hubs are in my district in Southeast Missouri, so I have seen firsthand how successful ToRCH has been to coordinate care for rural Missourians. I am positive its expansion through TorchLink will be a success.

TorchLink is the next generation of ToRCH, operating at three levels – local, state, and regional, to ensure care coordination for individuals and the broader communities. Through investments in new technological tools and enhanced accountability, it will ensure the state's rural providers have the scale and expertise needed to proactively intervene to stop chronic disease before it worsens. Missouri plans to build a network of 30 hubs, linked through seven regional networks to connect hospitals, Federally Qualified Health Centers, behavioral health, pharmacists, emergency medical services, and other partners.

Missouri will utilize TorchLink to enhance access to critical services that have long vanished from rural Missouri. With investments in innovative care delivery technology and maximizing the value of all our health providers, the care will be more patient-centered and integrated than ever before. Specifically, TorchLink will enable **24/7 telehealth coverage** for hub partners providing time-critical care, like stroke, cardiac, obstetrics, and behavioral health. By including **local pharmacies and paramedics** in its clinically integrated networks, TorchLink will **expand care into patients' homes** and facilitate quicker follow-ups for high-risk patients while reducing unnecessary hospital visits. TorchLink will also facilitate the expansion of two successful University of Missouri projects, a **maternal health access program** that provides same-day psychiatric consultations for pregnant women, as well as a **child psychiatric access program** that allows real-time access to child and adolescent psychiatrists and coordinated follow-up care.

Through TorchLink, Missouri is following the path laid out by the Trump Administration. First, President Trump's and Secretary Kennedy's **Make America Healthy Again** vision is the basis for Missouri's keen focus on chronic disease, the fundamental factors driving Americans' need for health care interventions. TorchLink builds on this vision by helping Missouri's rural providers move beyond triaging sick patients, instead coordinating them with pharmacies, primary care providers, and community-based organizations to help patients address the root causes of their need for health care services – whether it is lack of access to nutritious food or untreated diabetes, and everything in-between. With TorchLink, Missouri is also following the Administration's lead on harnessing technology. For example, under Dr. Oz's leadership, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services launched the **Health Tech Ecosystem initiative**, which seeks to enhance interoperability of systems that will allow coordination among providers and community-based facilities to improve access to care. Similarly, Missouri's TorchLink's **Show Me Digital Backbone** will coordinate care with real-time data exchange through modernized interoperability and allow for the tracking of important quality improvement analytics, displaying them on statewide dashboards to enhance accountability.

In conjunction with TorchLink, Missouri proposes to use the RHTP funding to launch the **Rural Health Workforce Program** (RHWP), a statewide initiative that coordinates recruitment, education, training, employment, and retention. The RHWP will expand Career and Technical Education in high schools and post-secondary schools focused on the development of Certified Nursing Assistants, Behavioral Health Support Workers, Community Health Workers, EMTs, as well as facilitating the trajectories toward Licensed Practical Nurse or Registered Nurse credentialing. The state also plans to expand medical school clerkships, helping retain the nearly 300 medical students who leave the state annually to complete their third- and fourth-year clerkships at out-of-state hospitals.

Critically, Missouri intends TorchLink and its workforce development and maternal and behavioral health plans to be **long-term sustainable projects to continue for years to come**, following the key RHTP investment. For example, after the RHTP's one-time, upfront investment, TorchLink's technological backbone will enable hubs to become local transformation engines, facilitating technical assistance and knowledge transfer among payers and providers, helping develop value-based payment agreements. Importantly, the state is intentionally designing the program to generate downstream savings following the initial RHTP investment, to ensure better health outcomes and shared savings can yield a sustainable model for years to come.

Missouri's RHTP application is focused on **coordinated care, harnessing technology, and reducing chronic disease**, all goals that are in lockstep with the priorities you and President Trump have emphasized through the program, and goals that will serve rural Missouri. On behalf of the hundreds of thousands of southeast Missourians I represent and the millions of rural Missourians statewide, I wholeheartedly endorse Missouri's RHTP application and look forward to its implementation. Thank you for your full and thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,



Jason Smith
Member of Congress