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SAUL ROOM

AMERICA'S RURAL FUTURE: ANNOUNCING THE BROOKINGS-AEI COMMISSION
ON US RURAL PROSPERITY

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Former Governor, New Hampshire

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ROUSE: Good afternoon, everyone. We're going to go ahead and get started. So I am Cecilia Rouse, the president of the Brookings Institution. And I want to thank you all for being here today for the launch of the Brookings AEI Commission on US Rural Prosperity, or America's Rural Future. This initiative will be dedicated to advancing policy ideas that support a healthy and thriving future for rural communities across the country.

Brookings and AEI first joined forces over 40 years ago. In January of 1983, we co-hosted a four-day briefing for new members of the 98th Congress, 26 Republicans, and 58 Democrats that focused on economic, defense, and social welfare issues. From the very beginning, our partnership has been rooted in a shared commitment to cross-partisanship and ideological independence. That commitment continues today, although in more daunting circumstances. The 98th Congress, convened in 1983, is remembered as one of the most bipartisan in American history. It enacted around 670 laws, many of which address contentious issues from social security amendments to a major revision of the federal criminal code. The 118th Congress which concluded this January leaves a markedly different legacy. It enacted approximately 270 bills, about 400 fewer than the 98th Congress and the lowest total since the 1940s. Moreover, some of the bills enacted were strikingly non-controversial, like amending the U.S. code to designate the bald eagle as the national bird or requiring the Treasury to mint coins in commemoration of working dogs. In short, we are living through a high point for patriotic animals and a low point for bipartisan governance.

That's why today's launch of the Brookings AEI Bipartisan Commission is so critical. This commission will be co-chaired by former Senator Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota and former Governor Chris Sununu of New Hampshire. Its activities and research will be facilitated by Brent Orrell of the Senior Fellow at AEI. And Tony Pipa, a senior fellow here at Brookings. Together, this group will elevate the national policy discourse on rural development, offer practical, cross-partisan solutions grounded in local realities. Far too often, rural America gets overlooked by our nation's media and cultural power brokers. And when it is noticed, it is frequently pigeonholed. The dominant narrative casts these communities as places in decline. Their residence is backward or bigoted. Even well-intended portrayals can be patronizing, describing rural Americans as ordinary or everyday people as if those of us in urban areas are somehow more exceptional or important.

This view is both inaccurate and incomplete. Just like the rest of our country, rural America encompasses cultural, demographic, and economic diversity. On the economic front, there is no doubt that some rural communities are struggling, but some of the most advantaged places in the U.S. are rural. Home ownership rates are higher than in urban areas. And today, exciting economic opportunities are emerging from new manufacturing and clean energy to the expansion of AI data centers, which will be largely built in rural places.

The problem is this: Washington often makes policy about rural America without first taking the time to include rural voices. At Brookings, we pride ourselves on being an evidence-based institution, but evidence doesn't come from data alone. It comes from listening to people. To understand rural America, we have to stay connected to what's happening on the ground. Only then can we tackle the challenges people face and help maximize the opportunities available to them. And that's exactly what this commission has set out to do. Before I hand things over to Robert Doar, president of the American Enterprise Institute, I want to thank this commission's supporters, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Ascendium Education Group, Cobank, and the Scan Foundation. I also want to reaffirm Brookings' ongoing commitment to independence and impact. And with that, Robert, the floor is yours.

DOAR: So I am very pleased to join Ceci in saying how happy all of us at AEI are that we're partnering with Brookings on this important initiative. Senator Heitkamp and Governor Sununu, along with Brent and Tony, will do an outstanding job examining the real condition of Americans who live in our rural communities. Now at AEI we like to say that we may be Washington-based, but we are not Washington-focused. And this initiative announced today is another in a series of initiatives that have brought our scholars and our scholarship to communities around the country. In just the past year we have conducted working groups and gatherings in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Lexington, Kentucky, and Memphis, Tennessee. So I look forward to seeing the results of this important study and I'm grateful to all of those who are participating in it and who have agreed to do this important work. So my job now is to turn it over to Tony and get us started. Thanks very much.

PIPA: Thank you Robert, and thanks Ceci, both for your collaborative leadership and for bringing our institutions together to take the future of rural America seriously. And I'm also deeply grateful to our co-chairs and also the commission members who have committed to join us on this journey. We'll publish and share a full list of the commission members and a calendar of events a little later this summer on our website. But for now, just a big thank you and a lot of excitement at the beginning.

So, I'm Tony Pipa. I'm a senior fellow here at Brookings, where I do research and analysis on the effectiveness of federal rural policy. I'm originally a small town boy from Pennsylvania. And some of you know me from my podcast—shameless promotion—Reimagine Rural. Find it wherever you listen. Third season's about to start, where we collect the stories of rural places that are experiencing positive change.

Before we hear from Senator Heitkamp and Governor Sununu on their vision for the commission, Brent and I thought it would be good to provide some context. And so I'm going to provide a very quick overview of rural America and start off by saying, even that phrase, rural America, belies just how diverse our rural communities are, as Ceci alluded to, geographically, economically, racially, culturally. So whatever picture pops into your head, whenever I say rural America, it represents just one small sliver of the country's rural landscape. Maybe you think agriculture, yet ag generates just 7% of rural employment. You might see a white person in your head. Yet almost a quarter of the rural population are people of color. And the fastest growing population is Latino. The geography extends from the rugged landscape of the Badlands in North Dakota where Senator Heitkamp hails from to the picket fences of Senator Heitkamp, the picket fences of Governor Sununu's New Hampshire, and to the hollers of West Virginia where Chris Stirewalt grew up. And that's, I think, the first major point, is just the breadth and diversity across rural America is exceptional.

But defining rural is not straightforward. The federal government has more than a dozen definitions. So this is the definition of the Office of Management and Budget: Metropolitan, non-metropolitan areas at the county level, rural is the brown, and it gives us a population in the country of 14% of rural. Now let me go to this definition by the Census Bureau. Factors in housing and population density adds a larger geographic footprint, still brown, makes more people in the surrounding metro areas

rural and results in a rural population of 20%. It's a difference of almost 20 million people and less than 45 percent overlap between the two definitions. For our purposes, we often use the first definition or others like it where rural places are more self-contained, and that's because we find that rural is as much about community identity, kinship, and state of mind as it is about population or geographic classifications. And I think that's the second major point. Despite its diversity, rural places often share a set of unique characteristics that go beyond size. For example, when a rural place experiences change, whether it's positive or negative, it's often felt more directly and acutely by its residents, by the people who are living there. And I interviewed for the podcast a young rural tech entrepreneur, Chris Carnell, and he said to me, just as startup is not a small version of a large corporation, a rural community is not a small version of a city. And that's a really important for policymakers and a really point for us to keep in mind.

So rural places are central to the country's overall future. They provide our food, energy, water, fiber. Manufacturing jobs are proportionally higher in rural areas and rural is often where the country goes to recreate. But how are rural places doing? So this is a map of advantage and disadvantage that's developed by the authors of the Justice of Place that Brent and I interviewed on our On the Front Porch series. The lightest is the most advantaged, the darkest blue is the disadvantage. Now watch as I switch to rural communities. Notice how the light blue remains. As Ceci said, some of the most advantaged places in the country are rural. High levels of social capital, proportionately lower levels of inequality, Most of the people in those communities, solidly middle class, these communities have a lot to teach us about economic stability. But most of the dark blue remains as well. Rural communities make up some of the most disadvantaged places in the country, places that are challenged by changes in the national or global economy. Often the legacy of an extractive economy based on natural resources or due to economies that relied on a major employer or a single industry that was lost. I personally grew up in the anthracite coal country in Pennsylvania. The rural town where I went to elementary school is now dealing with persistent poverty. Anthracite coal left decades ago. And in fact, 85% of the persistent poverty counties in the country are rural. And almost half of their aggregate population are people of color. The dual burden of race and place is really rural in America. Now rural places are seeing potential new economic opportunities. AI revolutions, bringing data centers to rural places. Rural will be where we continue to get our energy, whether it's old or new energy. 99% of the

wind turbines are in rural America, and there's so much new manufacturing in rural Georgia, we're calling it the battery belt. But as rural communities seek out these new opportunities, I think it's really important to ensure that we're just not recreating the extractive economies of the past. And we have to recognize that policy changes could have significant implications for rural places, and a single policy change can have a lot of ripple effects throughout a rural community.

There are changes to health care and nutrition programs that were being contemplated, and maybe are passed today, I'm not quite sure, that shift more responsibility to the states. And for example, Medicare disproportionately covers rural people, but whatever the impact of that change, it's gonna extend beyond just the health outcomes for those people. The health industry is a major employer in rural economies, and rural hospitals often play a key role in local economic development. I think it's an example of how one single policy can impact many different aspects of a rural community and demonstrates how the work of the commission, which will focus on creating the brightest future possible for rural communities, is urgently needed.

So just let me end. A few years ago, we landscaped the public federal investment available to rural areas for their community and economic development. On the left are the federal offices and departments where those investments are available. In the middle are the issues they support. On the right are the congressional actions that authorize them. Many of them go back decades or more. You can see how challenging a maze it is to navigate, especially for rural places, where one person often does many different things. And on one hand, this is the project of a very responsive government. Congressional members created these different programs because the constituents asked and declared a need. But I think it signals a lack of a coherent vision for how rural places will thrive in the 21st century. And creating that vision, one that's especially informed by local rural people and leaders, is really a primary goal for this commission, because the future of rural America is central to the future of our country overall.

And thanks for your interest in our rural places. And now I'm pleased to turn it over to someone who has become a trusted colleague, a true partner, and a great friend, and who I'm indebted to for coming on this endeavor with me, Brent Orrell from AEI.

ORRELL: Thank you, Tony. That's really a remarkable chart and something that is going to be top of mind as we pursue the research agenda for the commission. And that's what I'm here to talk with you about. Tony, as we were just discussing over lunch, dragged me into this project. And I'm so glad he did, because it's been fascinating. We haven't really even gotten started yet. So. Very excited about it. I'd like to thank Ceci and Robert for their support for this project and to our distinguished co-chairs, Senator Heitkamp, Governor Sununu for their leadership. This is an amazing team effort coming together here. My task here today is to give you an overview of the key areas of research the commission will undertake over the next two years to fulfill its goal of creating a federal policy roadmap for rural America, one that is rooted in what we learn from rural communities and the challenges and opportunities they face.

We have five basic pillars. Slide up. So we have five pillars to our research program. Workforce and economic transformation, demographics and infrastructure and quality of life, health finance systems and outcomes. I wanna underline outcomes because I think it is so critical to the future of rural prosperity. Resources and resilience and governance policy and investment and that goes back to Tony's slide and the incredibly complex system of programs and not even a system collection of programs that we have that endeavor to serve rural America.

So let's start with talking about the work the first pillar workforce and economic transformation rural communities are being reshaped. By automation, by advanced manufacturing, and most recently by the emergence of artificial intelligence. For decades, automation has... Automation has exacted a great toll on rural places. We know that the manufacturing base of the United States has always been predominantly in rural areas. We don't think of that. We think of the smokestacks in the cities, but the real heart of America's manufacturing is in rural America. AI is now automating white-collar office work while trades like agriculture, construction, remain relatively insulated, at least in the near term. Meanwhile, we have new AI-driven sectors that, as Tony mentioned, the data centers that are looking to rural places for expansion and sometimes finding welcome and sometimes not. So we want to understand that better. So we're asking, are rural workers and systems ready for this shift, ready for the transformation that's going on?

I think the answer is probably going to be. In some places, yes, they are. In other places, they risk falling behind. What kinds of skills and infrastructure do they need? How can federal workforce development policy help rural communities benefit from the new wave of investment? The battery belt, the data centers, the semiconductor plants. The second pillar that we're working on is going to be demographics, infrastructure, and quality of life. And that's really looking at population decline, demographic change. Rural communities are becoming diverse, as Tony mentioned, but these places still face real challenges in terms of shrinking tax bases, aging infrastructure, and limited housing.

Pillar three is health finance systems and outcomes. Health outcomes in rural communities continue to lag metropolitan America from obesity to diabetes to mental health and mortality. Rural hospitals are struggling and the pending changes in Medicaid are likely to heighten those challenges. Pillar four, climate resources and resilience. Rural communities are on the front lines of some of the most tragic and devastating natural disasters that we've seen in recent over the. In recent years, floods, droughts, wildfires, but they are also home to most of both our traditional energy sources and our renewable sources. This concentration of energy production creates new opportunities for jobs and growth and we're looking forward to examining that.

Finally, on pillar five, governance, policy, and investment. Tony's chart says it all. We've got 500 federal programs across 13 agencies, which is bewildering, even if you have a large government, state or local government, interacting with them, but doubly so in rural areas. Rural America is not a monolith. We want to pursue this grounded in data and listening to the voices of rural Americans so that we can better structure the federal-rural relationship and give more of these communities a chance to access the prosperity the American economy and our society afford. So we look forward to your engagement as we carry this work forward. Thanks, and I'm turning this over to Chris.

STIREWALT: And the green light is on so that means that I can be heard. My name is Chris Stirewalt, and I am but a simple country pundit, a son of Ohio County, West Virginia, grew up there and I'm a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. I'm very excited to be here today and I've very excited be working on this commission. I'm excited about all of it because I spent most of my young adult life trying to not be where I was from, and then I got to where I was going, and I said, I wish I

was there. And I think we need to create space for people to succeed and thrive in places that are often forgotten. You should know, you already know that Heidi Heitkamp served in the United States Senate from 2013 to 2019. She was the first female senator elected from North Dakota. But before that, she was the state's tax commissioner. She was the attorney general. And she's the last Democrat to hold or win statewide or congressional office in North Dakota; last one out, turn out the lights. She's also, I will just say, as a person who developed a reputation in Washington for being true to her word, for being willing to work with people on issues when she disagreed with them on other issues, and she was something of a, I would say, a lodestar for her conference as they were trying to figure out how to navigate difficult times. They looked to her and with good reason. She grew up in Manador, North Dakota, as one of seven children. And I just learned today that it was a town of 90. So when you're gone, it's 89. And then when you go back.

HEITKAMP: My family was one-tenth the population.

STIREWALT: Exactly, exactly. Now, that may also be true of the Sununu in New Hampshire. I'm not sure. There's a lot of them.

SUNUNU: But only one matters.

STIREWALT: This is how they're competitive. This is, how they are competitive. Chris Sununu was the 82nd governor of New Hampshire, 2017 to 2025. Before that, he had a real job. He had an engineering business that was actually successful. He did not go to politics out of last resort. He cleaned up hazardous waste sites around New Hampshire and was leading a perfectly normal, happy life until the family business. He got, like Michael Corleone, got dragged into the family business at the end. And I will just say having covered him and known him for some time, I don't know whether you know this, the political road goes through New Hampshire pretty often. This is a good man, right? This is, this is a person who has the courage of his convictions. And that means doing things that are unpopular sometimes, like saying no to people in his when they don't want him to say no? That means working with Democrats. He has the scars to prove that he means what he says. And we are

very lucky that they're here together and that they are doing this. So if we could get another gratuitous round of applause for these people. It's sadly rare in Washington.

But you know what? This is a great day to not be in the United States Senate. This is wonderful day. He didn't run. Today, I'm sure as he was walking down here, he thought, I am so glad I did not run to be in United States senate. This looks tough. And this is a good day to be here and not there. But senator, I wanna start with you. In the end, what were they fighting about in the Senate as they were doing this? They were fighting about rural issues at the end because they got left for last, right? At the end, the rural states came forward and said, well, you can't cut our hospitals like that. And what do you do, what do we do about having a discussion that includes rural from the outset, and it isn't just the last thing on the table?

HEITKAMP: Chris, can I just have a point of personal privilege? Other members of the commission who are in the audience, could you just stand up? Because we've got great attendance here from some of our colleagues who are going to be participating with us, a wealth of information.

What we have to do is quit governing in crisis and start governing from evidence, evidence-based perspective, and start being realistic about what those choices are. Number one, we are not gonna live in a world where resources are infinite. We're gonna live a world of finite resources. And so that's what you're seeing debated right now. And every time they make a change, do they change it so that it costs less? No, it's just building more and more to build those coalitions.

And so, that's why I think the work of this commission is so important because if you have that go-to source, that says that program is not as effective as this program. What people are saying is they need, you know, this transportation assistance for their employees. They need broadband to make sure that they can get telehealth. They, you know, all of the things that we know could work in delivering services. I always tell people. You know, what a cab driver in North Dakota wants or in New York wants is really not different from what that small business owner in Carrington, North Dakota, wants. They want security for their family. They want to be able to retire with dignity. They want their

kids to go to great schools. They want healthcare for their grandmother. The desires are the same. What's different is how do you deliver the product.

And that's why we want to differentiate here in what we're talking about in terms of rural. Progress and rural deployment of resources. And so to me, what you're seeing right now play out is we don't have a farm bill. We're not likely to have a Farm Bill going forward. We already have frayed that relationship, the urban-rural relationship in this big, beautiful bill, and it's gonna create even more stress on the unified, everybody wins when we have good rural policy kind of legislation, and so what needs to change is we need to basically do the work of building coalitions around ideas and leadership and having leadership that's willing to advance it and hold firm. And when you legislate through crisis, you get chaos and you get bad decision-making. And that is what I think we're seeing right now on Capitol Hill.

STIREWALT: Governor, before I ask you, if I don't say this, I'll get in trouble, I'll be kicked off right away, I'll lose my post on the first day if I do not say the magic words. Online questions, yes, you, we see you, internet, we know that you're out there. Online questions can be submitted to events@brookings.edu or by using the hashtag #RuralCommission on the artist formerly known as Twitter.

Okay, I remember the first time I went up in the White Mountains, and I had always thought of New Hampshire as rich people on the seacoast and then tax refugees down in Manchester. And I didn't think about it. And then, as a West Virginian, I got up there and I said, this state is full of hillbillies. And I was into it. I liked it a lot. Talk about--

SUNUNU: Thank you?

STIREWALT: Yes. Are you kidding me? Heck yeah. To talk a little bit about the misunderstanding of what's rural and what's not rural in the United States.

SUNUNU: You know New Hampshire's fairly unique 'cause it's-- all of New England is fairly unique right, because in New England, each state relies on each other in certain ways. In southern New Hampshire, to your point, we're thirty miles north of Boston which is like one of the health care epicenters of the planet. Amazing opportunity. You go thirty miles north of that, and you get north of Concord, whole different, whole different world. So we had to deal with, we were constantly kind of crossing these issues. When we did a piece of legislation in in New Hampshire, it was, what's going to happen in the north country? How does this affect folks in the Monadnock region? And yes, there's always a sense of the haves and the have-nots, if you will, with the seacoast and the southern tier and the northern tier.

So I think as a governor, and I think this goes for most governors, maybe New Hampshire's a little more unique, but every governor has cities and every governor have rural areas. Every governor, every legislature has to deal these things on a consistent basis. And, you know, one thing we were talking about earlier is my thesis is the further you get away from the people, right, local government really deals with things in a nonpartisan way, because it's just about who's going to collect the garbage and the recycling, and are we going to build a road here, and what happens to our wastewater treatment plant. And then at the state level, it's a little further away, but again, still fairly connected with your legislatures.

When you get to the federal government, they almost have the lack of discipline and the luxury, if you will, to just live up here in the headlines. When we talk about what's happening with the big, beautiful bill, it's Medicaid cuts are here and these people aren't gonna get services. Well, it so much deeper than that, right? You have to go out into the heartland, if you will, and say, okay, if let's say a hospital doesn't get their money in Chicago, that could be a real problem, but Chicago has seven more hospitals. If a healthcare center in rural Iowa doesn't it's done there's no more services the fragility of the systems because of a lack of redundancy and the needs for other things like transportation. And you can hear about transportation a lot because again no matter how great your service, you get the best health care system in the world in in rural Missouri, but if there's not bus to get you there, if there is no transportation system or whatever it is that that becomes a real problem. The needs are, as Heidi pointed out, the needs are the same.

The dynamics of how you go about it different, and I think the opportunity here is really getting to that kind of localized and state-level discussion and then bringing, Heidi talks about this a lot, bringing those best practices, sharing those best practice, like why did West Texas fail in a certain area, but Eastern Montana succeeded, right? Let's share that, right, and the actual practice, the actual doorway of opportunity for that service and for that system, and then bring that up to the federal government as well to make sure those policies. Are either mimicking or at least not uh... Prohibiting that type of access and I would just and again say is governor so often it's not even congress is just the bureaucracies within the agencies the rulemaking if you will is so limiting to governors or mayors or localities because it's an it's at everything in Washington's one-size-fits-all this rule now pertains to everyone in America but believe me what California's rural area needs might be different very in the New Hampshire and Mississippi.

It's that bureaucracy that we're constantly fighting because it sounded good up here, but they really didn't take the time at the localized level to say, oh, wait a minute, it works or doesn't work. Or have the discipline to say maybe we shouldn't be creating these rules. Not all of them, but some rules are created in Washington, as we all know, thousands of them that should have never been created in the first place. Let the states figure it out. Let the localities figure out. Because that way as the resources get diminished, and guys, they are getting diminished.

STIREWALT: I'm going to have to invoke cloture. I have to vote cloture only to say this because I'm going to ask Governor Sununu in a minute to talk about this same subject, but I want to point to a success he had in his state, senator, which was, and I want to say this to get it out of the way, because I hate it so much, which is we can't talk about what's going on in rural America without talking about addiction. And we can, It is tragically, as I say this, as an Appalachian. There's just no way to have the conversation without talking about it. And I'm gonna ask the governor to talk about their program in New Hampshire, which was a real success.

But you were statewide in North Dakota and then you were in the Senate in North Dakota when the wave came through, right? Like when we went from meth to opioids and it laid waste to a lot of these

rural places. For a generation, we had talked about drugs in America as an urban problem, and then all of a sudden we woke up one day and it was rural communities and it taking its toll. This affects workforce, this affects family formation, it affects everything else. When you think about that issue, when you think of North Dakota, the rest of the country, what are the things that you found that worked and what are things that didn't work?

HEITKAMP: Well, first off, just to kind of calibrate, I was one of the negotiators on the National Tobacco Settlement Agreement, which was, I think, one of most successful. The anti-tobacco campaign that really started probably back in the 70s, that made its way through to the settlement of the agreement, was really remarkable because it was a collaboration between public health professionals, legal professionals who looked at various levers, legislators and governors and attorneys general. I mean you think about all the people that you brought into the room along with cancer—we used to call them the body part groups, lung cancer, heart, and what—bring everybody together to actually have a conversation about how do you tackle this problem.

And you know I think for -- and trust me, as North Dakotas attorney general I ran our drug enforcement program. And everybody talks about opioids, but methamphetamines, the methamphetamine epidemic really led the challenge for so many communities, especially Native communities, where meth still is the drug of choice in Native communities. And so if you look at this, I think it was all approached from, this is a law enforcement problem, and my line always was, you will not supply side your way out of this problem. You will not win if all you're doing is trying to control the supply. You have got to basically provide a multi-layered approach. And you've got to train professionals. And I think we're retreating from some of that, that we're doing that, seeing remarkable results doesn't mean that we are lowering addiction, but what it does mean is that we are stopping the morbidity, the deaths because of addiction.

Now you might see that turn up because we're now not funding harm reduction programs, because if you fund those, it seems like you're agreeing that the use is okay. If you're funding drug courts, you're not taking the punitive approach to drug use. And I think that a lot of this activity was born out of state. The drug courts was a state idea that the federal government eventually operated. And so a lot what

we were able to do was lead with good innovation. In state organizations and state legislation and local work and we've got to get back to that if we're going to be successful but I want wanted to leave you with two stories number one I think at the time when I was serving in the united states senate about sixty to seventy percent of all addiction treatment was paid for by Medicaid, you think about somebody who's heavily addicted, can they work? Or more importantly, do you wanna hire them, right? And so this was a program that brought services and brought healthcare to the addicted. And so that's a challenge right now.

The other thing I wanna tell you is that the safety net that has always been the family structure is stressed to the max in addicted families. And so I remember sitting down, we have a program called PATH, which is the foster care program, where we were looking at adult foster care, grandparents fostering, kinship care, and how we could maybe change the system so you didn't have to give up custody of your kids in order to get the kind of help that you needed to get. And I was sitting with a woman with a family, very successful, middle-class, upper-middle-class Fargo family. And it was, I think, parents in their mid-60s, and their daughter had been addicted and was in prison, and they were taking care of their kids, and she said something that I'll never forget. She said, we were thinking that at this point in time, we would be looking at buying a vacation home in Phoenix, in the Phoenix area. Now we're looking at, can we afford a minivan? And so, as we look at this, and that's what getting out there and actually visiting with people, finding out what their challenges is so critical because you don't think about what is the need of that grandparent who now has taken on the responsibility and then only to have their kid come out of prison, basically try and secure custody again, only to a relapse and now the children have been ping ponging back and forth.

And so these are challenges that, in so many ways, affect the rural workforce. They affect an attitude that is pervasive of, things are not good in my life, and I need some additional help. And I think just a little bit of help to families who are doing that kind of work is absolutely critical. But I think when we. This is my soapbox. But if we don't think about punitive behavior as it relates to the addicted or the incarcerated and we think about what do these kids need and how do we deliver what they need and help whoever is gonna help them a little bit more.

STIREWALT: I know a guy who told law and order Republicans in his state that they were going to have to accept those very kinds of things. Talk about that, governor, but also talk about the economic, part of the argument that you made in New Hampshire was the knock on economic effects for the workforce and for everybody else to create a sort of, this is a phrase I hate, a whole of government approach, but that's what happened.

SUNUNU: Yeah, so, I mean, just to take a step back, one of the first, as a lot of folks know, we had the second highest death rate for opioids when I became governor in early 2017. And I won't go into the whole story. I'll write a book on it someday. But what I quickly realized was the addiction rate in rural parts of the North country, of New Hampshire, was four to five times that than our inner cities. And everyone's like, oh, but the inner cities is where the drugs are. No, the inner cities were where the treatment centers were. And when I would talk to people in the North Country, well, I said, why is this? And it was like, well, what do you expect us to do, Gov? We're going to drive 150 miles to Manchester, probably lose my job, lose my kids, maybe get better, maybe not, nah, it's opioid, I'll just tough it out.

That was another thing we heard, oh, well tough it out, and I'm like, oh my God, this is where the system's broken. And so I don't mind saying, I went home, this was a little after the 4th of July in 2017, and I was up on a Saturday night, and I, I was putting pins in Google Maps. And my theory was, how far would I be willing to drive my car to go to a recovery program? Well, maybe 30 or 40 miles at most. Beyond that, I'm probably not gonna go, right? So I've started putting pins and maps and I got it down to nine, I think nine pins, where you could get to pretty much anywhere in New Hampshire is only about a 40 minute drive. And then I was able to line those up with hospitals actually. And I connected and I said, we're gonna have a hub and spoke model and to his, I am not here to tell the Trump thing, but I came down, I spoke to the president directly about it. President Trump understands that issue big time because of losing his brother. And Jared and Ivanka really got it. And next thing you know, we had a, I said, I need money to create an infrastructure, a whole new infrastructure. They created the SOR grants, which states got. Long story short, we created more of a hub and spoke system.

And I would go to the nonprofits, and I'd say, look, if you want, nonprofits are the ones that run these recovery centers. They run the treatment programs. I said if you the money, fine, but you have to make a certain commitment to rural areas. And you gotta set up these shops, we're gonna connect them to hospitals. You know, we had people doing overdosing. Look, if you overdose and you get Narcan, maybe at the time you get taken to the hospital or not, you dry out for a couple hours at like two or three a.m. You're just walking out the door, literally. And the hospitals are like, well, good luck. Should probably go to a recovery center. But the hospitals weren't directing the patients anywhere. There was no interconnection. They lived in a silo. And I got really upset with the hospitals, actually. To this day, I'm still in a fight with them on it. And so I said, I am going to force you, if you want the state money, if you all these other opportunities, you have to, these nine facilities especially, have to set up kind of sister locations to be. So when that person dries out in an emergency room, they're walking right next door, like literally being handheld next door into the recovery center when they're at their most vulnerable.

I bring that story up because A, it was a rural issue that we created a huge statewide solution for. It made the dollars more efficient. It incentivized workforce in certain areas. It got the nonprofits thinking bigger, not just in their mode of, well, look, just give us the money. We know what we're doing. No, they were running a system like it was 1992, right? Like it was still a crack addiction or something like that and spice and marijuana to hide it brings it up. Exactly this was all it all started with to use Chris's word hill the hillbilly heroin and that you're still seeing the specially in, on the reservations in the Native American uh... About culture here in America and they go I think that's a huge discussion I think this group has to has to dive into and the last thing up This is just one example, one issue of opioids, right? But believe me, it's a Venn diagram. It's all interconnected to mental health. It's interconnected to healthcare. The fact that someone stays on opioids, guess what, their heart, their liver, their pancreas, it all deteriorates. They have to get, the cost of healthcare skyrockets in those areas. Because you have to do more transplants, so Medicaid costs more, Medicare costs more.

The treatments cost more because the acute health issues start deteriorating. People drain their 401ks, to Heidi's point, they drain their 401ks to make sure their kid is in a recovery program praying they don't have the recidivism. What's happening behind the wall in prisons? Do we have NARC in

there? All of these pieces, the last big one was workforce, right? So I created something when I ran my ski resort, I had people that were addicted, and for a while we would, oh, he's addicted, yeah, we gotta get rid of him. He's stealing from us, we got to fire him. And I realized that's the worst thing because it's hard to find a good employee. I was sending them back to the wolves, they had no job. I mean, I'm just, I mean it was almost a predetermined death sentence I felt like sometimes. So I said, look guys, I am not going to fire you because you're addicted. Come talk to me, I'll get you into a program. We'll keep you employed. The self-worth value of staying employed, of having a normal life while you're going through recovery was so valuable. We created something called Recovery Friendly Workforce and Workplaces, where I would train the workforce, manufacturers, Dunkin' Donuts, McDonald's, anyone who would do it, I would certify them as recovery friendly, and that meant that if you work there, go talk to your employer about it, they wanna keep you as an employee, they'll help you get into a program and shepherd you along. And guess what we found immediately the number of people in recovery programs skyrocketed. And I went, oh no, the problem's so much worse. But we finally realized, oh, no.

People were going to get recovery 'cause they weren't afraid of being fired anymore all holy cow they could talk to them put and so now there wasn't the shame the stigma the fear and guess what they would have mental health services that would be attached to that so it was a positive cycle I mean it's not perfect but believe me this so obviously lots of problems in in our system across the country but it was a great example of the domino effect of when you really get to the grassroots of one thing which is what this organization is going to be It has a domino positive effect for all the other opportunities. Specifically where there's no resilience and no backstop.

STIREWALT: What was the mortality decline in New Hampshire from 2017 to when you left office?

SUNUNU: Greater than fifty percent we cut it more than in the half was more than it pretty much I think we went from the second worst in the country to about seventeenth best or something like that I mean look what is too many right but...

STIREWALT: It was huge. As we would say in southern West Virginia, this is actually true. This is actually true. Okay, we're going to get to good news things. I promise we're gonna get to good news. We're not going to dwell on the things that are wrong. But I was struck looking at that map, senator, when you look across the country and every data table that I've ever looked at this stuff. When you look at the tribal lands, right, the deepest pockets of poverty. And you know, Appalachia has its swath, but the deepest pockets of poverty in the country on these tribal lands. This is something that you very much had to deal with in the Dakotas. When we think about... It's tempting to think about it as a set-aside. What works in answer to that problem and what doesn't work in answer that problem?

HEITKAMP: I think for so many years, the idea of how do you bring opportunity to Indian country was let's put a defense contractor there and they're all going to work in the factory. No choice, this is your one opportunity, and culturally, the significance of family and taking care of each other. Is just embedded and so to think oh they should move here or move there and lose all of their connectivity spiritually and culturally is just a non-starter. But what I will tell you about Indian country is it's full of very entrepreneurial people. It's full of people who want an opportunity to grow a business, to take a good idea, expand that idea. Guess what you need to do that if you're going to be thinking about a reach beyond just marketing whatever you're gonna do to your community, you need the internet.

And North Dakota is a great example of this. Because of Byron Dorgan, who was worried about the digital divide years ago, we're one of the most rural connected states in the country. In fact, my mother-in-law, who lived on a family farm outside of Jamestown, 20 miles outside of Jamestown, she had better internet than they do in Fargo. Because of the commitment that the rural telecoms made and because of the resources Byron was able to get to North Dakota. And so it wasn't, but guess where they don't have services? They don't services on the reservation because nobody was basically making that a priority for the last mile. The last mile was in Bowman, not in Standing Rock. And so if you look at, and this is why it's so important to get out and actually have a conversation. Because when you go out and have a conversation, you say, well, I'm sure you want to, you know, rib it, or make Kevlar vests. Well, I want a paycheck, I wanna a living, but I don't like that work.

And so guess what happens? People start dropping off or they don't end up going to work and so it's just a cycle and then that it's criticism you had a job and you left well guess what I have a job I hated and you weren't speaking to what I want and what I need and that's why I think if we approach rural communities especially Native communities with the attitude of how can we help you be enterprising. What do you need? To basically expand your good idea, whether it is building something.

There's a number of really fascinating projects out there of building tribal corporations, which are very diverse in terms of what they offer. And to me, the real problem that we have for economic opportunity in Indian country is we have been doing it to them, not with them. And if we turn that around and say, what are the needs and how can we better deliver the infrastructure that, guess what, other parts of rural America have, but you don't, whether it's safe drinking water, whether it is broadband, whether its wireless, what are those things that we need to be doing and how do we do the next connect? And so a great example is my husband's a family physician, works in Mandan, which is just. You know, 60 miles north of Standing Rock.

And he had patients who would come to him because the money at Indian Health ran out, which is a whole nother issue. Literally, those, his patient, bad diabetic. 80 miles away from any kind of health care. Now, it wouldn't have been great if he could have done a check-in every day with telecommunications or with telehealth services so he could better practice medicine but also help save lives. And so we just need to be very strategic about how we approach Indian country. But I'll tell ya, we can't approach him as missionaries.

SUNUNU: Can I say something only because I just started to harp on what Heidi said, you hit a really great point there. With technology and all this comes an amazing opportunity for home health care, right, when we're talking about that dialysis in particular. I mean, I don't know, I'm probably going to ruffle some feathers here. There's basically two companies that run dialysis, in this country. I think it's...

HEITKAMP: ...paid for by the federal government.

SUNUNU: That's right, and I think it's pretty much a scam, but there's new technologies coming on. No, I do, but there are new technologies, and I'm just using this as one example. So as technologies evolve, are there barriers that are preventing that from being reimbursable through Medicare or Medicaid? Are there barriers and rules that prevent certain opportunities to come to the market, that home market, faster, right? Sometimes because it's in the home, it's not regulated as much, the government gets a little more nervous.

They want to pile on a little more prohibit. But how do we enhance the technologies as workforce shrinks, as resources shrink, and as rural issues get exacerbated? But I think the technology opportunities on health care are just.

STIREWALT: It's just huge. Well, that leads me to the question I actually wanted to ask you, which is, New England was America's first Rust Belt, Merrimack River. We go back and- I can still smell the shoes. And the story of American industry has been moving to, was moved to a more remote place and do something that was either extractive or environmentally damaging and move on down the road, right? Where I grew up, that happened in the 1930s and 1940s. But it's been the story across the country. I also know that politicians my whole life have told me that they were going to bring those jobs back, it was going to come back.

And they were all lying, and they will always continue to be lying because it's not going to be 1945 in Wheeling, West Virginia ever again. We do, however, have 400,000 unfilled manufacturing jobs in the United States today, but they don't look like what they look like in those days, big vertically integrated mills and all of that stuff. It's a lot more decentralized. It's lot harder to see, fund and do all that stuff, but the job openings are there. What can this commission do? What did you do? What is your insight on trying to connect people who need those jobs and want those jobs with those employers who wanna hire them? So, I think this is the best way to do it.

SUNUNU: I think there's two issues there. First, I think you're gonna, to your point, you're going to have more decentralized manufacturing coming into America. I do think those jobs coming back, no, but manufacturing is definitely here, and there's a need. You're going have more and more of these manufacturers going to robotics, and that's what you're going to see in a lot of rural America, right?

You're gonna have, instead of a manufacturing plant that makes car doors with 300 people, they're gonna 50 people and a whole bunch of robots in rural America. But then there are certain jobs that you just need bodies for, right? AI will replace a lot of things, but it won't replace carpentry, and it won't unclog my toilet, and we're going to need plumbers, we're gonna need welders, we're going to need all of it.

So there are a certain, that's where I think there's going to be a huge workforce need. And again, not to get overly political, but it's one of the reasons why no matter what. Media outlet I'm talking to on any given day, I always try to crowbar in. You need immigration reform, right? I mean, that's a big issue in rural America, believe it or not. A lot of people think that all the immigrants and all the... People that come in they're all just going to the inner cities. They're not that is old-school thinking Depending on where they're coming from and what their background is they're going to go where the jobs are and where the opportunity is So it's a housing issue. It's an immigration You know a reform bill that really has to come because you need the bodies here.

We're not going to grow the bodies we need if you will the workforce we need for the future We'll need theoretically less workforce with more technology, but in America. I don't know I mean this whole Gen Z, they're having less kids later in life. It's a whole, it's a cultural thing here in America that's a real problem. So I don't know whether this group will get into that whole thing, but there's no doubt that there is a need to get the workforce in here. We are a melting pot. This is where we need to be. And whether you're Republican or Democrat, it has to happen at some point where we're making sure that those ports of entry in that process is happening. For the workforce in rural America. I just think that, and I'll pick on my own party, I think Republicans in particular think that immigrants just go to the cities and they're blue cities and they vote Democrat. And so, if we're not jumping on that issue right now, it's okay, it's not. It's gonna really hold this country back.

HEITKAMP: If I can just add, because I think we're talking about workforce, but it's interconnected with all of this other, all of the other kinds of issues that we're talking about. Are you living in a place, I used to say this, where you can get Netflix? I mean, you know, now streaming is just the way of the land, right? And so what is the quality of life? What is the affordable housing in that place? What are the amenities in that What does the community look like? Is the community accepting? And so what I

would say is, as you're talking about workforce, which is why this commission idea is so important, because you can draw a thread through all of these things. And what they will tell you is that you can't solve the workforce issue without solving the demographic and infrastructure issue, without solving the health care issue, without looking at good governance. And so when you try and silo each one of these five, that's not our approach.

Our approach is how do these all interact to create an ecosystem, and I know that is an overused word, but how do they interact to create an ecosystem that creates opportunity? Opportunity not just for that new manufacturer, but entrepreneurial opportunity.

STIREWALT: I won't criticize you for saying ecosystem. I said whole of government approach earlier. We're all in a bad place. Okay, I'm gonna put the same question to the governor, but I wanna start with you because I think your story is more illustrative here. The part of the problem with our duopoly in politics is that it's too easy to be wrong for too long. You don't ever pay the price because if only Coke and Pepsi are for sale, people are going to drink a lot of Coke and Pepsi. At the beginning of this century, an argument ran through the Democratic Party, and it was centered around an idea. There was a book called *What's the Matter with Kansas* that Thomas Frank wrote, and the argument was basically that Republicans had tricked rural America into voting Republican using social and wedge issues to pry them away from the progressive economic policies that would have made it better, da-da-da.

And of course, when Barack Obama won the 2008 election, many Democrats said, it's We're moving away from that. We don't have to think about these flyover country. They're backward, and we don't need to worry about them. I watched you for six years in the United States Senate. Drag your party by the lower lip, back to middle America, back to this stuff, and say you can't offend the sensibilities of the people whose vote you want. You can't talk down to them, you can ignore them, and you can do that. Democrats have woken up to their blind spots. They've woken to what you were telling them, right? After the 2024 election, it's cool to be rural. It's cool be small town. Again, what's the Democrats' blind spot on this and how do they get better at it?

HEITKAMP: I think clearly the blind spot is, look what we've done. Look what we stand for. Look at, pat ourselves on the back. Why do they vote against their interest? And I go, no one ever votes against their interests. Stop it. That is a nonsense thing to say. Why aren't you speaking to them about what the needs are and how you need to, I mean, not change your values, not change who you are. But how do you connect in a more significant way?

One of the things that I would say is that the stories that go into the local watering hole, right, will be a story about, you know, some inspector from the federal government came out and I had an open pesticide can and I got fined \$10,000. That happens, that happens. And so isn't that ridiculous? Or, you know, I was farming and I went too close to a prairie pothole and now I owe, you know conservation program \$10,000. And it was, everybody wants to focus on those wedge issues, and I'll remember if you read What's the Matter with Kansas, there's a lot in there about abortion. Guess what Kansas did? Passed an abortion protection law. That went very well by the way in rural America. So get off the cultural stuff and start looking at those things that speak to overreach of the federal government.

I used to challenge my caucus, I said, why do you want to be the party of dumb regulation? No, seriously, why do you wanna be the part of overreach and stupid regulation? And it happens and you hear it every day and it may be unique or discreet, they go, well that doesn't happen. I want to say, yes it does. Go out there and visit with people and so I think I think where the Democrats went wrong is they think if you just have broadband, well, they should love you because you've delivered broadband or you've deliver a conservation program or you delivered this instead of saying what is the best way with the least amount of intrusion in your life to provide some opportunity. And so I started a group called One Country Project, which is a political organization. And people say, what is this? I said, it's to reintroduce the Democratic Party to rural America. To reintroduced them. Here, this is who we are.

And I think that there is so much generalization about who rural people are. And we talked, and I think Tony did a great job talking about more diverse, sometimes aging, not as healthy, but we're catching up. And so I just think that I have a friend, David Axelrod, who says it best, and I have to credit David. Name dropper. Yeah, name dropper, well, you know, we work together, so I get to drop his name.

And he said, you the Democratic Party approaches rural America as missionaries and not neighbors. And I think that sums up kind of that, and the more people think that you disrespect them or pity them or have to give them something, or that you should be grateful for what they got. The more they're gonna retreat. And so that dialog needs to, we need to be honest about what the frustrations are in rural America.

STIREWALT: So, governor, that Republican version of this is we're just fine with it you find no problems the republican version if this is there's a guy he's got uh... Sleeveless American flag t-shirt on they're blasting the Lee Greenwood uh... Republic and national anthem. This is heartland America baby this is right this is this is real these are the real Americans this is god's country out here. And we're not like those bad folks in the city. We're not the bad people in the City. So the Republican brand now is deeply rooted in a fictional version of rural America that is supposed to be more virtuous, more wholesome, more American, more religious than these folks in cities and in the suburbs, these decadent, these rootless cosmopolitan elites who are down in the cities. These are the real Americans out here. I know for sure. That that prevents Republican lawmakers and people in government from seeing what's actually happening in real America because they're looking at an idealized, often very white version of what's actually going on instead of the real thing. Is that fair?

SUNUNU: Uh, that's fair, but I, I mean, I don't want to be overly defensive, but I do think it's changing. I think the 24 election really showed that. Um, and again, I'm not here to tell Trump or the Republican, but the fact is Trump got more of the African American vote than, you know, any other Republican president candidate in history, and I don't think he got more of a Latino vote, maybe pushed through that or something.

STIREWALT: He got more since 1960....

SUNUNU: The 1960s. That's modern times. So there's definitely some inroads there. Now, why that is, I think people are still trying to dissect that and figure that But there's no doubt minorities and people of color came out more for Trump in 24 than before. And if you saw, again, not just talk about Trump, but just since 16, 20, and 24, especially in California, those numbers really skyrocketed.

STIREWALT: Over time but the point of the question is that if rural America isn't as white as is as it is thought in popular culture to be if it is more diverse are republican do republican c rural America accurately and how does the perception of what's really going on in rural Americas create blind spots for republicans

SUNUNU: Well, if anything, they probably they take it for granted, right? I mean, that's the that's probably the safe thing that they take it for granted that I was always going to vote Republican or whatever it is, or Ohio is now moved. But, you know, I think to Heidi's point is people are going to always vote their interest. People are much smarter than politicians really give them credit for. We talked about, well, if it's all if rural America is all going Republican, I say, well go to Vermont. You tell me that they're already I don't think there's I think bill Scott is the last republican in Vermont I mean that tell Bernie sanders governor I mean he's hanging out in a well yeah but like tell I mean I do but Vermont isn't even democrat the communist for god's sakes they really are I mean but really it's probably one of the most liberal communist places you're gonna find and that's as rural as you're going to find as well or go to Maine that leans democrat is using the states around me so I'm exaggerate I'm not exactly his neighbors not attacking them they're proud they're very proud of it.

But my point is this. Don't think that rural America is just conservative or anything like that, right? People vote in their interests. It's their culture. It's what they want. It's they're getting. And we can argue whether it's good government or bad government or whatever it is. But they're voting for it. And they have every right to be successful and not successful with that system. But to your point, yes, Republicans, I think, do take it for granted somewhat. And again, especially at the national level, right? We talked a little bit before, if I can go a little far afield, I don't wanna step on your next question, but how people consume information now is one of the biggest problems we have.

STIREWALT: And I am going to stop you because we have two minutes before the Q&A begins. We have two minute before the q&a begins and I'm going to do moderators, what did you say? Well, you had a better senatorial sound, a point of personal privilege, moderators point of privilege to say this, North Dakota is a great example, it's great to be connected to the Internet, but what if there isn't anything on it? If the only news that you can get, so we've talked a lot about the importance of

broadband and connecting people and doing all that stuff, but if what you're plugging into doesn't talk about where you are, so something that I care a lot and that I'm going to be sweating these guys to address is the news ecosystem across rural America was wiped out in first two decades of the 21st century.

The internet came and destroyed a low profit margin business model for these newspapers, took out their classified ads and people don't have the information that they need to engage in partnership with other Americans to engage in self-government because they just don't have reliable access. What have you seen about that and what can we do about that?

HEITKAMP: Well, and, you know, again, my brother has a radio talk show in Fargo, North Dakota. It goes, it's true. All across, all across, he talks to about 100,000 people every day, right? And he's more liberal than I am. But he's got the number one show. Because he identifies, he talk about what's relevant in their life. And so, is his bent bias? People call in and say outrageous things to them. Or you make great points. I mean, so it's become the coffee table in a community that has lost the coffee clutch. What do I mean by that? I used to say, you know, in North Dakota, you would walk into any cafe and there would be ten people sitting around a coffee table solving all the problems of the world if people would only listen. But there were Democrats there, there were Republicans there, there were Green Bay fans and Packers fans, or Minnesota Vikings fans and that, yeah.

Well, no, in North Dakota. Anyway, my point would be that there was a diversity of opinion by gathering. And as we have retracted away from gathering places, as we move that dialog onto the internet. We've failed to accommodate the need for diversity of opinion. Now, I would argue that if you want to know what's happening in the economy, you have access to all the federal reserve sites. Whether it's, I mean, amazing wealth of information if you really want it. If you want to know about healthcare, Kaiser is a stunningly important kind of resource.

There are independent resource places that you can send people. But it's many cases, for people like me, it's love it, consume it, but it's too dense. And we have not, and what the media used to do is take that reliable information and distill it into a manageable, digestible dialog. And instead, we've abandoned kind of that opportunity. And so the lack of community, we now get our community

information on Facebook in North Dakota. We know, and that can be right or it can be wrong, but without an active crowdsourcing for the truth on those sites, you will spread disinformation, which will lead to grievance, which will lead to further disintegration of civic life.

STIREWALT: Now. That was fantastic. I'm I want to go on your brother's show. It sounds like I really will do it 100%

HEITKAMP: 100% Tony's been on Joel's show.

STIREWALT: It sounds like a hoot, and I will 100% do it. I call into radio shows around the country. I have standing bookings of rural radio.

HEITKAMP: So I just say don't forget radio. Radio is still really important in rural America. It's particularly important in Indian country.

STIREWALT: We're going to go to your questions now, and to chum the water before we get to a great question from in the room. We're gonna start with one of the questions that we received in advance on the aforementioned internet. And that is, how will this commission avoid the trap of urban-based institutions speaking about rural America? Rather than with rural America. I offer that accusatory question from the internet to you, Governor Sununu, what do you say?

SUNUNU: Uh... Because they're not to be speaking at all rates that they haven't they aren't an it's about making sure the people are and the individuals are speaking and that's why I think the board that you have here is a very diverse for the understand the mission we're not doing meetings in Washington d c or new York city were going out all across the country uh... I think it's gonna be almost a contest upon the smallest town possible in bringing the biggest crowd possible uh... And make sure that it's truly representative all these different uh... Aspects of people that are on the ground. And it's just listening, it's listening.

And then turning that into not just ideas, but truly actionable items. And that's the hardest part. What is actionable? Not pie in the sky, boy, if we had a hundred billion dollars, we could do this. Well, that's a useless recommendation, right? Given the resources we have, given the timing, and given the immediacy of the need, what opens the door of opportunity? Because that guy that lives on you know mainstream USA explained that we know one of the fundamental problems and we've heard it time and again not from the institutions they're just thank you for the money institutions thank you put the money but at the end of the day the money is really driving the opportunity for these forced to folks to finally have a voice who's got in the back to the room right

STIREWALT: There all the way back in the blue shirt.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, thank you so much. My name's Rachael Oshmarlo. I'm the executive director of Research Head, one of the urban institutions, so based here, but I grew up in rural Vermont, so a communist, I suppose.

SUNUNU: She's funny. Sounds like you reformed though, your reformed communist.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah, so I wanted to just say how excited I am about the future of this commission, and I think, you know, we're in a time where things are obviously deeply divided, and we're in a very challenging federal climate. The senator spoke earlier about, you now, at the end of the day, what people in rural and urban communities want is really the same, right, like we want the same things for our families. But I think the important thing is it's in the details, right of how we get there. And obviously, you, know, I think Brookings and AEI working together represents a fairly bipartisan. Opportunity, but there's going to be differences of opinion, and so curious what the future of the commission looks like, in particular with, you know, will there be more focus on federal policy, looking at things at the local or state level, how you're kind of conceptualizing that, especially given that, you now, there's difference of opinion in terms of what should be federal responsibility versus left to the state.

HEITKAMP: If I can avoid a groan for a political answer, we're looking for good policy, right? And that can be federal, it can be state, it could be local. So our quest is to find good policy solutions to the challenges. Those may be federal. They may be state. They may be community-based and supporting community institutions. So to me, I think it's really important that we not put a label on whose responsibility is instead look at what is good policy and how and who should deliver it.

SUNUNU: No, that's absolutely right, and I think the idea is to have a set of these ideas, policies, and recommendations that every state could theoretically take and say, okay, this is clearly where we need to go. If the feds can help us with that, great, but if not, as a state, we're going to move forward with it. And it's a nonpartisan, bipartisan, whatever you want to do approach. I mean, like I said, the closer you get to the local issues, the less the politics comes into play.

HEITKAMP: And the other thing is the role that philanthropy could play if you had evidence-based, you know, this is a really good idea, could you help us?

STIREWALT: Excellent. All right. Right up here in the front.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you very much. This is a great discussion. Fiona Hill from Brookings. I have actually one question that perhaps has been somewhat missed as an issue in this discussion, which is about age demographics. You've talked about all kinds of other demographic diversity and obviously aging in rural America at all different parts of that spectrum, from being a small child all the way through to being elderly. Is a very different experience. And I'm wondering about how you might capture that as well because obviously rural America has few services for childcare, for example, and also very few services for elder care in the home and also in institutions and extraordinarily difficult in different places. So how do you thought about that in the terms of the commission?

STIREWALT: Go ahead, Senator, you go first.

HEITKAMP: I think that you're seeing with the pandemic, you're some of that aging of rural America reverse. And you're not, it's not the deep decline that I used to talk about, which is how are we going

to basically, who's gonna turn out the lights because everybody in rural America is aging out of the system and we aren't retaining young people. And so to me, you've got to create. A rural community that people want to live in that people can say that's where I want that and you have to de-romanticize it, so this uh...you know the garrison math we I mean we are the product in this war in this country of the agrarian now do you think it was always really good to be a farmer even in Thomas Jefferson.

I mean I suppose Thomas Jefferson might be in the farmer I don't know how you know and so this there's this agrarian myth which group builds on what Chris was already saying about the kind of where the real Americans and so we have to be honest about what rural life is and what it means I would I would suggest to you that one of the challenges we have is the political diversification that's happening in this country. People are electing to move where people think the same way they do politically. And that has changed the dynamic and the opportunity for rural America. And we have to get back to a more welcoming, as Chris was talking about, you know, diverse, we have get back a more accepting kind of community.

I used to say, in Manitoba, North Dakota, You accepted everyone because there is only 90 of us. And the one guy who was a little odd, he was somebody's uncle, right? And so y'all took care of each other. And, you know, so we've got to get back to those positive attributes, which is more diverse thinking, more diverse dialog, and not this political separation. But I don't think we should sweep under the cover, under the. Rug when I ask my kids why they wouldn't move back to north Dakota they say if I could bring twenty of my friends with me because they don't culturally identify with them and that's the problem governor...

STIREWALT: Right, which is births and burials, but not very many weddings, right? The people in the middle part of life leave and they go elsewhere. They go elsewhere and they don't start families there and these towns dry out and then when it's time to take care of grandma, right, when the people who are caught in the metal, there's not enough people to do it. What do you say about that? What do think about that problem?

SUNUNU: Well, I would say that as it pertains to this commission, I think the challenge isn't just making sure that we have a representation of young people. How do we actually get them to come to these sessions we're going to hold? Because they're going to be working, or they're a mom that's staying at home taking care of the kids. You'll get a lot of older folks come out, a lot of retirees, they have more time, they want to participate, they're more engaged in the issue. So what you have to be careful is that you don't just say, oh, well, the room is filled, the average age of this room is 65, so this must be the issue of the day. NO!

It's because how you set it up and how you have that discussion, so you have to use the technology. You can't wait for everyone to come to you to participate in this. I think we as an organization is gonna have to think really critically about how we go out and make sure that we're getting that real spectrum of not just age, diversity, we'll just be our own little DEI, no, I'm just kidding. No, but no, you want that spectrum, not just who could show up on that day that you were in Fargo or wherever we're gonna go. Casselton in North Dakota.

STIREWALT: Didn't you see the movie we're gonna go in the back on this so we're going to get some representation from this side ma'am in the bag yes right there hand up didn't have your hand up yes you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, thank you so much for this panel. My name is Thea. I am the Executive Director of the Futures Institute and Governor Sununu will let you know that my folks all live in New Hampshire in Campton. So exit 28 off of 93 North. So it is wonderful to see you here.

SUNUNU: They don't have to pay income tax this year. That is anybody else, but you tell them to keep the money.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, my question is, and this builds a little bit on Fiona's question of a moment ago, but when I was looking at those pillars, it did seem like there was one pillar that was missing, which was thinking about investments in kids. And that means investments in education from childcare on up. It also means thinking about things like third spaces and youth programs. And one thing I was really struck by is that you had that graph from the book Injustice place. One of the things

that really grabbed me about that book was an entire chapter called Nothing to Do Here but Drugs, and talk about how from so many of their interviews with folks in rural communities, the biggest driver they saw of the opioid epidemic was a lack of things for kids to go do. So I'm just curious, are there any of the pillars that y'all will be looking at that will be a chance to think about how you provide education and comprehensive, you know, youth supports, or if not, are their other projects where folks are going to.

SUNUNU: If I could, I'm just going to keep going back to the thing I harper on the most, especially around kids, is transportation, right, because they don't drive. So you have to have, whether it's the Boys and Girls Clubs organizations or Girls, Inc. Or whatever it is, all these often non-profits that are providing those after school programs, things to do, sports leagues, whatever it, those are all great, but it's where are they and is there some type of whether it is public or access to transportation or some way of getting them from here to there because especially generationally, it's just gonna keep getting, I think ultimately for the next 10 years or so, worse in terms of isolation, which is so dangerous for kids, that exacerbates the mental health issues, but it's too easy to isolate. There's nothing to do, but you know what? I was on my device all afternoon and I looked down at my phone at five, I looked up at 7 p.m. And the time just blew right by. They don't even realize that they're not engaging.

HEITKAMP: And they're doom-scrolling.

SUNUNU: Yeah, it's really bad. So they think they're doing something, but to your point, they're not, because it's all about that social interaction. So it's really critical. But I think for kids in childcare as well, I mean, that's the big one. And too often, if I may, the last point is, people ignore the kids issue. They're like, well, there's public schools, right? Public schools takes care of that. No, no, no. Public schools are a fraction of the time. I mean public schools are great. You have to fund them and keep them there. But They aren't just a backbone of what kids are engaging in like they were before.

HEITKAMP: I think, to be fair, I think the demographic and infrastructure is where we're talking about it. And one of the things that Chris and I were talking about earlier is the movement towards

privatization of public education and what that means, and we expect that we will be having lots of dialog about that issue, either driven from federal policies or from local policy.

STIREWALT: Now for the man, right there. The man. Hi, Jonathan Harwitz, Housing Assistance Council, and Senator, I'm privileged to work with your great former staffer Samantha Booth, and I bring greetings. So as the name of our organization suggests, I am going to ask about housing. Over half of rural renters are housing cost burdened, over a quarter of rural homeowners. I think we all know that housing is at the top of the list of what's on the public's It's the biggest payment that most households pay. And unlike the addiction epidemic, Senator, it is something we have to supply side our way out of. And so I'm just curious about how the commission's gonna think about that and kind of find a way around what might be characterized as democratic over-regulation and persistent Republican underfunding. She gave it and gave it to you right there.

HEITKAMP: Yeah, I mean, I think that, just to tell a story, we had 40 primary sector, meaning value added jobs in rural North Dakota and no housing for the workers. And so this has to be a collaboration with states. We have to look at what works, what doesn't work. And the one thing in rural America, because the last mile is always the most expensive mile, right? So, bringing water and sewer systems, a lot of those systems are failing and they're adding costs to green space, right, to expand, but also the crumbling basic infrastructure of rural communities and towns has to be addressed.

Rural water systems that went in 30 years ago, I had a rural water system in eastern North Dakota that 30 percent of all the water they put in the pipe went into the with leaks. And so we have to identify the infrastructure needs. And I think the housing, when you look at housing costs, everybody wants to talk about, you know, what it costs to build a house. And I'm like, I wanna talk about curb and gutter. I wanna to talk streetlights. I wanna about city water and sewer and how special assessments basically will kill the affordability. Of that option. And so, you know, I think if we're, we could do all the things on workforce development, but if we don't deal with housing and education and health care, we will have failed as a commission.

STIREWALT: What do you do, Governor, in places there's a lot of light blue, a lot of very light blue in New Hampshire and its rural areas, because there's a lot a very nice, wealthy enclaves where people don't want new housing.

SUNUNU: I was going to say that the biggest barrier and the biggest issue of housing is the NIMBY thing, right? Everyone thinks that especially if you're talking about affordable housing and workforce housing that it should be in the city. We in New Hampshire just had a program where we said, look, do four units here, do six units here. We're not looking for massive apartment. They think about it like it's 1975, Section 8, right, crazy, and... I would say the biggest problem is you have selectmen in town planners that are just old school thinkers, mostly in rural America, that just don't want it in their backyard. It's a nimby issue more than anything. There are a lot of land grabs on the federal level and all that sort of thing that have happened that have created a lot of regulations that, no, you can't develop here, can't develop there. I'm a big pro-development guy.

If someone wants to build a building and put housing, God bless them, let's fast track it. And a lot of those developers, it's not about the cash that you give them as much as. They're saying, well, if it's gonna take me three years to permit this project, I'm going somewhere else, right? There's the time value, so. The time and the permitting barriers alone are huge. Again, I don't know if it's the right answer. In New Hampshire, we created a part of our courts just for housing appeals. That's it, so we could fast track them. So you couldn't get stuck in court for years and a town couldn't hold you up or someone couldn't you up in court for years and years and year. If you appealed something, it went right and got dealt with in about 30 days. So that was no longer an issue and if the project had validity, it could actually move forward. So this is different ways to do it, but you gotta hear from. What's happening in New Mexico? What's happened in Iowa to figure out, you know, best practice?

HEITKAMP: One of the challenges you have is how do you build resilient housing in the current environment? You say get rid of all regulation, but how resilient is the housing to weather patterns and everything else that's going on? But if there ever was an issue that needs to be locally driven, there's the negative because frequently the town council is going to be older, more established. More

resistant to change, and so that needs to balance, but I think these local issues of providing service are pretty critical.

SUNUNU: Let me throw one more in there, you're going to see more and more coming as manufacturers come back or they expand, these big manufacturers start and they're looking for jobs. They're going say, I'm going to build a factory here, but they're going actually build the apartments. The manufacturer, the GEs of the world or whoever the manufacturer, building the widget, they're gonna become and they are not going to just wait for someone to They're gonna build and run that housing for their employees and provide that opportunity because there's too much, you know, to back up a. 200 million dollar factory with a 25 million dollar apartment building is a no-brainer

STIREWALT: In our next episode, we'll talk about the rebirth of company towns in America. I did not know that we would get a cliffhanger at the end. That was a great question, and thank you. It obviously got us cranked up. Now, that is the time that we have. That is the Time that we Have. I'm going to give you an instruction if you can, if these people can be instructed.

SUNUNU: Everyone from Vermont is texting me.

STIREWALT: Right, exactly. Bernie Sanders is blowing up your DMs, but you guys I'm gonna ask you to stay on stage. I'm gonna ask our other speakers to come up because we will be photographed after this, but before you do that I want to say this. Thank you so much to Brookings for hosting this event today, and thank you so, much to our panelists for being here and for continuing to show the kind of courage out of office that they demonstrated consistently in office. It takes a lot of guts. To attack big, difficult problems. We have the right people for this. We have a great commission to do this. And I'm really excited about the work. So please stay tuned to what we're doing. That concludes our broadcast day.