

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 4, 2024

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

As you know, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Vermont and New Hampshire Rural Development (RD) Office provides vital services for the rural communities in our region. For months, however, it is our understanding that the office has operated with the lowest staffing level of any regional RD office in the nation. We therefore urge you to provide the office with the resources necessary to overcome this staffing shortage.

The Vermont and New Hampshire RD Office offers critical support to our states. This support is needed now more than ever, as our states recover from natural disasters, face economic pressures, and continue to adapt to a changing climate. In July 2023, for example, Vermont experienced catastrophic flooding that devastated farmland and rural communities across the state. In December 2023, New Hampshire was hit with a severe storm and flooding that impacted several counties. Our RD employees know and understand our communities, providing essential technical assistance, loans, and grants to support our constituents as they tackle and overcome these challenges.

RD office employees have done an excellent job serving Vermont and New Hampshire—but they have had to do so under severe resource constraints. Since 2022, our RD office has operated between 50 and 70 percent capacity, and the office is currently operating at 61 percent capacity. In other words, the office would ideally employ 47 people but employs 29 at the present time. These resource constraints have led to higher workloads for existing staff, making it difficult to complete projects in a reasonable time frame and leading to frustration from clients and communities. The RD office's Business Team, for example, is responsible for implementing the Rural Energy for America Program in Vermont, a vital program for emission reduction and rural economic development. Because the team currently has four staffers when it should have nine, the program is experiencing a processing backlog of almost a year.

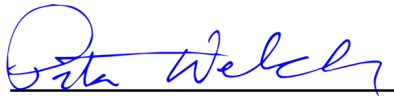
It is our understanding that USDA has transferred Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) from USDA headquarters to regional offices across the country in recent years, including the Vermont and New Hampshire RD Office. We are thankful for the nine FTEs the office has received. However, despite the additional FTEs, the office has not been able to bring on any additional employees. This is not for lack of trying, as the office has gone through multiple rounds of hiring. But high cost of living, government salary levels and the remoteness of our states has made it challenging to onboard staff.

We urge you to take immediate additional action to support hiring in our regional office and bring employees on board. Our delegations would greatly appreciate added flexibilities or

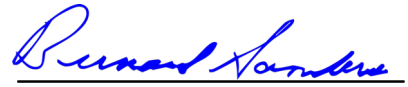
monetary incentives in the hiring process. We ask that you brief our staff on potential and planned actions to remedy the staffing situation in the Vermont and New Hampshire Office no later than May 4, 2024.

We appreciate your attention to this issue and look forward to your response to our request.

Sincerely,



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Becca Balint
Member of Congress



Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress



Chris Pappas
Member of Congress