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# SPRING 2025 CORE EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

## **Gary Wu '26, Co-President**

Gary is a junior studying Policy Analysis and Management with minors in Business and Law & Society. He joined the Economics Center his freshman year and has since served as the Economics Center Director and now Co-President of CPG. Gary's policy interests lie in the intersection of law, economics, data privacy, and the healthcare industry. Outside of CPG, Gary's a Senior Research Assistant for the Labor Dynamics Institute and is conducting an independent research project as a Rawlings Cornell Presidential Scholar. After his undergrad, Gary plans on attending law school with a focus on healthcare and data privacy law.

## **Keten Abebe '27, Director of Internal Affairs**

Keten is sophomore at the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy majoring in Public Policy. She is also pursuing three minors respectively in International Relations, Inequality Studies and Law and Society. She joined CPG in Fall 2023 as an analyst for the Foreign Policy Center and currently serves as CPG's Director of Internal Affairs. Keten's policy interests lie in the field of International Affairs, specifically within sustainability, human rights advocacy, international law, and the intersection between racial/gender disparities and policy. Outside of CPG, Keten is the Vice President of New Member Development for the Black Ivy Pre-Law Society, an Institute of Politics and Global Affairs Scholar, a Brooks School course assistant and a Cornell Tradition's Fellow. She also conducts legal review and sustainable development projects as a Research Analyst for Regenerative Africa Consulting.

## **Ava Boris '27, Director of External Affairs**

Ava is a sophomore studying Public Policy and International Relations at Cornell University. As a member of CPG Ava serves as an analyst for the Healthcare Center and the Director of External Affairs for the organization. Ava has focused her studies on understanding national security issues through the lens of gender and interpersonal relationships. Outside of CPG Ava is a member of Kappa Alpha Theta and Pi Lambda Sigma. She also is a teaching assistant for PUBPOL 2301: Introduction to Policy Analysis.

## **Lilia Mitra '26, Advocacy Director**

Lilia is a junior studying Health Care Policy in the Brooks School of Public Policy. She joined CPG in Fall 2023 as an analyst in the Healthcare Center and now serves as Advocacy Director. Lilia's policy interests include eliminating health disparities, protecting access to reproductive care, and improving public education. Outside of CPG, Lilia is a member of Phi Delta Epsilon and Tri Delta and works as an LSC organic chemistry tutor.

## **Zain Ali '26, New Member Educator**

Zain is a junior, majoring in Public Policy in the Brooks School of Public Policy. His primary interests lie in education and foreign policy, primarily focused on peacekeeping, democracy, development, and governance standards in developing nations. He joined CPG in the Spring of 2024 as an analyst for the Foreign Policy Center where he continues to write alongside serving as a New Member Educator. Outside of CPG, Zain serves as the Events Director for the Cornell Political Union and is a member of the Cornell University Veterans Association, The Alexander Hamilton Society, and the Cornell International Affairs Society. He also enjoys volunteering as a mentor with the Ithaca Big Brothers, Big Sisters program.

## **Jaiden Fisher-Dayn '27, New Member Educator**

Jaiden is a sophomore majoring in Public Policy in the Brooks School. He joined CPG in Fall 2023 as an analyst for the Education Center and currently serves as CPG's New Member Educator. Jaiden is interested in education, criminal justice, and human rights. His proposals have focused on policing in schools, education systems in prisons, expanding free tutoring, and introducing diverse curricula. Outside of CPG, Jaiden is on the Executive Board for the Cornell University Parole Initiative, a member of the Compassionate Release Project, a research assistant for the Cornell Prison Education Program, and the President of the Men's Club Basketball team.

## **Samuel Stille '26, New Member Educator**

Sam is a junior studying Public Policy in the Brooks School of Public Policy. I joined CPG in Spring 2024 and am an analyst in the Domestic Center as well as a New Member Educator. I am deeply interested in transportation policy and criminal justice policy. Outside of CPG, I am an undergraduate fellow for the Center on Global Democracy and the treasurer of Cornell's chapter of Doctors Without Borders.

**Grace Chen '24, Senior Advisor**

Grace is a senior, majoring in Policy Analysis and Management in the Brooks School of Public Policy. She joined CPG in Fall 2021 as an analyst for the Economic Center and has previously served as the Economic Center Director and the Co-President. Grace's policy interests lie within the economic analysis of social welfare programs, policing and racial discrimination, and education. Outside of CPG, Grace is in Social Business Consulting, Asian American InterVarsity, and is a pre-doctorate fellow for Professor Daniela Scur in Dyson. She also loves to dance, bake, and blog.

**Franklin Zheng '25, Senior Advisor**

Franklin is a senior studying Information Science with minors in International Relations and German Studies. He joined CPG in Fall 2021 as an analyst in the Center for Environmental and Technology Policy and served as the Editor-in-Chief from 2022 to 2024. Outside of CPG, Franklin conducts research on global police force violence in the Gender and Security Sector Lab and works on artificial intelligence integration in the open-source intelligence cycle at USCENTCOM.

## SPRING 2025 EDITORS

**Henry Han '26, Editor-in-Chief**

Henry is a junior, majoring in Industrial and Labor Relations at the ILR School. He joined CPG in Fall 2023 as an analyst for the Center of Environmental and Technology Policy and now serves as the Editor-in-Chief after previously serving as Assistant Center Director of Environmental and Technology Policy. Henry is interested in labor, electoral, and agriculture policies, pursuing these interests as a research fellow with the Worker Institute on the Labor Action Tracker and serving as Junior Representation on the ILR Student Government Association. Henry is also the Director of Publications for the Scheinman Conflict Resolution Club.

**Isabela Wilson '26, Associate Editor**

Isabela is a junior pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Government with minors in International Relations, Law & Society, and East Asian Studies with a focus on the Korean peninsula. She joined Cornell Policy Group in Fall 2023 as a Foreign Policy Analyst and currently serves as an Associate Editor and Assistant Center Director of Foreign Policy. Her policy interests include South Korean policy with focuses on immigration, education, and the Korean diaspora. Outside CPG, she is also involved in The Cornell International Affairs Review and Pi Lambda Sigma (POLIS).

**Simone Chan '25, Associate Editor**

Simone is currently a senior majoring in communication with a focus on international relations and development. Her research interest includes a diverse range of subjects, from media studies and communication theories to global politics and development economics, providing a robust understanding of complex global issues and the role of communication in shaping public opinion and policy. Outside of CPG, Simone is also the VP of External Affairs of the Cornell Student Assembly and Service Chair of Cornell Democrats.

**Arjun Anugole '28, Associate Editor**

Arjun is a freshman, majoring in Biological Sciences with a minor in Health Policy on a pre-medical track. He joined CPG in Fall 2024 as an analyst for the Healthcare Center and now serves as an Associate Editor. Arjun is

interested in addressing racial health inequities, therapeutic modalities for human disease, and artificial intelligence in medicine. Outside of CPG, he is a member of Alpha Iota Gamma, an undergraduate researcher in the Rudd lab, and a TA for CHEM 2070.

**Claudia Nesin '27, Associate Editor**

Claudia is a sophomore, majoring in Government and Philosophy. She joined CPG in Fall 2024 as an analyst for the Education Center and now serves as an Associate Editor. Claudia is also an Editor for Logos, the Cornell undergraduate philosophy journal and a member of Cornell Prison Reform and Education Project.

**Kimia Shahriyar '28, Associate Editor**

Kimia is a freshman studying Health Care Policy. She joined CPG in Fall 2024 as an analyst in the Healthcare Center and now serves as Associate Editor in Chief. Kimia's policy interests include drug policy, harm reduction, and health disparities among incarcerated populations. Outside of CPG, Kimia is a member of Alpha Iota Gamma and is an avid artist. After graduation, Kimia plans to pursue an MD/MPP and eventually serve on health commissions board, work in non-profit, or enter academia.

## SPRING 2025 CENTER DIRECTORS

**Elliott Serna '27, Center Director for Domestic Policy**

Elliott is a student at Cornell University's Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy studying Public Policy with a minor in Urban and Regional Studies. Elliott serves as Center Director of CPG's Domestic Policy Center, supporting the Center's work at the fore of all topics touching US domestic policy. Outside of CPG, Elliott is a student researcher working on housing policy research with the Brooks School's Senior Associate Dean of Public Engagement, Dr. Jamila Michener, and economics replication work with Cornell's Labor Dynamics Institute, with a particular research interest in community development and administrative reform.

**Amani Agrawal '27, Assistant Center Director for Domestic Policy**

Amani is a sophomore, majoring in Industrial and Labor Relations. She joined CPG in Fall 2024 and is interested in criminal justice reform and the intersection between policy and the rights of incarcerated individuals. Outside of CPG, Amani is the Director of Recruitment for the Cornell International Affairs Review and a news writer for the Cornell Daily Sun.

**Avery Prince '28, Assistant Center Director for Domestic Policy**

Avery is a freshman studying Public Policy at the Brooks School. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 as an analyst in the Domestic Center. His policy interests lie in the fields of criminal justice and policing. Outside of CPG, Avery is a news writer for the Cornell Daily Sun, a member of Cornell Sports Analytics, a member of the Prison Reform and Education Project, a member of Cornell University American Civil Liberties Union, and the Philanthropy Executive of Pi Kappa Phi.

**Nathaniel Cain '27, Center Director for Economic Policy**

Nathaniel is a sophomore, majoring in Policy Analysis and Management. He joined CPG in Fall 2023, and he is most interested in consumer protection policy, macroeconomic policy, and housing policy. Outside of CPG, he is the Head Teaching Assistant for the introductory public policy course at Cornell, a research assistant within the ILR School, a member of a student consulting organization, and a DJ for WVBR.

**Simone Chan '25, Assistant Center Director for Economic Policy**

Simone is currently a senior majoring in communication with a focus on international relations and development. Her research interest includes a diverse range of subjects, from media studies and communication theories to global politics and development economics, providing a robust understanding of complex global issues and the role of

communication in shaping public opinion and policy. Outside of CPG, Simone is also the VP of External Affairs of the Cornell Student Assembly and Service Chair of Cornell Democrats.

**Sejal Sekhar '27, Center Director for Education Policy**

Sejal is a sophomore, majoring in Public Policy in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy with plans of minoring in Business and Law & Society. She joined CPG in Fall 2023 and is interested in researching educational inequalities and creating policies that address them. Outside of CPG, Sejal is a brother of Cornell's Kappa Alpha Pi Pre-Law Fraternity, a board member of Community Partnership Funding Board, and a dancer on Cornell's competitive Bhangra Team.

**Danielle Berkowitz '27, Assistant Center Director for Education Policy**

Danielle Berkowitz is a sophomore studying public policy at the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, with intended minors in Law and Society and Business. She joined CPG in the Fall 2023 as an analyst for the Education Center and now serves as Assistant Education Center Director. Danielle's policy interests focus on addressing education inequality, specifically advancing equitable resource access and creating policies that effectively support underrepresented communities.

**Krislyn Michel '27, Center Director for Environmental & Technology Policy**

Krislyn Michel is a Public Policy major with an interest in specializing in environmental, data/technology, and social policy. She is also pursuing two minors respectively in Inequality Studies alongside Law and Society. She joined CPG in Fall 2023 and is interested in equitable approaches pollution, environmental racism, and consumer data protection. Outside of CPG, she is a member of various student dance groups, a campaign fellow for Students4NY, and serves as a student ambassador for the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy. In her free time, she enjoys thrifting, analyzing film and media, attending concerts, and cooking.

**Jack Turner '26, Assistant Center Director for Environmental & Technology Policy**

Jack is a junior majoring in Public Policy, and joined CPG in Fall 2023. He is most interested in the intersection of transportation and infrastructure policy aimed at improving mobility for all. Outside of CPG, Jack loves to spend time outdoors, especially on a bike or through running. He is especially passionate about long-distance running and can frequently be found at the Cornell Running Club which he is the Co-VP of, or working in Rhodes Hall on a CUSD project team

**Bingsong Li '26, Center Director for Foreign Policy**

Bingsong Li is a junior studying Government and Information Science. Joining CPG as a foreign policy analyst in Spring 2022 and becoming Center Director in Spring 2023, Bing is fascinated by the intersection between foreign policy and technology. Bing conducts computational social sciences research in Bowers CIS and can also be found in Cornell Writing Centers, POLIS, and the Translator Interpreter Program.

**Krystlove Yeboah '27, Co-Assistant Center Director for Foreign Policy**

Krystlove is Co-Assistant Center Director for Foreign Policy. She is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences majoring in Government and Sociology. Outside of CPG, she is a Research Fellow for the Brooks School of Public Policy's Center for Global Democracy and a Student Career Advisor. Her policy interests include civic engagement and economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa

**Kaitlyn Z Varriale '25, Center Director for Healthcare Policy**

Kaitlyn is a senior, majoring in Healthcare Policy in the Brooks School of Public Policy. She joined CPG in Fall 2022 as an analyst for the Center of Healthcare Policy and now serves as the Healthcare Center Director. Kaitlyn is interested in pioneering and managing a more equitable, efficient, and high-quality healthcare system and strategically pairing health justice and optimal operations through an administrator's lens.

**Zoë O'Halloran '27, Assistant Center Director for Healthcare Policy**

Zoë O'Halloran is a sophomore in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy studying Health Care Policy on a pre-medical track. She joined CPG in Spring 2024 as a Healthcare Policy Analyst and now serves as the Assistant Center Director for the Healthcare Policy Center. Zoë's policy interests include the regulation of pharmaceutical development and international healthcare policy. Outside of CPG, Zoë is the Treasurer of the Cornell Chapter of The Diabetes Link and a member of a pre-professional chemistry fraternity. She is also an undergraduate research student in the Shaw Lab.

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

Dear Reader,

On behalf of the Cornell Policy Group, I am excited to publish the twenty-third edition of the Journal of Affairs, the successor of the former Roosevelt Review.

I had the pleasure of editing and crafting this journal during my second semester as editor-in-chief after a successful fall semester publication. With this semester's journal, Cornell Policy Group wrote twenty-eight policy proposals ranging from a variety of policy fields, including but not limited to labor arbitration reform and investments in food security for college students. Each analyst presented research, backing pragmatic solutions to broad-ranging issues for special policy fields, with each center presenting proposals personal to the analysts. Our incoming class of new analysts, among the most selective class of Cornell Policy Group, has only reinforced our ever-growing group of bright researchers. With the introduction of guest writers, we have opened the doors for more students to bring fresh ideas. I want to thank this class for writing spectacular proposals. With the help of our new member educators leading the new analyst training program, we can teach our new class critical writing and professional practices within and beyond Cornell Policy Group. I also want to give a special thanks to the new associate editors I took into the editing team, especially Isabela Wilson '26, an Associate Editor, for her help on compiling this journal.

After a successful semester of effective restructuring with additional members, I have complete faith that our group is ready to continue our success. I am confident all of our members will thrive under new executive leadership in the next academic year. I extend my most sincere gratitude to everyone who has supported the Cornell Policy Group and this publication. I look forward to seeing this organization evolve, grow, and prosper. I hope you enjoy our policy proposals from this semester.

Sincerely,

Henry Han  
Editor-in-Chief

# DOMESTIC POLICY

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# Addressing Healthcare Inequity: Eliminating Medical Co-Pay Fees in Texas Prisons

By Amani Agrawal, [aa2747@cornell.edu](mailto:aa2747@cornell.edu)

*To address severe healthcare disparities and reduce long-term correctional costs, Texas should eliminate the \$13.55 medical co-pay fee for incarcerated individuals—removing a critical barrier to care in a system where prison labor is unpaid and health outcomes are worsening.*

## Background

Healthcare affordability and accessibility remain widespread issues in the United States, with nearly half of US adults struggling to afford healthcare costs. Incarcerated individuals, however, experience these challenges most severely.<sup>1</sup> Despite a 1976 Supreme Court ruling that cited “deliberate indifference... to a prisoner’s severe illness” as cruel and unusual punishment, incarcerated individuals still lack proper healthcare access.<sup>2</sup> Since 2000, the urgency of prison healthcare conditions has sparked 52 successful lawsuits across 26 states, mandating court-ordered improvements of medical and mental healthcare.<sup>3</sup> In Texas, where the incarceration rate of 751 per every 10,000 people is the highest of any independent democratic country globally, incarcerated individuals must pay a medical co-pay fee of \$13.55 for every “inmate-initiated” visit to healthcare staff.<sup>4,5</sup> Given that the nationwide incarcerated average for wages ranges between \$0.14 to \$0.63—and that Texas prison jobs remain unpaid—such a co-pay fee is a significant obstacle to healthcare for incarcerated individuals.<sup>6,7</sup> Before incarceration, incarcerated men between the ages of 27 to 42 in 2020 reported an annual income of \$19,650, roughly 52 percent less

than that of non-incarcerated men of the same age.<sup>8</sup> This stark income disparity—or, in some cases, lack of income altogether—that Texas provides for incarcerated labor exacerbates prisoners’ financial burdens. Thus, medical co-pay fees in Texas deter incarcerated individuals from pursuing necessary care, and are proven to directly affect health.<sup>9</sup> This leads to worsened health conditions and higher rates of communicable diseases, with more than a quarter of the Texas prison system reporting at least one chronic condition in 2010.<sup>10</sup>

With the current medical co-pay fee, individuals incarcerated in Texas are forced to weigh the cost of healthcare with that of other necessities, ultimately perpetuating a cycle of neglect and preventable health crises.

## Policy Idea

Texas should abolish medical co-pay fees for incarcerated individuals to ensure accessible healthcare and reduce their financial burden. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) would be the primary agency responsible for eliminating these fees, using existing healthcare funds more efficiently to cover the costs of services without shifting the financial burden to those who are incarcerated.

Under this policy, TDCJ would work jointly with the Correctional Managed Health Care Committee (CMHCC) to ensure efficient allocation of healthcare resources.<sup>11</sup> This could include strategies like bulk medical contracting, expanded telemedicine, and preventative care programs to reduce long-term costs and eliminate co-pays without added financial strain. Eliminating Texas co-pay fees would be a proactive, long-term investment that would reduce the need for costly emergency medical services and improve overall health outcomes, thus reducing overall healthcare-associated costs.

## Policy Analysis

Research suggests a correlation between medical co-pays and reduced healthcare access in prisons.<sup>7</sup> In a 2024 study, Lupez and colleagues found that in state systems where the co-pay fee exceeded individuals’ weekly wages, individuals with chronic health issues were twice as likely to forgo seeking medical care.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in Texas, since incarcerated individuals are not paid for their labor, the \$13.55 medical co-pay fee represents an insurmountable barrier to healthcare access.<sup>4</sup> Further, the U.S. government’s RAND health insurance experiment found that co-payments do not

reduce inappropriate hospitalizations, a key justification for Texas' co-pay policy.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control identified co-pay fees as the leading cause of a MRSA outbreak in Texas prisons, demonstrating the danger of such fees.<sup>13</sup>

To offset the cost of eliminating co-pay fees in prisons, Texas should follow the budgetary precedents of California and Illinois. Though Texas differs in size and structure from California and Illinois, the underlying fiscal logic remains comparable: in all three states, co-pay fees generate minimal revenue relative to the administrative burden and long-term costs of untreated illness. In 2019, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the California Correctional Health Care Services (CCHCS) abolished co-pay fees, having found that they had minimal fiscal benefit, ultimately increasing treatment costs and reducing efficiency.<sup>14</sup> The financial impact was minimal considering the broader cost-benefit analysis of improving inmate health. Additionally, in Illinois, after eliminating the fee in 2018, officials found that it generated just \$40,000 annually, which was insufficient to cover the administrative costs of running the program.<sup>13</sup> While some may argue that individuals should contribute to the cost of their healthcare, the lack of income in Texas prisons means that medical co-pays disproportionately affect those least able to pay, aggravating health disparities.

### Highlights

- In the state of Texas, where the incarceration rate of 751

per every 10,000 people is the highest of any independent democratic country globally, incarcerated individuals must pay a medical co-pay fee of \$13.55 for every “inmate-initiated” visit to healthcare staff.<sup>4,5</sup>

- Given that the nationwide incarcerated average for wages ranges between \$0.14 to \$0.63—and that Texas prison jobs remain unpaid—such a co-pay fee is a significant obstacle to healthcare for incarcerated individuals.<sup>6,7</sup>
- Research links medical co-pays to decreased healthcare access in prisons and worsened health outcomes, including higher rates of communicable diseases like MRSA in Texas prisons.<sup>11,13</sup>
- Eliminating co-pay fees would improve health outcomes and reduce long-term costs, following successful models from California and Illinois where similar policies resulted in minimal financial loss and greater healthcare efficiency.<sup>13,14</sup>

### Implementation

To implement the elimination of medical co-pay fees in Texas prisons, TDCJ would take the lead, coordinating closely with the Correctional Managed Health Care Committee.<sup>11</sup> First, with oversight from the Texas House Committee on Corrections, TDCJ would work closely with state legislators to amend Texas Government Code §§501.063—which currently authorizes the \$13.55 medical co-pay fee—and

formally authorize its removal.<sup>15</sup> This would involve presenting data on the minimal fiscal impact of the fee and the long-term benefits of improved inmate health.<sup>14</sup> Representative Venton Jones, Vice Chair of the House Corrections Committee, who has been a strong advocate for healthcare equity and criminal justice reform, and Representative Thresa “Terry” Meza, a fellow committee member known for sponsoring legislation to address racial and economic disparities within the criminal legal system, are key legislators who could push for this policy.<sup>16,17,18</sup> These legislative allies could counter likely fiscal or “soft-on-crime” opposition by emphasizing long-term cost savings and alignment with constitutional standards.<sup>2</sup>

Once the state legislator enacts statutory changes, TDCJ and CMHCC would be responsible for removing administrative mechanisms related to co-payment enforcement. The mechanisms, including dismantling billing infrastructure and training staff to implement the revised protocol, could be completed within 6–9 months, based on timelines from California.<sup>14,19</sup> The National Commission on Correction Health Care (NCHCC) notes that the administrative burden of collecting these fees can outweigh the revenue generated. Eliminating these fees allows resources to be redirected to enhance preventive care, chronic disease management, and service delivery.<sup>20</sup>

The proposed policy would require a reallocation of funds within TDCJ's existing budget of \$8.5 billion for the 2024-2025 fiscal year, with the average cost per day per inmate at \$77.49.<sup>21</sup> This

reallocation could be controversial. Yet, given that the medical co-pay system generates minimal revenue—often less than the cost of administering it—its elimination would not significantly impact the agency’s financial standing.<sup>13,20</sup> Texas should follow the precedents set by both Illinois and California in their eliminations of the medical co-pay system, and reallocate funds from non-essential administrative functions towards direct healthcare services, such as chronic condition management and mental health care.<sup>13,14</sup> Additionally, the State could consider implementing policies that reduce the number of individuals requiring long-term care in prison. For example, New York’s Elder Parole Bills (S. 2423 and A. 2035) propose parole eligibility for individuals aged 55 and older who have served at least 15 years.<sup>22</sup> Applying a similar framework in Texas would significantly reduce the healthcare burden and costs associated with aging incarcerated populations—many of whom require more intensive and expensive care.

Following implementation, TDCJ should partner with independent researchers and public health institutions to track healthcare utilization, emergency care reduction, and inmate satisfaction, using baseline data.<sup>11</sup> Transparent, data-driven evaluation would be critical in maintaining legislative support.

Eliminating medical co-pay fees in Texas addresses the urgent need for accessible healthcare among incarcerated individuals and is a critical step in advancing an equitable justice system.

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# Reinstating Employee Choice: Making Arbitration Clauses in Employee Contracts Voluntary

By Quinn Friedman, [qaf2@cornell.edu](mailto:qaf2@cornell.edu)

*To provide employees with just legal options, the federal government should amend the Federal Arbitration Act to ban mandatory arbitration clauses and class action waivers, empowering employees to choose between arbitration and public courts.*

## Background

Arbitration is a private dispute resolution system operating outside of the judicial system, where two parties bring their arguments in front of a neutral third party, or arbitrator, who helps reach a legally binding decision.<sup>1</sup> In 1925, the Federal Arbitration Act (FAA) established arbitration agreements as “valid, irrevocable, and enforceable.”<sup>2</sup> Originally intended to address an increasing number of business and commercial disputes, the FAA exempted issues of “contract of employment.”<sup>2</sup> However, since the 1990s, the scope and interpretation of the FAA have expanded significantly.<sup>3</sup>

Numerous Supreme Court decisions have increasingly applied arbitration to employment contexts, forcing employees into unfair arbitration courts. Research shows employers have bound 56 percent of private-sector, non-union workers, or 60 million Americans, to mandatory arbitration agreements, with 23 percent of these employees denied the right to bring class action lawsuits under their arbitration procedures.<sup>3</sup> The Supreme Court’s 2018 ruling in *Epic Systems Corp. v. Lewis* formalized these trends by allowing employers to enforce mandatory arbitration clauses as a condition of employment and preventing workers from filing class action lawsuits.<sup>4</sup> This ruling

enshrined a dispute resolution system that explicitly favors employers over employees.<sup>5</sup> Employers benefit from advantageous outcomes due to “repeat player” relationships with arbitrators, and arbitration imposes a lower standard for fair judicial procedures compared to public courts.<sup>5</sup> A 2023 study from the Annual Review of Law and Social Science found that employees have a win rate of 19 percent in arbitration courts.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, approximately 98 percent of workers with potential employment claims choose not to proceed when arbitration is their sole recourse.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, research on labor arbitration finds that “solid empirical data on this topic have proven slow and difficult to gather” because employers are generally not required to publicly disclose arbitration decisions.<sup>8,9</sup>

## Policy Idea

Congress should pass legislation banning forced arbitration clauses and class action waivers in employment contracts. Specifically, the legislation should amend the FAA to nullify the Supreme Court’s decision in *Epic Systems Corp. v. Lewis*. This law should make arbitration voluntary, empowering employees to choose between arbitration and public courts for dispute resolution. It

should prohibit employers from requiring arbitration as a condition of employment and ban forced class action waivers, preserving workers’ rights to collective legal action. Furthermore, this legislation should mandate that labor arbitration courts make case outcomes publicly accessible to enhance transparency and provide data for informed policymaking.

This law should also establish penalties for employers who violate these provisions. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) should be responsible for administering penalties, including civil monetary penalties and liquidated damages, to ensure compliance.

## Policy Analysis

Access to public courts for labor disputes correlates with favorable outcomes for employees. The Annual Review study found that successful employee claimants in arbitration cases received mean damages of \$170,000.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, employee claims in federal courts and state courts have success rates of 36 percent and 44 percent respectively, with mean damages exceeding \$325,000.<sup>6</sup> These studies suggest that public courts provide a more favorable dispute resolution system for employees than arbitration. Banning forced arbitration will reduce the

proportion of employment disputes settled through arbitration, leading to more equitable outcomes for employees.

Maintaining voluntary arbitration will prevent overburdening public courts and retain the positive benefits of private courts. A study by the American Arbitration Association found that federal court cases take an average of 24.2 months to reach trial, while arbitration cases are resolved in 11.6 months.<sup>10</sup>

Voluntary arbitration provides a faster resolution alternative while preserving access to public courts when preferred.

Mandating public outcome reporting for arbitration courts will enable policymakers to research and draft legislation more effectively and ensure fair standards. Research on international commercial arbitration finds that increased transparency not only leads to more accurate decision-making but also promotes democratic principles by subjecting arbiters to public scrutiny.<sup>11</sup>

In 2022, Congress passed the Ending Forced Arbitration of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Act (EFAA), allowing victims to bypass their forced arbitration clauses and pursue claims in state or federal courts.<sup>12</sup> Since its passing, one law firm found plaintiffs succeeded in enforcing the EFAA in approximately 57.4 percent of cases where invoked.<sup>13</sup> This success rate demonstrates the potential effectiveness of legislation banning forced arbitration in specific cases, suggesting that broadly banning mandatory arbitration will encourage employees to settle workplace disputes in public courts.

## Highlights

- Since the 1980s, arbitration has become increasingly common in employment disputes. The 2018 Supreme Court decision in *Epic Systems Corp v. Lewis* upheld the legality of mandatory arbitration clauses and class action waivers in employee contracts, restricting workers' access to public courts and collective action.<sup>4</sup>
- Employees are increasingly being forced into arbitration courts to settle issues, including wage theft, workplace discrimination, and wrongful termination, where they face disproportionately low win rates and biased processes.<sup>3</sup>
- Congress should pass a law that amends the FAA, making arbitration clauses in employment contracts voluntary and banning forced class action waivers.
- Research shows that public courts provide better outcomes for employees, including higher win rates and larger settlements, promoting fairness and equity in the workplace.<sup>6</sup>

## Implementation

The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) should draft a bill to amend the FAA to make arbitration clauses in employee contracts voluntary. Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), the former chair and current member of the HELP committee, should sponsor this bill due to his track record of advocating for labor protections. Senator Sanders has previously

cosponsored bills such as the Restoring Justice for Workers Act and has consistently advocated for strengthening workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain, suggesting that he would support this policy.<sup>14</sup> Senator Sanders should partner with Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA), Ranking Member of the House Education and Workforce Committee, to jointly introduce this bill.<sup>15</sup> The House Judiciary Committee, which introduced the successful EFAA, should concurrently help address any legal barriers.<sup>16</sup>

To build momentum and support for this bill, leading experts on arbitration, such as Alexander J. Colvin, should come to speak to Congress about this bill. Colvin has previously testified before the HELP committee on arbitration, stating that "the current system of forced arbitration imposed on workers by corporations undermines employment rights and should be eliminated."<sup>17</sup> The support and partnership of worker advocacy groups such as the National Employment Law Project (NELP) and labor unions such as the AFL-CIO, both of which have been proponents of stopping forced arbitration in the past, will be crucial for mobilizing grassroots support and putting pressure on legislators.<sup>18,19</sup>

The first three months should focus on drafting the legislation with stakeholder input and building bipartisan support. In the following six months, Senator Sanders and Representative Scott should introduce this bill, with expert and worker testimonials presented in committee hearings. Advocacy groups will mobilize public support and push for the

bill's passage in both chambers of Congress.

Proponents of this bill can anticipate resistance from business groups. The US Chamber of Commerce, a large lobbying group, has actively opposed legislation addressing arbitration. In 2023, representing a coalition of businesses, the US Chamber of Commerce wrote a letter to Congress asking them to reject proposed bills that dealt with arbitration and class action waivers.<sup>20</sup> To overcome these hurdles, proponents of the bill should emphasize that providing fair and healthy workplaces fosters employee trust, resulting in beneficial organizational outcomes, such as decreased turnover and higher levels of job satisfaction.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, allowing voluntary arbitration would help increase this bill's viability.

To measure the policy's effectiveness, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) should regularly track the ratio of employment-related cases held in arbitration versus public courts, aiming for an increase in public court cases. Employee contracts should be routinely surveyed by the DOL to verify that arbitration remains voluntary and class action waivers are not enforced. This data collection will help assess the law's impact and identify any necessary adjustments. By ensuring arbitration remains voluntary, employees retain the right to pursue alternative legal pathways, such as collective bargaining and public courts, which provide stronger protections and more equitable outcomes.

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# Targeting Labor Shortages In Skilled Trades By Subsidizing Training Costs

By Celia Holden, [cmh434@cornell.edu](mailto:cmh434@cornell.edu)

*To combat nationwide labor shortages and re-incentivize Americans to work in underserved industries, the federal government should subsidize firm-provided training programs for firms in industries currently experiencing labor shortages.*

## Background

With a current unemployment rate of four percent and a labor force participation rate of 62.4 percent, job openings in the United States have surged in recent years.<sup>1</sup> The low unemployment rates and, if not adequately addressed, estimates suggest that there could be a global talent shortage of 85 million skilled workers by 2030.<sup>2</sup> According to the Society for Human Resources Management, skilled trades such as manufacturing, construction, utilities, and health support services are struggling to fill vacancies due to the candidates' lack of proper training.<sup>3</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that the lack of trained applicants could stem from a stigma surrounding trade and vocational schools, despite the less predictable returns on a larger investment for a college degree.<sup>4</sup> As societal preferences shift towards college degrees, various skilled trade industries are experiencing difficulties hiring qualified applicants and meeting the demand for their labor. A survey conducted by the Associated General Contractors of America found that 68 percent of construction work applicants nationwide lacked the skills necessary to fulfill their job requirements.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, looking forward, the Associated Builders and Contractors

Organization estimates that approximately 454,000 additional skilled trade workers would need to be hired to satisfy the demand for labor in 2025.<sup>6</sup> There is a clear gap between the demand for skilled labor and the promotion of proper training. The federal government needs to take action to offset the growing talent shortage in skilled trade industries.

## Policy Idea

The federal government should subsidize training programs for skilled-trade positions currently experiencing worker shortages. The US Department of Labor and the Department of Education would be the primary agencies responsible for overseeing this program. This policy should include the agriculture, mining, construction, manufacturing, utilities, and "other services, except private households" industries.<sup>7</sup> If companies in these industries decide to reimburse a new employee's costs of attending an accredited trade school or pay for their current employees to become certified in a skilled trade, the federal government should cover 50 percent of the costs accrued by the company. To receive reimbursements, firms taking part in the program should submit valid documentation of their expenses annually.

## Policy Analysis

Employer-provided training is a win-win situation for employees and firms. According to a recent US Chamber of Commerce survey, 14 percent of Americans outside of the labor force would feel more urgency to return to full-time work if their employers provided adequate training.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, only 21 percent of new hires intend to stay at an organization that doesn't provide training, compared to 62 percent who intend to stay at organizations that provide training.<sup>9</sup> Employer-provided training has also been shown to improve employee morale while decreasing turnover.<sup>10</sup> Overall, employer-provided training can create a strong return on investment for firms, especially in industries experiencing worker shortages.

While covering a portion of training costs for skilled labor can be costly, the self-selecting nature of the policy would allow firms to decide whether they would take part in providing internal training or reimbursing external training. Currently, only 41 percent of labor contracting firms are increasing spending on training for their workers.<sup>5</sup> Studies show that contract workers who are less educated or come from underrepresented backgrounds are much less likely to receive training on the job than salaried, professional workers.<sup>11</sup>

However, with government subsidization of training programs, the risk of firms losing on training investments would decrease significantly.

Compared to a full government subsidy or regular employer-provided training initiatives, the 50% subsidization rate was chosen to decrease the financial burden on the federal government and companies who choose to provide training for their employees, effectively splitting the costs between the government and private entities. Given the self-selecting nature of the policy, the fiscal implications of the policy are difficult to determine before implementation, which would make a full subsidization much less feasible.

### Highlights

- With a current unemployment rate of four percent and a labor force participation rate of 62.4 percent, job openings in the United States have surged in recent years.<sup>1</sup>
- According to the Society for Human Resources Management and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, skilled trades such as plumbers, electricians, and mechanics are struggling to fill vacancies.<sup>3</sup>
- The federal government should subsidize training programs for skilled-trade positions currently experiencing worker shortages. The US Department of Labor and the Department of Education would be the primary agencies responsible for overseeing this program.

- With government subsidization of training programs, the risk of firms losing on training investments would decrease significantly.

### Implementation

With the end goal of implementing this policy on the federal level, local municipalities and progressive state governments should start implementing similar subsidization policies to collect data on the effectiveness of subsidized firm-provided training. The initial implementation could include states with progressive labor policies like New York, New Jersey, and California, and stakeholders should target politicians in these states who are passionate about the workforce in the initial stages of turning this policy into law. Key stakeholders could include various labor committee members, such as Harry Bronson and Jessica Ramos of New York, Gordon Johnson of New Jersey, and Alma Perez of California.<sup>12,13,14,15</sup> Human resources officers and executives at large companies that require skilled labor, including Con Edison, Avangrid, and DPR Construction, should also be included in the initial stages of implementing this policy.<sup>16,17,18</sup>

Currently, New York City offers subsidized training programs for certain in-demand positions, including nurses, HVAC installers, and healthcare operations managers.<sup>19</sup> They also offer individual training grants, which cover the tuition, registration fees, examination fees, and other related costs of short-term training programs, to those looking for employment or making less than \$63,928 annually.<sup>20</sup> States

interested in implementing partially subsidized training should use New York City's current policies as a model. Firms that wish to provide training opportunities for their employees should formally opt-in with the agency responsible for administering this program. Initially, this would be the New York, New Jersey, and California state labor agencies, and in the final stages, the U.S. Department of Labor. Once the federal government implements the policy, states experiencing more drastic labor shortages can choose to supplement the 50 percent subsidization rate that the federal government provides, further incentivizing companies in their area to invest in employer-provided training. It is plausible that the current administration's focus on government efficiency would obstruct implementing a policy that would increase federal government spending. However, by reiterating the idea that this policy would remove access barriers for thousands of Americans seeking employment, it could appeal to the conservative ideals of strengthening the economy with American labor.

The exact financial implications of this policy would remain undetermined until state labor agencies can collect data on how many companies choose to participate in the program. An estimate of the finances can be based on the prediction that 454,000 workers would be needed to satisfy the demand for labor in the contracting and building industries, and that workers in these industries make up 32 percent of the total workers that would be covered under this policy. Using these figures, it is estimated that 1,418,750 workers would be needed

to fill the labor demand across all skilled trades. Then, given a rough estimate that approximately 50 percent of companies in skilled trade industries would participate in the program, it is estimated that 709,375 workers would receive subsidized training through this policy. Assuming that trade schools and in-house training would cost at most \$15,000 per employee, with the government paying \$7,500 of these costs, this policy would cost the government approximately \$5.3 billion total.<sup>21</sup>

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# Ameliorating Educational Outcomes in K-12 Schools by Bolstering Music Education

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*To stimulate educational outcomes among students, the federal government should increase the prevalence of and funding for music education programs via categorical grants, reversing a recent decline in such programs despite their effectiveness.*

## Background

Education is a fundamental service the government offers its citizens, striving to provide equality of opportunity and the chance for social mobility.<sup>1</sup> Despite the United States being the largest economic and military powerhouse in the world, it lags in education.<sup>2</sup> Globally, the U.S. ranks 12th in public education systems and 15th in educational knowledge among 15-year-olds.<sup>3,4</sup> Despite this, the country spends more money per pupil than all nations other than Luxembourg, and teachers work more hours than those in the average country's education system.<sup>3,5</sup> One way to boost learning outcomes is to implement music education programs.

Music education is scientifically proven to bolster educational and social outcomes among students. Exposure to music training at young ages significantly improves reading scores and spelling abilities.<sup>6,7</sup> For those learning second languages, music education assists by utilizing similar portions of the brain as language processing.<sup>8,9</sup> Music training also aids with motor coordination, short-term and long-term memory, and auditory learning in the classroom.<sup>10,11,12,13</sup> Students gain teamwork and socialization skills, valuable assets for success in higher education and the workplace.<sup>14,15</sup>

Music education programs boost graduation rates at participating schools.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, playing an instrument is correlated with diminished risks of anxiety and depression and elevated self-control.<sup>17,18</sup>

Unfortunately, not all public schools have a music education program—3.6 million public school students have no access to music education, a group disproportionately composed of minority and low-income students.<sup>19,20</sup> Additionally, music programs have seen funding cuts in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. With a seven percent decrease in overall public school funding, schools have had to cut or diminish “non-essential” programs, resulting in 55 percent of districts eliminating music and arts programs.<sup>21,22,23</sup>

## Policy Idea

The federal government should provide categorical grants to states for music education through federal legislation. The amount received per state would be proportional to the number of public school students in the state. These funds would be distributed across schools to account for existing inequities in music education funding. The schools with the least-funded music programs relative to total student enrollment would be

prioritized. Dollars would be given to the lowest-financed school until all grant money is exhausted, done in a way that maximizes the mean of programs bolstered by this program. Programs would only be given money until they exceed this mean, ensuring programs not receiving money are not artificially overtaken in federal funding through this program. Federal funds would not be used to bolster already well-funded programs.

## Policy Analysis

A precedent exists for the federal government offering grants to the education sector. There are already categorical grants for low-income schools under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.<sup>24</sup> However, Title I Grants have various shortcomings, including unnecessary government oversight, failures to reduce achievement gaps, administrative overhead costs, a focus on ineffective educational remedies, and intense standardization.<sup>25</sup> Categorical grants based on student population would avoid some of these pitfalls by making students the unit of analysis as opposed to individual schools, personalizing funding policy, and accurately targeting where needs are.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, flexibly allowing states and localities to choose how to best implement music education

would reduce administrative overhead. Most critically, Title I Grants focus on reducing the achievement gap by funding particular students, while these categorical grants establish programs that benefit all students at recipient schools. On top of establishing novel music programs, bolstering underfunded programs is also necessary. Studies show that students in higher-quality music programs outperform those in poorly-endowed music programs, suggesting program quality is crucial to this policy's success.<sup>27</sup>

In Finland, ranked fourth in most well-developed public education systems, there are requirements to teach music in grades one through nine, including compulsory music lessons, in public schools.<sup>3,28,29</sup> As these schools are substantially funded by the federal government of Finland, the music programs, similar to the proposed policy, are also funded.<sup>30</sup> Finland also takes into account each municipality's needs when deciding how much money to give towards education. In Sweden, ranked second in most well-developed public education systems, there is a requirement to teach music for at least 230 hours in primary school.<sup>3,31</sup> Sweden also funds schooling through grants to municipalities, however, these have fewer restrictions than the proposed categorical grants.<sup>32</sup> Under the United States' federalist system, narrower grants are necessary due to education being a matter dictated by states and localities.<sup>33</sup> Beyond these countries, Denmark and Norway also have notable music education programs.<sup>34,35</sup>

## Highlights

- While the US is a global leader, it lags behind other countries in education, ranking 12th in public education despite spending more than all countries except Luxembourg.<sup>3</sup>
- Music education programs, which are underfunded or nonexistent in many schools, are proven supplements to educational insufficiencies, improving reading, spelling, math, motor coordination, memory, and social abilities.<sup>6,7,10,11,12,14,15,19,21,22,23</sup>
- The federal government should provide grants to the states to establish and bolster funding for music programs in schools with the lowest quality of music education.
- This proposal improves upon the Title I Grant system by ameliorating processes, redirecting funds to all students attending under resourced schools rather than a select group of low-income students, and minimizing administrative overhead.<sup>25,26</sup>

## Implementation

As the Trump Administration attempts to abolish the Department of Education, the optimal place of implementation for this program remains uncertain.<sup>36</sup> The ideal placement is wherever Title I Grants are distributed, a difficult program to abolish due to its Congressional mandate. The federal government would immediately redistribute the money to the states, with minimal

additional financial policing to save overhead costs.

Potential allies within Congress include Democratic Representative Nydia Velázquez of New York, and twenty-four Democratic signatories of the Guarantee Access to Arts and Music Education Act of 2023, which would have allowed for the reallocation of Title I Grants to music education, and Democratic Congressman David Scott of Georgia and eighteen Democratic signatories of the Reimagining Inclusive Arts Education Act, which would have expanded arts education to accommodate those with disabilities.<sup>37,38</sup>

While these bills likely failed to go to committee due to a lack of salience, organizational lobbying can assist. Music education has taken a backseat—it is not widely thought of as a solution to academic-social woes, which themselves are becoming less politically relevant in place of cultural fights.<sup>39</sup> Organizations aligned with the goals of this policy include the National Association for Music Educators, a member of the Arts Education Alliance that already lobbies on the national, state, and local levels for music education.<sup>40</sup> NAfME can utilize its already existing lobbying network to bring attention to this policy, which is consistent with their organizational values, both within and outside of Congress.

Another roadblock to this policy is Republican resistance to federal education grants, as Title I Grants have failed to reduce achievement gaps meaningfully.<sup>41</sup> However, the proposed policy is consistent with the GOP's objective to return education to the states, with states and localities largely

dictating how these funds are utilized.<sup>42</sup> These funds in no way restrict what school districts teach in their curriculum; they only add additional funds and additional educational opportunities for students. Categorical grants can generate bipartisan support by effectively boosting educational outcomes while returning power to municipalities.

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# Disseminating Harm Reduction in New York State High Schools

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*New York State should pilot a program to make naloxone and drug test kits free and available to students in high schools.*

## Background

Throughout adolescence, many teenagers are exposed to illicit substances they are unprepared to navigate. While substance abuse should always be discouraged, the precipitous behavior of adolescents is often difficult to control. For unyielding drug users, harm reduction, which is the practice of mitigating the threats of substance use through methods such as testing strips and needle cleaning, has proven effective. Researchers have studied harm reduction for decades, and multiple studies have demonstrated that it decreases the risk of overdose and death from illicit drugs—particularly in youth.<sup>1,2</sup>

However, harm reduction programs are often disseminated inequitably, with many at-risk communities unable to reap their benefits.<sup>2</sup> This leads to low-income and minority school districts having insufficient access to harm reduction techniques. In 2019, 11.5 percent of high school students had used illicit drugs in the past year, with 4.5 percent using amphetamines, 2.2 percent using cocaine, and 3.4 percent using tranquilizers.<sup>3</sup> These drugs carry the risk of contamination with fentanyl, an ultra-potent opioid. As little as two milligrams—about the size of five to seven grains of salt—can be lethal.<sup>4</sup>

## Policy Idea

New York State should implement a pilot program through a state bill in which all participating high schools receive supplies of drug testing kits and naloxone. The supplies would be sent to the nurse's office or any equivalent health center. This policy would allocate \$5 million for test strips and naloxone to be distributed to 300 initial high schools that the New York State Education Department (NYSED) determines to be "at-risk." An additional \$1 million would be allocated to training teachers, staff, and student volunteers in naloxone administration. Furthermore, students would be informed that requesting drug kits and naloxone would be free and confidential; school nurses and healthcare workers would not be permitted to release the names or information of students requesting the products. Researchers would monitor the program for effectiveness over the course of a year, and expand it if found effective in reducing overdoses without increasing drug use.

## Policy Analysis

While adolescents are using illicit drugs at lower rates than in preceding decades, fentanyl contamination has made drug use more dangerous than ever. In 2022,

22 teens aged 14 to 18 died per week from a drug overdose.<sup>5</sup> Many drug-related deaths are due to fentanyl, which is responsible for 90 percent of opioid overdoses in New York State.<sup>6</sup> Fentanyl strips have proven to be effective in both preventing overdoses and curbing illicit drug usage.<sup>7</sup> A 2019 Harm Reduction Journal study found that 98 percent of young adult test strip users were confident in their ability to use them effectively.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, when granted free test strips, 77 percent of participants used them to test their drug supply.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, upon receiving a positive test result for fentanyl contamination, the participants became increasingly likely to rethink and limit their drug use.<sup>7</sup>

Naloxone is also a cost-effective method of reducing overdose deaths. The dispensation of naloxone has been found to avert 6 percent of overdose deaths, with a cost effectiveness of \$14,000 per quality-adjusted life year (QALY).<sup>8</sup> Generally, treatments are considered cost-effective if they cost less than \$50,000 per QALY.<sup>9</sup> The naloxone training enabled by this policy could potentially increase the medication's effectiveness by facilitating its effective administration. Thus, the issuance of naloxone in schools is a cost-effective policy that would save teenage lives. Furthermore,

this policy would function as a pilot program in order to evaluate its general effectiveness. If found effective, this policy would be expanded throughout New York State. Prior research on harm reduction strongly suggests that the dissemination of test strips and naloxone would decrease overdose deaths.<sup>7</sup>

### Highlights

- The rise of fentanyl, a pestilent contaminant in illicit drugs, has amplified the dangers of adolescent drug use, contributing to 90 percent of teen overdose deaths in New York State.<sup>5</sup>
- Past research has demonstrated that harm reduction is an effective technique for abating overdoses, as drug users find testing kits easy to use and helpful.<sup>1</sup>
- New York State should combat the fentanyl crisis by enacting a pilot program providing free naloxone and drug testing kits to 300 at-risk high schools.
- Students could access these harm reduction resources confidentially through school nurses or other in-house healthcare administrators, ensuring a judgment-free environment.
- If the program successfully reduces overdoses without adverse effects, it would gradually be expanded statewide to all New York high schools.

### Implementation

To implement the pilot program, NYSED would determine the 300 high schools that are the

most “at-risk” for adolescent drug use. NYSED would prioritize high schools with low spending per pupil in areas with high drug overdose rates to ensure that the most vulnerable populations are duly aided. NYSED would also release enrollment information to the New York State Department of Health (NYSDoH) so that they could aptly appropriate the naloxone and testing kits. The program would then grant NYSDoH five million taxpayer dollars to purchase a cache of naloxone and testing kits and distribute them to schools based on the NYSED data. The NYSDoH would also receive an additional one million dollars to hire workers to train school administrators in naloxone administration and test strip utilization. Furthermore, this policy would task NYSED with including information about harm reduction in standardized health curricula, which health instructors would teach statewide. These instructors would inform their students that test strips can detect contaminating agents, like fentanyl, in drug supplies.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, they would educate students about naloxone, which can restore breathing and resuscitate the victim in case of a drug overdose.

NYSDoH would monitor this program over the course of a year to ensure its effectiveness. If monitors find that the policy leads to a statistically significant reduction in drug usage or mortality without adverse effects, the program would be expanded throughout the state. To further gain traction for this legislation, the New York State Teachers Union (NYSUT) could serve as an influential ally in advocating for harm reduction education in schools. NYSUT has a history of

fighting for progressive causes in public schools and could potentially help fight for better harm reduction practices.<sup>9</sup> Such a program, if effective, would position NYS as a leader in harm reduction strategies. Since this program could face backlash from groups who view harm reduction as enabling drug use, data-driven research on this policy could serve to satiate critics. Advocates could also engage in public education campaigns to shift perceptions about the goals and benefits of harm reduction.

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# ECONOMIC POLICY

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# From Pantry to Plate: Expanding SNAP for Hot Meals

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*The US federal government's current Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has strict limitations that inhibit full benefit access for marginalized populations. To accommodate individuals who cannot cook, SNAP expansion should be implemented to include the purchase of hot/prepared meals.*

## Background

As the US's largest federal nutrition welfare initiative, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) serves about 42.1 million people monthly.<sup>1</sup> Yet, its current structure falls short of addressing the needs of several marginalized communities. Under the current regulation, only staple foods – basic items like fruits, vegetables, meat, dairy, and grains – count toward a retailer's SNAP eligibility, excluding prepared and hot foods because of longstanding concerns over cost control, difficulty upholding nutrition standards, and possible fraud prevention due to their variable pricing and resale potential.<sup>2,3</sup> This restriction disproportionately hinders populations unable to cook or lacking cooking facility access, such as the elderly, disabled, and homeless.<sup>4</sup>

With more than one in eight households reporting difficulties in receiving sufficient food,<sup>2</sup> SNAP's exclusion of hot and prepared meals further exacerbates food insecurity in the US.<sup>2</sup> Related studies demonstrate that individuals facing food insecurity are at higher risk of chronic health conditions like diabetes, heart disease, and mental health disorders.<sup>5</sup> Beyond its direct health consequences, food insecurity also heightens economic

inequality and instability. The annual cost of food insecurity is around \$130.5 billion due to illness, while poor educational outcomes and lower lifetime earnings linked to food insecurity add another \$19.2 billion.<sup>6</sup> The cycle of poverty and food insecurity continues to strain the US economy and hinder marginalized communities from breaking free of the systematic barriers to upward mobility.

Although SNAP played a crucial role in alleviating food insecurity, its current restrictions fail to meet the needs of marginalized communities. Expanding SNAP to cover prepared and hot food would provide the necessary relief to vulnerable populations while mitigating the long-term economic consequences of food insecurity.

## Policy Idea

Congress should introduce a new bill allowing SNAP-eligible individuals to use their benefits to buy prepared and hot meals from approved grocery stores and food establishments. Authorized retailers must meet the federal government eligibility criteria, including offering meals that comply with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutritional

standards. Participating retailers must keep documentation of all transactions for compliance assurance. To encourage local food vendors and community-based small businesses to participate in the expanded SNAP program, the federal government should offer financial incentives such as tax credits to help mitigate the potential cost of joining the program.

## Policy Analysis:

The federal expansion of the SNAP program would allow participants to purchase prepared and hot meals, ensuring all populations have access to nutritionally adequate food options without requiring cooking facilities. To address the issue, individual states implemented the Restaurant Meal Program (RMP), which allows certain people with high risk for chronic hunger to use state food benefits to buy prepared meals at approved vendors.<sup>7</sup> Take California's RMP as an example. While expanding access, California faced challenges, including limited participation from local restaurants and a predominance of fast-food chains, raising concerns about nutritional quality and geographic equity. Los Angeles County combated such issues through collaboration with public health

departments to recruit vendors offering healthier options and provided technical assistance to facilitate enrollment.<sup>8</sup> As of 2022, RMP was active in Arizona, California, and Rhode Island.<sup>7</sup> Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, and Virginia also initiated their RMPs during this period.<sup>7</sup> The expansion of RMP in multiple states demonstrates the feasibility of national implementation.

Expanding the SNAP program to include hot and prepared meal options would not only improve food access for marginalized populations but also help stimulate the economy. Given the US's current weak economic standing,<sup>9</sup> research studies by the OpenSky Policy Institute have demonstrated that, in such an economy, every \$1 spent on SNAP benefits generates \$1.54 in economic activity, meaning the additional investment in the SNAP program would stimulate local economies while enhancing food security.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, based on the Economic Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture, an increase of \$1 billion in SNAP benefits in a slow economy will help increase the Gross Domestic Product by \$1.54 billion, meaning the same increase would support 13,560 additional jobs.<sup>11</sup> The proposed policy would also include financial incentives such as tax credits and grants to encourage vendor participation, particularly to help local small businesses.

### Highlights

- More than 1 in 8 US households report food insufficiency, and food-insecure individuals face higher risks of diabetes,

heart disease, and mental health conditions.<sup>2</sup>

- A federal expansion of SNAP to cover hot and prepared meals for individuals without access to cooking facilities, such as the elderly, disabled, and unhoused, would address this issue.<sup>4</sup>
- This policy builds on successful state Restaurant Meals Programs (RMPs) in California, Arizona, and others—proving feasibility, especially for high-need populations.<sup>7</sup>
- Vendors must meet USDA/FDA nutrition standards and maintain transaction records; federal tax credits and grants will offset participation costs for small businesses to boost food access, public health, and local economies.

### Implementation

Under the proposed expansion, the USDA, in collaboration with state departments of social services or equivalent human services agencies that already administer SNAP, like California's Department of Social Services (CDSS) and New York's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), would oversee the implementation of SNAP-covered prepared meals to ensure compliance with nutritional standards.<sup>12,13</sup> Participating retailers would be required to document all transactions through an electronic tracking system modeled after the current Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) system, which has proven effective in both preventing fraud and monitoring program compliance.<sup>14</sup> To further uphold

program integrity, state agencies would conduct annual audits and compliance checks to ensure that retailers adhere to all guidelines. Additionally, to structure vendor participation, a tiered eligibility model would be introduced, prioritizing grocery stores, supermarkets, and nonprofit organizations before considering larger chains. This phased approach ensures that small businesses and community-based food providers are the first to benefit. State agencies would collaborate closely with local meal service providers and small businesses to facilitate outreach and on-the-ground execution.

On the federal level, outreach efforts would target bipartisan members of Congress who have demonstrated consistent support for modernizing SNAP. Legislators such as Rep. Grace Meng (D-NY), Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX), and Sen. Alex Padilla (D-CA) have demonstrated support for similar initiatives like the Hot Foods Act and the Meals for At-Risk Americans Act.<sup>15,16</sup> Although the mentioned initiatives did not pass due to broader federal gridlock, budgetary conflicts, and administrative concerns around oversight, the existing bipartisan interest reflects a shared understanding that food assistance programs must change to meet the practical needs of recipients, especially working families, older adults, and individuals with disabilities who may lack the ability or time to prepare meals.<sup>2,3</sup> By engaging with these lawmakers, the proposed policy can build upon their prior advocacy efforts and signal the willingness for bipartisan collaboration to gain broader public

support, thereby increasing the chances of legislative passage.

Alongside Congressional efforts, external advocacy with organizations such as the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) is well-positioned to act as powerful allies, given its extensive history of advocating for equitable food policy. FRAC and similar organizations can amplify constituent voices, provide lawmakers with cost-benefit evidence and district-specific data, and humanize the issue by gathering stories from their seniors, unhoused individuals, and other beneficiaries.<sup>17</sup> Together, congressional outreach and organizational mobilization can generate the momentum necessary to break through policy gridlock and bring this long-overdue expansion of SNAP benefits to life.

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# The Path to Net Zero Emissions: Abolishing Tariffs on Imported Chinese Electric Vehicles

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*The US federal government should abolish tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles to jumpstart stagnant domestic manufacturing, mitigate rising input costs, and remove barriers to green energy goals.*

## Background

As last reported in fall of 2024, the US government committed to raise tariffs on imported Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) from 25 percent to 100 percent over three years in an attempt to protect domestic manufacturers that cannot compete with the influx of cheap, government-subsidized EVs from China.<sup>1</sup> However, the administration acted without empirical evidence that these tariffs benefit the supposed newly-protected sector. The implementation of tariffs under the first Trump administration neither raised nor lowered employment rates.<sup>2</sup> Rather, tariffs negatively impact the domestic EV industry, causing input costs to rise and prompting China to exact retaliatory tariffs.<sup>3</sup> Such a protectionist measure stands only to exacerbate existing tensions within the US-China trade relationship. This measure also allows the US domestic industry to stagnate and avoid prioritizing technological development, which could significantly hinder its ability to compete on the global stage.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, consumer access to cheap EVs is crucial for achieving the US's goal of carbon neutrality by 2050 and a global green energy transition.<sup>5</sup> Transportation is the largest contributing sector to US

greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for 28% of emissions in 2024 according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).<sup>6</sup> By levying tariffs on imported Chinese EVs, the US government is not only raising prices for consumers, but also inhibiting its own energy goals. The proposed removal of these tariffs would crucially combat climate change through increased access to affordable EVs.

## Policy Idea

To achieve its goal of carbon neutrality by 2050, the US federal government should immediately abolish existing tariffs on imported Chinese EVs. These tariffs do not accomplish their goal of protecting domestic manufacturers but rather raise both manufacturing and consumer prices while worsening trade relations between China and the US. Eliminating the tariffs sooner rather than later would reduce inefficiencies and heightened costs, as well as expedite efforts against climate change.

Abolition would be undertaken by the executive branch, or more specifically, the President of the United States, in whom Congress has vested authority over import tariffs through a variety of laws.<sup>7</sup> Changes in tariff regulation would subsequently be implemented by the US Customs

and Border Protection (CBP) when goods cross the border into the country.<sup>8</sup>

## Policy Analysis

Research does not support the conviction that import tariffs bolster domestic industry. Empirical evidence from the National Bureau of Economic Research's statistical aggregate study of the first Trump administration's tariffs shows the ineffectiveness of then-instituted tariffs, which remained in place throughout the subsequent Biden administration, in influencing the EV manufacturing sector. The sector has seen no significant change in employment rates since their introduction.<sup>2</sup> In another blow to domestic industry, tariffs affect imports crucial to vehicle manufacturing like steel, aluminum, and auto parts, and significantly raise production costs.<sup>9</sup> According to Dean Baker, an economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, US-imported steel and aluminum are valued at around \$50 billion annually. He further claimed that 20% tariffs on these goods will cost the nation \$10 billion yearly due to higher prices, or roughly \$100 per family.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, each wave of tariffs on China has prompted retaliatory tariffs on US goods.<sup>11</sup> China imposed 10-15% tariffs on US agricultural products, affecting nearly \$21 billion in exports.<sup>12</sup>

Consumer prices have also been influenced by tariffs, with experts at Bloomberg estimating they could raise prices of some EV brands by up to \$12,000.<sup>13</sup> The average cost of a new EV in the US is around \$50,000, with the cheapest market offering, the Nissan Leaf, being priced at approximately \$29,000.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Chinese-manufactured EVs are often less than \$10,000.<sup>15</sup> Keeping EV prices low and accessible to consumers is necessary to incentivize the switch from gas-powered to electric vehicles. In 2023, one in every three new car registrations in China was electric, compared with only one in ten in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Tariffs on Chinese EVs increase costs for American consumers, fail to significantly aid domestic manufacturers, and contradict the government's goal of reducing carbon emissions. Abolishing tariffs on imported Chinese EVs would subsequently benefit consumers and diminish a major roadblock to the US's goal of carbon neutrality.

### Highlights

- Tariffs on imported Chinese EVs raise consumer prices and hinder the US's goal of carbon neutrality by 2050, all while exacerbating existing tensions within the US-China trade relationship.<sup>5,10,11,13</sup>
- The president of the United States, in whom Congress has vested authority over import tariffs, should abolish tariffs on Chinese EVs to lower consumer costs and incentivize the switch from gas-powered to electric vehicles.<sup>7</sup> In doing

so, the US federal government would remove a major roadblock to carbon neutrality.

- This policy would save the US around \$10 billion per year in lower import prices, or roughly \$100 per family.<sup>10</sup> It would also prevent the estimated \$12,000 increase in price of some EV brands.<sup>13</sup>

### Implementation

Given that the US President controls American import tariffs, this policy is unlikely to actualize under the current administration. President Trump ran on a platform emphasizing the importance of import tariffs for promoting domestic manufacturing and alleviating the US trade deficit. He promised to rebalance trade, strategically distance from China, and bolster the American auto industry by preventing the importation of Chinese vehicles.<sup>17</sup> Upon election, President Trump was the driving force behind the imposition of these tariffs. Therefore, the timeline for implementation of this policy would likely extend beyond President Trump's remaining four years in office.

Following the next presidential election cycle, there may be newfound hope for the policy. To mobilize support, environmental groups such as the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) should lobby at the federal level by building coalitions and meeting with individual policymakers. EDF is a US-based nonprofit environmental advocacy group that works across borders, including in efforts to aid

China in decarbonizing its energy system.<sup>18</sup> NRDC is another internationally-focused environmental advocacy group with a mission closely aligned with that of EDF.<sup>19</sup> Both organizations' cross-cultural expertise would make them strong choices to lead lobbying efforts, ensuring a perspective that seriously considers the impacts of these tariffs on both economies.

The creation of coalitions would expand available budgets and influence to effectively lobby policymakers. Policymakers representing the "Battery Belt," an area with a significant concentration of EV manufacturing in the Midwestern and Southeastern US, should be the targets of individual meetings. The prominence of EV sector manufacturing in this area results in its representatives' favorable views of protectionist tariffs.<sup>20</sup> Indiana Senator Jim Banks, for example, is vocal about the positive impacts of tariffs on domestic jobs and national security.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, lobbyists should change these policymakers' minds regarding the harmful effects of import tariffs on Chinese EVs.

Top leaders in the Republican Party have also been critical of President Trump's tariff policy. Republican Senator Chuck Grassley, chair of the Judiciary Committee and third in line for the presidency as the Senate's pro tempore, spearheaded new legislation in 2025 to limit presidential power in imposing tariffs and reassert Congress's authority in this area.<sup>22</sup> Senator Grassley, along with Senator Maria Cantwell from Washington who jointly introduced the bill, could spearhead a federal bill that would

repeal President Trump’s tariffs on imported EVs.

They would likely have much greater success under a subsequent administration.

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# Connecting Communities: Establishing Ithaca's Sustainable Mobility Hub

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*The Tompkins County government should build a mobility hub in Ithaca that includes an electric vehicle (EV) charging station, e-bike rental station, and Amtrak line connecting Ithaca to New York City in order to improve connectivity within and to/from Ithaca.*

## Background

Currently, public transportation within and to/from Ithaca is incredibly unreliable. The Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit (TCAT), Ithaca's public bus system, has inconsistent service and long wait times due to a loss in ridership on high revenue routes.<sup>1</sup> However, it is the only form of public transportation in the city.<sup>2</sup> Reliable and accessible public transportation is crucial to urban vitality, as it stimulates economic growth and development by reducing barriers to job and healthcare access.<sup>3</sup>

Although Ithaca currently does not have rail access, it had previously had access to New York City (NYC) via the Lehigh Valley Railroad until 1959.<sup>4</sup> The Ithaca Central Railroad also currently operates a freight line between Sayre, Pennsylvania and Ithaca that transports commodities between the cities using 53.33 miles of track.<sup>5</sup> As such, there is existing rail infrastructure connecting Ithaca to other cities in upstate New York (NY) and Pennsylvania, but it is no longer utilized for passenger transportation due to the nationwide decline in railroad usage that was mirrored in upstate NY.<sup>4,6</sup>

Although there are intercity bus services between Ithaca and NYC, they have been declining in quality and quantity over the past

30 years, with over 450 fewer points being served per year, leading to many companies selling off their properties and removing amenities for potential passengers.<sup>7,8,9</sup> Traffic congestion is also a large issue concerning intercity bus travel, causing significant delays for passengers.<sup>10</sup> As such, there needs to be a change in connection between Ithaca and New York City to attract potential members of the Ithaca workforce and grow the city economically. Improvements are necessary to prevent Ithaca from being economically isolated from the rest of the state.

## Policy Idea

To address the ineffectiveness of public transportation between Ithaca and New York City, the Tompkins County government and Amtrak should implement an Amtrak route between the two cities using existing rail infrastructure currently used for freight routes. This program would be administered jointly by Amtrak and the Tompkins County government. It would be funded using the \$22 billion in Department of Transportation funding allocated to Amtrak through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

## Policy Analysis

Implementing an Amtrak station in Ithaca would positively impact the economic connectivity of Ithaca to the rest of New York State and the U.S. Firstly, Amtrak generates between \$7 and \$8 million each year in economic impact, largely due to its unique connection of small cities (many of which are similar to Ithaca) to larger ones.<sup>11</sup> Amtrak also spurs job creation, with 100,000 jobs nationwide being directly linked to Amtrak and its passengers through its daily operations, tourism boosts, and suppliers.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, the U.S. Department of Transportation found that an investment of \$1 billion into public transportation, like Amtrak, creates roughly 36,000 jobs, demonstrating a direct link between expanded Amtrak access and job creation on a national scale.<sup>11</sup> In New York State, Amtrak quantifies their economic impact to be \$882 million in fiscal year 2015 and was largely caused by the increase in available jobs and tourism spending that Amtrak brought to the state.<sup>12</sup>

Policy analysts and lawmakers have also created economic impact estimates for a proposed Amtrak route between NYC and Scranton, Pennsylvania. Although its line does not run to Ithaca completely, this route would

be a crucial part of the proposed line, with Scranton serving as a critical stop given existing rail infrastructure.<sup>6</sup> The NYC-Scranton portion alone is projected to generate a \$2.9 billion one-time economic impact to the region, followed by \$87 million in annual boosts.<sup>13</sup> The estimate, created by Amtrak, considers ten regional universities and high tourism levels attracting passengers, coupled with an increase in jobs.<sup>13</sup> Extending service to Ithaca and the Finger Lakes, also a large tourist spot and university region, would only further positive economic impacts.<sup>14, 15</sup>

### Highlights

- Public transportation in Ithaca, NY is unreliable, and the TCAT bus is the only method of transportation in the area.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Transportation between Ithaca and New York City is only possible via intercity bus, which is a slowly dying industry that also leads to many inefficiencies for its passengers.<sup>8,9,10</sup>
- As such, the Tompkins County government and Amtrak should implement a long-range Amtrak station in Ithaca not only to improve connectivity within the region, but also between the region and New York City and the rest of the country.
- The Amtrak station would connect Ithaca with New York City and other cities in Upstate New York and Pennsylvania via existing rail running through Scranton.<sup>4,5,6</sup>
- US Department of Transportation grants

through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act would be used to fund the Amtrak station in Ithaca and the rail line to New York City.<sup>22,23,24,25</sup>

### Implementation

Building the Amtrak station would cost around \$10 million, the cost of a comparable station in Brattleboro, VT.<sup>16</sup> There would also be a significant cost of building and maintaining the tracks between Ithaca and Syracuse to connect it with the rest of Upstate New York, as the new Amtrak line directly to New York City could use existing tracks between Ithaca and New York City used for freight rail.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Excluding existing lines, roughly 20 miles of rail would be built, totaling approximately \$40 million (\$2 million per mile).<sup>17,18,19</sup> However, given that this would be a steep cost and that Syracuse can be accessed via Amtrak through New York, it would make more sense to use the existing railway to connect Ithaca and New York City and allow those who want to access the rest of Upstate New York to connect via NYC.<sup>20</sup> There would also be a cost of building the trains themselves which would be around \$37 million each on the high end, with two power cars and nine passenger cars.<sup>21</sup> As such, the total fixed cost of starting this project would be \$84 million, assuming two trains running on this route.

This policy would be administered jointly by the Tompkins County government (to build the railway station in Ithaca) and Amtrak (to oversee the creation of the railway line itself). However, a vast majority of the funding for both parts of the project would come from the federal government

through Department of Transportation grants. The Department of Transportation would utilize its funds from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which includes \$66 million in new funding for passenger rail to cover the total cost of the program.<sup>22</sup> This money is broken down to allot \$22 billion directly to Amtrak, which could be directly used for this project, as Amtrak would contribute to its development.<sup>23</sup> Specifically within Amtrak, the heads of State and Local Government Affairs for the Northeast region, Jane Brophy and Margaret Clark, would be vital resources in the development of this project, as they would coordinate between the Tompkins County government and Amtrak itself to develop the Amtrak station and rail line.<sup>24</sup> The Tompkins County government could also apply for competitive grants from the Department of Transportation, also provided through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, to help fund the development of the Amtrak station in Ithaca.<sup>25</sup>

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# The Case for a US Domestic Carbon Pricing System

By Lake Wiesmayr, [lmw262@cornell.edu](mailto:lmw262@cornell.edu)

*A domestic carbon price through an emissions trading system would encourage corporate emissions reductions and generate federal revenue. This approach would enable future adoption of a carbon border adjustment mechanism and align with proven international models including the European Union.*

## Background

The United States is among the world's largest contributors to climate change, emitting 4,780 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in 2024 alone.<sup>1,2</sup> With rising global temperatures and insufficient climate strategies, the US must adopt market-based mechanisms to drive emissions reductions.<sup>3</sup> A basic and effective economic policy approach is carbon pricing, which motivates industrial firms to internalize carbon costs during production while simultaneously raising federal revenue.<sup>4</sup> Despite implementation and proven effectiveness worldwide, the US remains the only developed economy globally without a national carbon pricing system.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, lawmakers have introduced over 15 carbon pricing bills in Congress.<sup>5,6</sup> However, most policies focus on taxing imports at the border, such as the 2023 Foreign Pollution Fee Act.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, these efforts have been unsuccessful partly because imposing a border carbon price before a domestic one may violate World Trade Organization regulations.<sup>5</sup>

Failure to implement a domestic carbon price will soon carry negative economic consequences. Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms (CBAMs),

which levy import duties according to a good's carbon footprint, are becoming more common among trade partners, including the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> CBAMs complement existing policies to prevent "carbon leakage" by ensuring that imports from countries without carbon pricing face similar costs to domestically produced goods.<sup>7</sup> Starting as soon as 2026, the US would be forced to pay others for internal emissions with funds that can easily be retained by adopting a domestic carbon price.<sup>5</sup> Doing so would generate billions in federal revenue at a time of historic deficits.<sup>8</sup> These funds could support climate change mitigation or other national priorities, making a domestic carbon price both environmentally and fiscally strategic.<sup>5</sup>

## Policy Idea

Congress should implement a domestic carbon price on the national level through an Emissions Trading System (ETS). An ETS, also known as cap-and-trade, is one of the most commonly used carbon pricing strategies worldwide.<sup>4</sup> The system sets a limit on emissions and allocates permits that firms must purchase through government auctions or trade with other

companies, creating a market incentive to reduce emissions.<sup>4</sup> Supply and demand for carbon allowances determine the price of the permits, rising when emissions increase and falling when firms stay within their limits.<sup>9</sup> Companies are required to monitor and disclose their emissions annually or face steep fines.<sup>9</sup> By establishing a domestic carbon price, the US would significantly reduce carbon emissions, generate federal revenue, and allow the federal government to avoid the looming introduction of CBAM taxes on its imports.

## Policy Analysis

Currently, 75 successful carbon pricing instruments operate throughout 64 countries, covering 24 percent of global emissions and generating \$104 billion in annual revenue.<sup>10,11</sup> In 2023, over half of this revenue supported climate and nature-related programs.<sup>12</sup> In the EU, proceeds from the ETS flow to national budgets, where member states fund the renewable energy transition and low-carbon technologies.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, revenue is used to lower taxes on workers and businesses and invest in climate innovation.<sup>13</sup>

Among existing systems, the EU ETS is one of the oldest and largest, implemented in 2005.<sup>14,15</sup>

The system covers industry, power, maritime, and domestic aviation sectors across 30 countries.<sup>14,15</sup> According to the European Commission, the EU ETS has reduced emissions by 48 percent since its introduction, with a goal of 62 percent by 2030.<sup>15</sup> In 2023, the system raised €43.6 billion (\$47.2B USD) with total revenue exceeding €200 billion (\$216B USD).<sup>15</sup> The ETS operates in trading phases, enabling reforms such as the Fit for 55 package which expanded the system to new sectors and introduced a CBAM.<sup>15</sup>

The CBAM complements the ETS and covers seven highly emitting industries, including iron, aluminum, and fertilizers, and will expand to all sectors under the ETS by 2030.<sup>15,16,17</sup> Payments begin in 2026, with charges varying based on supply and demand.<sup>15</sup> The Climate Leadership Council projects a CBAM of \$120 per emitted ton would cost the US \$300 million annually.<sup>17,18</sup> Although this amount is small for the US, the EU's CBAM is spurring adoption of similar mechanisms globally as carbon prices evolve.<sup>5</sup> When paired with the revenue generated from a domestic carbon price, implementation would bring substantial long-term financial gain.

### Highlights

- Despite being one of the world's largest emitters, the United States remains the only developed economy without a national carbon pricing system, putting the country at a competitive disadvantage.<sup>5</sup>
- Implementing a domestic carbon price through an emissions trading scheme

would incentivize businesses to cut emissions while generating federal revenue.<sup>5</sup>

- The US will soon face increasing tariffs from Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms in countries such as the European Union and the United Kingdom, requiring American firms to pay foreign governments for emissions produced within the US.<sup>5,15</sup> A domestic carbon price would internalize these funds.<sup>5</sup>
- Carbon pricing has proven effective worldwide, with 64 countries implementing systems covering 24 percent of global emissions.<sup>10,12</sup> The EU's Emissions Trading Scheme alone has reduced emissions by 48 percent and generated over €200 billion since inception in 2005.<sup>11,14,15</sup>

### Implementation

To ensure passage, a domestic carbon price through an ETS should be grounded in existing public and legislative support.<sup>19</sup> Polling shows that 58 percent of Americans already support some form of carbon pricing.<sup>20</sup> To maintain momentum, think tanks and organizations such as the Pricing Carbon Institute and the Brookings Institution can continue educating stakeholders on the economic and environmental benefits.<sup>4,5,21</sup> Expanding outreach to exporters vulnerable to CBAMs could increase corporate backing, while states with existing emissions trading programs, such as California and members of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, could serve as advocates.<sup>21</sup>

An accurate and transparent emissions framework would be critical for implementation. The bipartisan Providing Reliable, Objective, Verifiable Emissions Intensity (PROVE It) Act, already introduced in Congress, would establish a framework for measuring domestic and foreign carbon emissions. However, a carbon pricing bill can also integrate similar measurement provisions directly.<sup>5,22</sup> Such a framework would direct the Department of Energy to identify high-emitting industries to target with the carbon price, determine an appropriate emissions cap, and provide reliable data for effectively measuring the ETS's impact.<sup>22</sup> This information would also be essential if the US decides to implement a CBAM in the future. Although most Americans are unfamiliar with CBAMs, nearly three-quarters of voters nationwide are supportive once they hear a brief explanation, regardless of party lines, including in states with manufacturing and fossil fuel-based economies.<sup>23</sup>

The expiration of Trump-era tax cuts in 2025 and the ballooning federal deficit create fiscal pressure for new revenue sources, providing an opportunity for bipartisan support.<sup>5,24</sup> Democrats are likely to support the bill for its environmental benefits, as the League of Conservation Voters finds that Democratic lawmakers consistently score high in environmental voting records.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, Republicans may be drawn to the economic and geopolitical advantages of a CBAM, viewing the mechanism as less of an environmental policy and more of a competitive tool.<sup>26,27</sup> Several Congressional Republicans have shown interest in CBAM-like

proposals, and emphasizing that such a mechanism requires a domestic carbon pricing system could build more support.<sup>5,26,27</sup>

Despite climate policy skepticism, President Trump's interest in retaliatory tariffs and reluctance to financially benefit the EU could present an opportunity for signing an ETS into law.<sup>28,29</sup> Additionally, the Brookings Institution found that a domestic carbon price would significantly reduce emissions regardless of how revenue is used, making it an option for negotiation.<sup>30</sup>

Upon enactment, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of the Treasury would regulate emissions allowance distribution and compliance mechanisms. A supply and demand-based carbon market would be developed and overseen by the EPA to determine allowance prices. The system would initially target high-emission sectors such as power or industry, identified through the measuring framework, before expanding through reforms similar to the EU ETS. The EPA would track progress and measure success against 2005 baseline emissions levels, with the system designed to evolve into a CBAM over time as it proves successful.

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# EDUCATION POLICY

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# Overhauling FAFSA's IRS Data Retrieval Tool to Increase Federal Student Aid Efficiency

By Danielle Berkowitz, [db755@cornell.edu](mailto:db755@cornell.edu)

*Following the rollout of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Simplification Act, students nationwide faced delays that disrupted opportunities for higher education. To improve efficiency, the Education Department (ED) should enhance the new Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Data Retrieval Tool (DRT) by adding income verification and status checks to FAFSA.*

## Background

Each year, millions of undergraduates nationwide fill out the FAFSA to help pay for higher education. This application collects information to determine eligibility for federal aid, including loans, work-study, and grants such as Pell Grants.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, Congress passed the FAFSA Simplification Act, streamlining the application form. As part of this new process, the ED is now required to use data from the IRS, if applicable, to calculate an undergraduate's Student Aid Index (SAI), which determines eligibility for need-based financial aid.<sup>2</sup> Prior to this act, tax forms were required to be uploaded by students as proof of income for FAFSA; under the new approach, time and hassle are ideally saved by reducing the likelihood that an applicant's FAFSA is selected for verification. Previously, when FAFSA applications were flagged for verification, students had to submit additional documentation, such as tax forms from the IRS, which contributed to delays in processing.<sup>3</sup>

Although the revamped application was designed to increase efficiency, students and families nationwide reported numerous technical difficulties and delays after its release.<sup>4</sup> These obstacles resulted in a 40 percent

decrease in submitted applications for the 2024-2025 academic year. The ED received only about 27 percent of the class of 2024's FAFSA applications, compared to 45.5 percent for the class of 2023.<sup>5</sup> In addition to technical difficulties, delays occurred due to issues with the IRS Data Retrieval Tool (DRT). Applicants must consent to having their IRS data transferred through the DRT without the ability to modify or verify the retrieved information, making it difficult to correct FAFSA errors. As a result, students and families must submit revisions individually to each college.<sup>6</sup> Depending on how many schools a student applies to, this process can be extremely time-consuming.

This revamp has devastated students nationwide, significantly delaying their ability to commit to colleges, and thus limiting their options to pursue higher education due to financial barriers.<sup>7</sup>

## Policy Idea

The ED should modify the revamped FAFSA by revising aspects of the FAFSA Simplification Act, specifically the IRS DRT. Adding a verification step that allows applicants to review data received from the IRS before submission will help prevent delays caused by discrepancies in reported

income. Because technical issues are inevitable in an online retrieval system, this safeguard would reduce errors while upholding security and data integrity. Furthermore, the ED should develop an integrated online FAFSA portal where applicants can track their submitted corrections, confirm when their FAFSA has been received by each school they are applying to, and identify any outstanding requirements from individual colleges. Centralizing this information in one place would improve transparency, minimize processing delays, and help ensure that FAFSA-related issues do not interfere with college commitment deadlines.<sup>8</sup>

## Policy Analysis

Improving transparency and minimizing FAFSA processing delays is imperative to ensuring students can get the most out of their financial aid opportunities, without facing unnecessary barriers to higher education. Without modifying the IRS DRT for efficiency, financial constraints will continue to limit higher education opportunities for all Americans.

The IRS already has an online tool allowing all taxpayers to view and verify tax return transcripts before submitting their financial aid or loan applications. The tool allows individuals to 1)

view, print, or download their transcripts, 2) find out how much they owe, 3) look at their payment history, 4) see prior year's adjusted gross income (AGI), and 5) view other tax records (7).<sup>9</sup> Given that this option already exists, integrating a similar model into FAFSA's IRS DRT should be easy and cost-effective, allowing students and families to verify their information before submitting it to colleges.

Beyond the IRS transcript tool, other application platforms, such as the New York Higher Education Services Corporation's (HESC) system, can serve as models for improving FAFSA transparency and tracking.<sup>10</sup> HESC's system provides real-time updates on the status of financial aid applications and outstanding requirements, ensuring greater clarity. Similarly, the Common Application used for college applications features a submission tracker that provides students with updates on their application status, confirmations, missing materials, and deadlines.<sup>11</sup> Given the success of these platforms, developers could easily create and implement a comparable system for FAFSA by reworking existing models.

### Highlights

- The current Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process, including the Data Retrieval Tool (DRT), has led to significant delays and barriers for students in accessing financial aid and committing to college.<sup>4</sup>
- Technical issues and the inability to verify or correct Internal Revenue Service (IRS) data contribute to FAFSA processing delays,

limiting students' higher education opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

- The Department of Education should improve the IRS DRT by allowing applicants to verify their tax data before submission, thereby reducing discrepancies and delays.
- By streamlining the FAFSA process and adding an online portal to track applications, the federal government can help ensure students receive timely financial aid and limit barriers to college enrollment.

### Implementation

There is currently substantial bipartisan support for modifying FAFSA, demonstrated by ongoing Congressional backing for the FAFSA Simplification Act.<sup>13</sup> This indicates that implementing further improvements is feasible. With Congress's strong commitment to expanding financial aid accessibility, these proposed changes should receive similar support, as they are in line with the act's original goals.

ED should implement a phased approach to the new FAFSA rollout to prevent system crashes and delays that occurred during the initial FAFSA Simplification Act release.

Prior to nationwide implementation, the first phase of the plan would include initial testing of the updated FAFSA system to ensure the new verification step and status portal allow students to effectively revise IRS information from the DRT, while addressing security concerns. Following this, select institutions that serve a high number of Pell

Grant-eligible students would conduct a pilot program. Testing the updated IRS DRT in a controlled setting will evaluate its effectiveness in reducing processing delays and ensure that no technological or operational issues arise. Students, families, and financial aid administrators will provide feedback to identify necessary refinements before the final launch, guaranteeing all applicants benefit from increased transparency and efficiency. Finally, full nationwide implementation would occur after thorough testing and refinements.

Under the Higher Education Act (HEA), the HEA currently allocates funding for the administration of federal financial aid programs.<sup>12</sup> ED could allocate part of this funding to support the proposed system updates, including the testing, development, and expansion of FAFSA. This policy should also include financial support for training financial aid administrators and developing resources to assist students through the updated FAFSA data retrieval process.

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# Enforcing a Comprehensive Native American Curriculum in NYC Schools

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*To address the erasure of Native American culture and history, New York City should develop and implement a comprehensive Indigenous curriculum that will ensure accurate education and cultural visibility.*

## Background

New York City is located on the former homeland of the Lenape people, who were violently displaced due to settler colonialism over the course of 400 years.<sup>1</sup> Today, New York City has a Native American population of over 180,000 people that continues to grow.<sup>2</sup> Despite their long and painful history, the Lenape people remain connected to contemporary New York City. As a vital part of the New York City community, Indigenous education in the city's curriculum requires major reform.<sup>3</sup>

Native American history and modern-day life remain deeply underrepresented in educational curricula. Over 85 percent of US curricula do not mention Native American history after the year 1900.<sup>4</sup> In over 25 states, there is no mention of Native Americans in the K-12 curriculum.<sup>4</sup> While New York includes Native American history in its state standards, it does not mandate it across all grades or provide specific criteria to ensure it is taught accurately.<sup>5</sup>

Three out of four Americans admit knowing little to nothing about Native Americans.<sup>6</sup> Because Native American curriculum is often solely focused on Columbus-era colonialism, many Americans are unaware that Native Americans still exist as distinct communities with political sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> This lack of education fails to inform

students of how Indigenous communities were exterminated from their own land. States that have allocated funding for Native American education, have allocated less than \$100,000, failing to make a significant investment for our future generation. Moreover, the current form of Indigenous curriculum is insufficient in educating students on the contemporary life of Indigenous communities, as it limits their visibility and agency in our society.

## Policy Idea

To correctly educate our students on Indigenous and Native American communities, New York City should mandate a specific and detailed curriculum aimed at accuracy and telling complete history. Indigenous organizations and educators should help design this curriculum, which should be adequately funded and assessed for effectiveness through measurable outcomes. The Office of Indigenous Education will oversee the curriculum and ensure effective implementation. To establish a proper administration of curriculum, the Office of Indigenous Education will receive a yearly report from each NYC school. The curriculum should aim to include 1) Tribal history, 2) Contemporary Native life, 3) Treaties between our governments and Native American communities,

4) Impacts of colonization, and 5) Indigenous languages.

## Policy Analysis

While New York City has not mandated this policy, several schools have successfully implemented Indigenous courses in their curriculum. The Salamanca City Central School District has also put together a comprehensive Native American curriculum. Their curriculum is organized into two main concepts: culture and history. The culture component covers areas such as language, creation, ceremony, daily life, belief systems, and more. The history component explores topics like government, treaties, revitalization and activism, and other key historical themes.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Beacon High School, in Manhattan, offers an *Indigenous Voices* course for 12th graders. The course focuses on the current-day vibrant cultures, languages, and traditions of the over 500 Native nations in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Schools should not only offer this type of course, but they should require it. Since some NYC schools have already successfully implemented courses and curricula that accurately depict Native American history and contemporary life, incorporating them into broader NYC curricula is not only necessary but practical.

An analysis of TV shows, films, and books reveals that Native

Americans are often portrayed through unfair stereotypes and misconceptions, depicting them as poor or supernatural. This creates a harmful image of Native communities built on inaccuracies.<sup>10</sup> Given that the current representations of Native communities are fundamentally flawed, it is crucial to implement a sufficient curriculum.

Integrating Native American histories, cultures, and contemporary issues into school curricula is essential to shaping educated, empathetic, and socially conscious students during their most formative educational years. There are numerous benefits to a multicultural education.<sup>11</sup> Research shows that learning about other cultures not only increases their level of cultural empathy and ability to understand different cultural experiences, it also increases their connections to their own culture.<sup>12</sup> In these early stages of learning, children develop opinions and perspectives that can last a lifetime. By teaching a comprehensive curriculum, students will develop greater compassion and awareness, as well as an in-depth understanding about a vital aspect of our country.

Furthermore, for Native American students, the benefits of learning about their own culture in an educational setting are particularly significant. Many tribal families report that they have experienced forms of prejudice at school.<sup>13</sup> This education will help foster a positive identity, strengthen connections to their heritage, and instill a sense of pride and resilience, which is often missing in their childhood education.<sup>13</sup> Overall, significant funding and improvement to the Native American curriculum will promote

equity, cultural competence, and social justice.

### Highlights

- New York City, built on the lands of the displaced Lenape people, has a growing Native American population of over 180,000.<sup>2</sup>
- New York City should implement a comprehensive Indigenous education curriculum, developed collaboratively by teachers, administrators, and members of Indigenous communities in New York City. This curriculum should include tribal history, contemporary Native life, treaties, impacts of colonization, Indigenous languages, and more.
- New York City should use existing courses of Native American education, as well as the models of smaller school districts, like the Salamanca City School District, as a guide to designing the City's curriculum.<sup>8</sup>
- Investment in Indigenous curriculums are essential for equity, cultural competence, and social justice, as well as for providing a well-rounded education about the people who were violently displaced from their land.

### Implementation

To successfully implement a mandated policy of Native American curricula in schools, the New York City Department of Education needs to develop a comprehensive and culturally accurate curriculum, provide professional development and training for teachers, establish

partnerships with Native organizations, allocate adequate funding and resources, and monitor implementation.

There are several stakeholders who would work to develop a curriculum. The City and State Department of Education would form and oversee a New York City Indigenous Studies Committee (NYCISC). The committee would consist of a selection of teachers, administrators, and members from the Lenape Center, who have already worked with Rachel Talbert from Columbia University to develop a free Indigenous K-12 curriculum that they say serves as a "starting place" for students to learn more.<sup>14</sup> The Salamanca City Central School District has also put together a comprehensive Native American curriculum that NYC can use as a guideline for implementation.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Salamanca City Central School District is much smaller than New York City and has a student body that is 33 percent American Indian or Alaska Native, it can serve as a valuable model for implementing a mandated program in a larger district where only 1.2 percent of the student body identifies as American Indian or Alaska Native.<sup>15</sup> Through having a diverse and knowledgeable committee, along with mentorship from a school district that has put significant resources into Native American curricula, New York City can develop a comprehensive and culturally appropriate curriculum for its students.

A key issue to address is an adequate training and professional development program for teachers. Prior to the implementation of this program, selected teachers would go through an annual training

program, funded by the city, and partnered with multiple teachers colleges. During these training sessions, teachers will gain the knowledge needed to successfully carry out their grade-level curriculum for their students.

While this policy may be costly, NYC has a history of investing in important educational initiatives. Based on cost estimates for NYC elementary school new reading programs, training alone will be over \$30 million in the first year.<sup>16</sup> However, politicians have championed mandatory programs before. In 2021, Mayor De Blasio endorsed a \$600+ million initiative to jumpstart educational comeback after the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, an investment in Native education would support the gap in knowledge among NYC students. New York City publicly acknowledges that the Lenape people were violently displaced due to colonialism over hundreds of years but remain closely connected with NYC. However, to put those words into action, it is only right that the city invest in an education that will further connect the Lenape people to the land, acknowledge the genocide, and rightly teach NYC's students about the people who are indigenous to our land.

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# Giving Students a Say: Enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds in New Jersey School Board Elections

By Claudia Negin, [can89@cornell.edu](mailto:can89@cornell.edu)

*Given the disproportionate impact of school board policy decisions on students and low voter turnout rate in school board elections, New Jersey should allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local school board elections, making district policy more responsive to constituents.*

## Background

The United States' representative democracy is founded on the principle that government derives its legitimacy from the consent of its constituents. While the disenfranchisement of minors appears to contradict this ideal, to some extent this restriction is justified: young children lack the maturity and knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about complex political issues. Additionally, these minors will eventually gain the right to vote, enabling them to shape the system under which they live.

However, this rationale falters when applied to school board elections. By the time students become eligible to vote, they have largely exited the school system, meaning that district policies are never truly a product of representative democracy. Despite students having the greatest firsthand experience with and the most stake in school policies, the present electoral system excludes them from participation.

Furthermore, while restrictions on minors voting are generally justified based on perceived inability to make consequential decisions, research published by the American Psychological Association indicates that by 16, individuals reach adult levels of cognitive capacity,

facilitating deliberative decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

Even among enfranchised district members, voter turnout for school board elections is persistently low despite their enormous influence over issues critical to student life, including LGBTQ+ rights, racial equity, and curriculum content.<sup>2</sup> Turnout typically ranges from just 5 to 10 percent nationwide; worse, in 2024, just 2.8 percent of Newark, New Jersey's registered voters cast a ballot in their annual school board elections.<sup>3,4</sup>

## Policy Idea

The New Jersey State Legislature should pass Bill A4369, enabling 16- and 17-year-old residents of the state, assuming they are US citizens and have lived in the school district for at least 30 days prior to the election, to take part in voting for local school board elections to increase student representation and bolster overall civic engagement.<sup>5</sup> To accomplish this, the legislature would create a voter registration form and process that targets minor voters, develop a process of identification of registered minor voters, and facilitate the design of paper ballots to be used by 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school board elections.

## Policy Analysis

Passing Bill A4369 would strengthen civic engagement by both increasing the number of voters in local school board elections and instilling in the nation's youth the importance of civic engagement. In an effort to mitigate chronically low turnout, which hinders accurate representation, and ensure young voices are heard, the City Council of Newark, New Jersey passed a unanimous ordinance in January 2024 enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds beginning in April 2025.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds in Newark, about 7,000 new voters entered the voting pool, a significant enough population to have a meaningful effect on elections. If this initiative were to be extended to the rest of the state, about 200,000 individuals would gain voting rights.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, Governor Phil Murphy of New Jersey has touted lowering the voting age as a means of encouraging youth to become lifelong voters.<sup>8</sup> Research substantiates this assertion — countries that lower the voting age to 16 benefit from increased voter turnout, both in the short-term overall and regarding individual life-long turnout.<sup>9</sup> In fact, evidence from Tahoma Park, Maryland, indicates that once permitted to vote, 16- and 17-year-olds show up to the polls at a rate over double

that of those 18 and over; among registered minors, the turnout rate was about four times the rate of registered adults.<sup>10</sup> These new voters are generally attending school and living at home with their parents, who are more likely to vote themselves, groups likely to instill the importance of civic engagement. As voting is a deeply habit-based practice, introducing electoral access at an age at which individuals are more likely to take advantage of it may help youth develop long-standing practices of participation.<sup>9</sup>

Opponents of enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds often argue that doing so will degrade voting quality. However, evidence stands against this — a study of Austria, which introduced a voting age of 16 in 2007, concluded that there is no evidence that 16- and 17-year-olds have less political knowledge or make poorer quality electoral decisions than those of adult voters.<sup>9</sup>

### Highlights

- Despite school board election's persistently low turnout, students, who are most impacted by school board policies, are currently restricted from casting a ballot in board elections.<sup>1,3</sup>
- The state of New Jersey should pass Bill A4369, enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds in school board elections to make elections more representative and foster broader civic participation.<sup>5</sup>
- Research indicates that 16- and 17-year-olds are cognitively capable of voting in elections, and would likely turn out to do

so in relatively large numbers.<sup>9,10</sup> Additionally, facilitating civic engagement for younger individuals would promote the establishment of long-lasting voting habits.<sup>10</sup>

- Strong existing Democratic support for Bill A4369 suggests that the policy could pass. If so, the state should implement the policy effectively by looking to Newark, New Jersey as a model, and increasing civic education in schools.<sup>9,12</sup>

### Implementation

The recent enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds in school board elections in Newark, NJ, is likely to encourage a similar shift in greater New Jersey. The state should look to its most populated city for guidance regarding implementation, adjusting according to the program's successes and shortcomings, including effective strategies for garnering youth involvement and voter registration issues.<sup>11,13</sup>

The Secretary of State's office spent one million dollars on adjusting the voter registration system to enable youth voting, an investment that would not need to be repeated upon expansion of youth voting rights to the rest of the state, effectively laying the groundwork for seamlessly doing so. The methods for identifying registered youth voters and designing their voting ballots would closely resemble those used for adult voters, allowing efficient implementation.<sup>5</sup>

There is strong support for Bill A4369 among New Jersey politicians, including Senator Cory Booker, who declared that the city

of Newark was leading the way in empowering youth to influence their education and communities.<sup>14</sup> In passing Bill A4369, New Jersey would be the first state to enfranchise 16- and 17-year-olds.<sup>12</sup> As trailblazers, the state may face criticism for being too radical, particularly from New Jersey Republicans who perceive it to be a means of expanding the Democratic voting base. However, the state's Congressional Democratic majority means that such opposition should not prevent the bill from passing. Additionally, while the state has no comparatively scaled model for implementation, Bill A4369 is purely regulatory and requires no new infrastructure, enabling the shift to be prompt and inexpensive and bolstering Congressional approval. These elements of efficiency also enable the bill's implementation to occur in the election immediately following its passing.

Once enacted, New Jersey school districts would advertise the change to their student body. The state should fund an assembly educating students on the importance of civic engagement, the backgrounds and policy stances of school board candidates, and the logistics of voting; many studies demonstrate that the availability of civic education and political activities in schools improve the political knowledge and participation of 16- and 17-year olds.<sup>9</sup> This convergence of expanded enfranchisement and strengthened civic education would foster a lasting tradition of informed youth voting, energizing and legitimizing New Jersey school boards as democratic institutions.

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# Bridging the Gap: Federal Support for Rural Education

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*The Federal Government should approve a grant that provides states with funding for K-12 schools to aid rural districts in providing their students with transportation and school counselors.*

## Background

Across the US, schools in rural districts lack the appropriate resources to operate effectively. Although several American schools face underfunding issues, rural schools in low-income districts particularly lack adequate funds to afford essential student services.<sup>1</sup>

The influx of federal funds from the 2021 American Rescue Plan (ARP) was crucial in providing schools the money they needed to not just bounce back from the pandemic, as intended by the policy, but to provide students with basic necessities.<sup>2</sup> With funding from the ARP expiring in September 2024, schools will experience a shortage in federal aid that has become imperative to student well-being.

Rural populations across the US are aging, leading to declining K-12 enrollment, which reduces state funding while fixed costs remain.<sup>3,4</sup> Without alternative schools nearby, rural schools must stay open with fewer students and less funding, often cutting essential services.<sup>4</sup>

Two examples of funding needs for rural communities include school counselors and transportation. In rural areas, youths experience extreme depression at higher rates and commit suicide at double the rate of urban youths.<sup>5,6</sup> However, for every 310 rural students, rural schools only have

one school counselor, which is less than the ratio of 295:1 in urban and suburban areas and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommended figure of 250:1.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, in rural communities, students are more dispersed and lack accessible public transit alternatives to automobiles or school buses, leaving the brunt of transportation costs on schools' shoulders.<sup>8</sup>

Currently, federal funds are distributed according to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Title I, Part A which uses four formulas that are based on poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state.<sup>9</sup> While this framework provides essential support to many underserved schools, it does not adequately account for the unique challenges faced by struggling rural districts.

## Policy Idea

Congress should pass a bill allotting grant money through US Department of Education programs to rural schools across the US. To provide grant money specifically to struggling rural schools, the bill should add another formula that allots aid to struggling rural schools while still operating within the ESSA frameworks. As a result, states should receive aid proportionately to the amount of impoverished rural districts they possess. This aid would come in

addition to the federal grant money already distributed to schools based on the ESSA, ensuring urban and suburban schools in need of funding do not lose any money. This grant would provide impoverished rural schools with the additional funding necessary to account for striking transportation and mental health needs.

## Policy Analysis

This policy will save taxpayers money in the long term. By increasing rural funding, access to school counselors would increase, which reduces untreated mental health issues, thereby saving on juvenile justice system involvement and healthcare costs down the line.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, additional funding will increase access to transportation, reducing absenteeism, which is linked to higher dropout rates.<sup>11,12</sup> When students graduate, they contribute significantly more in taxes over their lifetimes and are less reliant on public assistance, meaning even modest improvements in graduation rates yield positive returns.<sup>13</sup>

This policy would be administratively feasible as it leverages the existing framework of the ESSA instead of building a new funding system. Metrics including income, student-to-counselor ratios, and transportation costs are already collected, making it easy to quantify which schools are most in need.<sup>14</sup>

The EPA's Clean School Bus Program has set aside over \$5 billion dollars for new zero-emissions school buses over the next five years.<sup>15</sup> The proposed policy should partner with the EPA so rural schools with old decrepit buses can utilize EPA funds to get new zero-emissions buses.<sup>16</sup> This approach would help maximize effectiveness while minimizing fiscal pressures in the short-term. Lastly, this policy is feasible as the ARP showed that schools can quickly and effectively use federal investment to support student well-being and services.<sup>2</sup>

### Highlights

- Rural schools lack essential services such as counselors and transportation due to chronic underfunding and the expiration of American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds.<sup>1,2</sup>
- The federal government should pass a law expanding federal funding through existing Department of Education (DOE) formulas to impoverished rural school districts.
- The proposed policy builds on existing Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) infrastructure by adding a rural specific funding formula to allocate targeted grants without reducing funds for urban or suburban schools.<sup>7</sup>
- The policy is administratively feasible as it utilizes existing bureaucratic frameworks and data. Additionally, it should lead to increased graduation rates which have the potential to save taxpayers future money in

justice system involvement, healthcare costs, and other forms of public assistance.<sup>10,12,14</sup>

### Implementation

The first step in implementing this policy is gaining congressional support. This bill has the potential to gain unique bipartisan support as Republicans typically represent more rural districts that benefit from the proposal, while Democrats are typically in favor of increasing federal investments on education.<sup>18,19</sup> Lawmakers from rural districts across the aisle should sponsor the bill to ensure it gains traction and support in their respective chambers. Lawmakers should introduce the bill in both the Senate's Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions and the House's Committee on Education & the Workforce. Independent Senator Bernie Sanders, who caucuses with Democrats, would be a great sponsor in the Senate as he is the ranking minority member of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions and is from Vermont, the most rural state in the US.<sup>20,21</sup> Republican Congressman James Comer would be an ideal sponsor in the House as he is on the Committee on Education & the Workforce and represents Kentucky, one of the ten most rural states in the country.<sup>22,20</sup> Having a Republican and Democrat sponsor versions of the bill in each chamber helps garner bipartisan support and makes this bill's passage feasible.

Potential hurdles to enacting the policy include pushback from politicians that do not want to increase federal spending on K-12 education and the struggle of

balancing the need for rural funding without a reduction in urban and suburban school resources. However, lawmakers can address these by forming bipartisan support. Although most Republican lawmakers do not want to increase federal education spending, most typically represent rural districts. This means they would likely support the policy as it directly benefits their district, meaning it could boost their popularity and chances of reelection. Similarly, Democrats representing urban districts might be concerned about passing legislation that does not aid their constituents. However, once they are assured that urban school districts would not lose any resources and this policy would help low-income students, they would be more inclined to offer their support. In 2020, U.S. Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Maggie Hassan (D-NH) worked together to reverse a Department of Education decision to limit funding for rural schools, demonstrating a history of bipartisan support on rural education.<sup>23</sup>

The bill would direct the US Department of Education to create a new funding formula that assists low-income rural schools and to prioritize districts with low-income families, difficult transportation costs, and low school counselor-to-student ratios. With the Trump administration currently threatening Department of Education funding, it is important to note that Trump's recent executive orders do not affect formula funding for schools as they are protected by law.<sup>24</sup> This program would work alongside Title I ESSA, which provides low-income schools federal funding, to ensure this aid supplements existing

funding without reducing support for urban or suburban schools.<sup>25,17</sup>

Providing targeted federal grants to rural schools for transportation and mental health is vital in ensuring that all students, regardless of where they live, have the proper resources to succeed and thrive in educational environments.

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# Addressing Food Insecurity Amongst College Students

By Samara Schiffman, [srs397@cornell.edu](mailto:srs397@cornell.edu)

*Congress must pass the Closing the College Hunger Gap Act to help the millions of college students across America who are currently experiencing food insecurity.*

## Background

Approximately 13.5 percent of the US, or 47.4 million Americans, struggle with food insecurity, leaving them without reliable access to affordable and nutritious food.<sup>1</sup> Of the nearly 50 million Americans experiencing food insecurity, about 3.8 million are college students, with 23 percent of undergraduate and 12 percent of graduate students nationally unsure of where their next meal will come from.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Students who experience food insecurity are 42 percent less likely to graduate than their peers and more likely to experience adverse mental and physical health outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Although students from every demographic experience food insecurity, those who come from marginalized communities struggle at much higher rates.<sup>3</sup> According to the National Institute of Health, Black, first-generation college students were 296 percent more likely to experience food insecurity compared to their white counterparts.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, the federal government addresses food insecurity primarily through the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which is delivered through an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card.<sup>4</sup> Every month, individuals receive benefits on an EBT card, which

functions like a debit card to purchase groceries and necessities at approved retailers.<sup>4</sup> However, many food insecure college students face barriers to accessing SNAP/EBT. Since the 1980s, SNAP's requirements deliberately work to exclude college students. In 1980, Congress declared full-time students ineligible for SNAP unless they were working a minimum of 20 hours per week or qualified for other possible exemptions. These changes caused 80 percent of students in the program to lose their benefits.<sup>2</sup> Of those who qualify for SNAP/EBT, almost 60 percent did not receive benefits.<sup>5</sup> Many college students are unaware of the food assistance programs and their eligibility for such help, making an increase in awareness and education crucial to effectively lowering food insecurity.<sup>5</sup>

## Policy Idea

Congress should pass the Closing the College Hunger Gap Act, which directs the US Secretary of Education to notify SNAP-eligible college students based on information provided by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form.<sup>6,7</sup> To receive tuition assistance from the federal government, students complete a FAFSA form which asks about family income, assets, and other relevant financial details.<sup>6,7</sup> From this information, the government is

then able to properly assess whether a student qualifies for federal student aid and, if so, how much aid should be offered.<sup>6,7</sup> This act allows the Secretary of Education to use information provided by FAFSA to identify students who qualify for food assistance.<sup>6,7</sup> By requiring the federal government, which already has adequate financial information to make SNAP/EBT determinations, to inform eligible students, this act removes the burden of research and education from already struggling students.

## Policy Analysis

Although some allowances are made for full-time students to be eligible for SNAP, the rules are intentionally confusing, leading many students to falsely believe that they do not qualify for benefits. The Closing the College Hunger Gap Act would require that the Department of Education notifies students of their eligibility for SNAP, which would address the significant information gaps that prevent students from receiving benefits.<sup>9,10</sup> According to research conducted by Temple University's Hope Center, over a quarter of students struggling with basic needs insecurity had never heard of SNAP, an issue which this policy remedies by mandating the Department of Education to inform eligible students about the program.<sup>5</sup> In a survey inquiring as

to why students experiencing basic needs insecurity did not apply for SNAP, over 70 percent responded that they did not think they were eligible, about 50 percent said they did not know how to apply, and approximately 16 percent struggled to complete the application.<sup>5,9</sup>

This policy would eliminate the uncertainty which prevents struggling students from applying for needed benefits by providing them with clear determination of their eligibility. Ensuring all students eligible for SNAP receive necessary food assistance is imperative in bettering the health and success of low-income and marginalized students. Greater access to nutritious food through SNAP leads to improved academic performance and standard of living for the undergraduate and graduate students who receive benefits.<sup>3</sup>

### Highlights

- Nationally, 23 percent of undergraduate and 12 percent of graduate students experience food and basic-need insecurity, which programs such as SNAP can remedy.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2020, 3.3 million college students were eligible for SNAP benefits, but only approximately 1.32 million received support through SNAP.<sup>2</sup>
- Approximately 60 percent of college students who were eligible to receive SNAP benefits did not receive benefits.<sup>2</sup>
- Nearly 50 percent of students surveyed by the Hope Center reported that they were unaware of SNAP benefits, despite being eligible.<sup>5</sup>

### Implementation

The Closing the College Hunger Gap Act was introduced in the House of Representatives on January 28th, 2025, by Democratic Representative Jahana Hayes (CT-5).<sup>6,7</sup> The bill has twenty-five cosponsors and was referred to the House Committee on Education and Workforce.<sup>6</sup> By increasing publicity and national awareness of student food insecurity, this bill can easily grow bipartisan, grassroots support. Since the bill does not require an increase in government spending, it is likely to be more popular than traditional welfare legislation. Additionally, college students currently compose about seven percent of the total American population, meaning legislators will gain support from a sizable voting block in championing this bill.<sup>11</sup>

The greatest challenge the Closing the College Hunger Gap Act faces is the current administration's goal of abolishing the Department of Education. Should the Department of Education be shut down, FAFSA would likely be transferred to the Treasury Department, rendering this legislation powerless.<sup>6</sup> Without the continued existence of the Department of Education, the Department of Education will be unable to notify students about their SNAP eligibility as per the requirements of this bill. With the future of the Department of Education uncertain, the future of this bill remains similarly precarious. Due to the current uncertainty surrounding the future of the Department of Education, the language within the Closing the College Hunger Gap Act should be amended so that the language is more general. The language currently specifies actions which

should be taken by the Secretary of Education and the Department of Education. By changing the language so that it instead addresses the management of FAFSA, this bill would maintain its influence independent of the status of the Department of Education.

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# Dollar-to-dollar Tax Credit for Companies

## Assisting with Employee School Loan Debt

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*The Trump administration's current efforts to dismantle the Department of Education (ED) suggest potential shifts in federal student loans. To stay ahead of loan restructuring, companies should offer employees student loan assistance in exchange for a tax credit.*

### Background

As of January 2025, the United States accumulated up to \$1.77 trillion in total student loan debt.<sup>1</sup> In the past few weeks, the current administration has limited or even closed opportunities for income-driven repayment plans and public service loan forgiveness.<sup>2</sup> Given the current federal interest rate reaching a decade-high at 6.53% and the Trump administration's limitations on loans, Congress should implement alternatives to student loans.

In 2020, Congress passed the Employer Participation in Repayment Act to combat the student debt crisis by allowing employers to assist employees with loans in exchange for annual tax-free benefits. Nowadays, Americans are turning to their employers for support in repaying student loan debts.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 45% of workers consider student loan assistance one of the most important factors when evaluating employee benefits.<sup>3</sup>

Despite widespread support for the Employer Participation in Repayment Act, the law was temporarily included under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act). Due to this, the Employer Participation in Repayment Act is set to expire in 2026<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, the yearly limitation of \$5,250 for

employer contributions to student loan debt creates unnecessary limitations that undermine the policy's effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> The need for student loan repayment options extends beyond financial concerns. Studies report that one in ten borrowers experience or have experienced anxiety over their loans, showing the toll student loan debt takes on the mental and physical health of borrowers.<sup>5</sup> With 43.6 million Americans facing the burden and uncertainty of federal student loans, it is clear that change is needed now.<sup>6</sup>

### Policy Idea

The temporary nature of the Employer Participation in Repayment Act makes it imperative that a standalone law for employee student debt assistance through employers be implemented before the complete overhaul of the ED. This new policy will rework the Employer Participation in Repayment Act model to ensure companies are educated on the benefits of repaying their employees' student loans and alter the tax benefits. The three key changes to the current act will switch to a dollar-for-dollar tax credit instead of a tax deduction, develop advocacy for the program due to its voluntary nature, and set no dollar cap for how much employers can contribute towards

their employees' student loans. The dollar-for-dollar tax credit allows companies to directly subtract every dollar amount that is contributed to employees' student loans from the company's government taxes.

### Policy Analysis

Since participation in the law is voluntary, it is important to incentivize companies of all sizes to take advantage of this act. Through a dollar-for-dollar tax credit, employers reap the benefits of their investment immediately due to company tax reduction being equal to the money contributed to their employees' student loans. This allows for smaller companies to participate in the act since they are limited to taxable income instead of the actual taxes owed. A dollar-for-dollar tax credit prompts companies to participate, compared to the former model of a tax deduction, due to higher savings given the full value of the credit being recuperated rather than savings being tax bracket dependent.<sup>7</sup> The shift from a \$5,250 cap under the CARES Act to a no-dollar cap system reduces complexity, bolsters employee retention, serves as a stronger recruitment tool for companies, and creates more financial relief for employees burdened by student loan debt. Therefore, the company and employees are better off, which

motivates companies to opt into the model.

Furthermore, the permanent nature of this policy can incentivize companies to participate and alleviate any hesitancy caused by the temporary nature of the Employer Participation in Repayment Act. Financial concerns from employees have a ripple effect of reducing productivity, job satisfaction, and overall morale.<sup>8</sup> Reports reveal 35% of employees have trouble focusing at work due to stress about personal finances. Additionally, 86% of employees admit they would commit to a company for five years in exchange for assistance with student loans.<sup>8</sup> The mutually beneficial nature of this policy is clear: through alleviating the financial burden and stress of millions of Americans, companies will prosper due to increased retention rates, finances, and employee productivity.

### Highlights

- Total student loan debt is at an all-time high, and recent changes to the Department of Education under the new administration have created uncertainty around the future of federal student loans.<sup>1</sup>
- The Employer Participation in Repayment Act works to reduce student loan debt by allowing employers to pay up to \$5,250 annually towards their employees' student loans.<sup>4</sup>
- However, the Employer Participation in Repayment Act is set to expire in 2026, calling for the reworking of the policy into a standalone law.<sup>4</sup>

- Key changes to the Employer Participation in Repayment Act should include switching to a dollar-to-dollar tax credit benefit for companies willing to pay for their employees and any amount of financial assistance in exchange for employee commitment to the company.<sup>7</sup>

### Implementation

Given the millions of Americans affected by student loan debt and the bipartisan support of the Employer Participation in Repayment Act, it is likely that the remodeling of the provision will be met with support and turned into a standalone law. Repackaging key provisions of the Employer Participation in Repayment Act into the new bill is necessary for a successful standalone law. Under the CARES Act, Congress was able to achieve bipartisan support. Building off the momentum and mobilizing support from key stakeholders, particularly business and industry groups, is crucial to ensuring the existing bill is amended to remove an expiration date. Engaging the original bill sponsors and getting them to co-sponsor the new bill is necessary to garner effective support. Within the House, the target committees are the House Ways and Means Committee and the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.<sup>9</sup> Since the Senate Small Business and Entrepreneurship Committee worked on CARES, the committee is the target for the new bill. The key to ensuring the implementation of this policy, given the current polarization, is by having congressional supporters,

such as Rep. Scott Peters (D-CA) and Rep. Nicole Malliotakis (R-NY), who are on opposite sides of the aisle. Additionally, Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA) and Sen. John Thune (R-SD) are two Senators whose collaborative effort can help incentivize their individual parties to address student debt through employer assistance programs. Since companies are choosing to implement the bill, it is imperative that the IRS establish clear guidelines to ensure effective administration and prevent abuse. The policy will stipulate that detailed record-keeping is required to prevent misclassification and abuse of the policy. The records should include payroll documentation, invoices, and proof of contributions. Furthermore, the company should receive information on the tax forms needed and how different credit programs work alongside the dollar-to-dollar tax credit. The policy should have penalties for fraud, including disqualification from dollar-for-dollar tax credits if misuse persists. Due to the logistical nuances, business networks can utilize information sessions to educate employers on the procedure of opting into the dollar-to-dollar tax credit. Implementing proper education on how the policy works will prevent abuse and popularize the policy, leading to more companies choosing to assist their employees with student loan debt.

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# Establishing a National Framework for Integrating Artificial Intelligence into K-12 and Higher Education

By Ria Sodhi, [rs928@cornell.edu](mailto:rs928@cornell.edu)

*To support instructors, streamline administrative procedures, and promote individualized learning, the US Department of Education ought to create a national framework for incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) into K-12 and higher education systems.*

## Background

Artificial intelligence (AI) instructors like Khan Academy's provide personalized feedback, while adaptive platforms like DreamBox modify lectures based on student success.<sup>1</sup> AI chatbots, like Georgia State's "Pounce," help with administrative questions, while automated grading platforms, like Gradescope, save teachers time.<sup>2</sup> Academic integrity is maintained via plagiarism detection programs like Turnitin, and predictive analytics can be used to identify students who are at risk for early intervention. These developments maximize instructional efficiency, enhance instruction, and personalize learning. Reflecting this growing impact, a 2023 Pew Research survey found that 65 percent of teachers believe AI will significantly influence teaching methods over the next five years.<sup>3</sup>

While some schools use AI to streamline administrative and grading processes, others use AI to power tutoring programs. Inefficiencies, moral dilemmas, and lost chances to improve learning outcomes arise from the absence of a national framework.<sup>4</sup> Finland, for example, has already put in place national AI education plans that prioritize teacher preparation and digital literacy.<sup>5</sup> The US needs to

proactively resolve issues of bias, data privacy, and ethical AI use while guaranteeing fair access to AI-enhanced education. The creation of a national AI framework will guarantee that educators and students have the skills they need to function in an AI-driven environment and will offer guidelines for the responsible integration of AI.

## Policy Idea

The U.S. Department of Education should implement a national AI integration framework focused on two components: developing a standardized AI literacy curriculum and investing in teacher training. Inspired by Finland's model, AI literacy standards would be introduced in middle and high school curricula and cover foundational concepts such as machine learning, algorithmic bias, and responsible use.<sup>6</sup> Federally funded teacher training programs, estimated at \$1,500 per educator, would equip instructors with the technical knowledge and pedagogical tools to teach AI effectively.<sup>7</sup> Gradescope and other administrative AI solutions will lessen workloads so teachers can concentrate on teaching. Gradescope and other administrative AI tools will reduce

workloads so teachers can focus on instruction. To ensure continued competency, the system includes certification tracking and periodic reassessment. By emphasizing curriculum development and teacher preparedness, this policy bridges the digital divide, promotes ethical AI use, and prepares students of all backgrounds for an AI-driven world. A national investment in these pillars—supported by public-private partnerships—would establish equitable, sustainable AI integration in education.<sup>8</sup>

## Policy Analysis

Focusing on standardized AI curriculum development and teacher training is a strategic and research-backed approach to addressing educational gaps in AI preparedness. Studies show that students benefit most from technology instruction when teachers are equipped with both subject knowledge and pedagogical tools to effectively translate complex concepts into classroom learning. A 2022 report from the Brookings Institution found that teachers with structured, ongoing professional development in digital literacy were significantly more effective in integrating technology into instruction and improving

student engagement and outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, incorporating AI literacy into curriculum has demonstrated success in international models. Finland's national AI education initiative, which includes AI as part of secondary education and mandates teacher training, has led to measurable increases in student understanding of algorithmic processes and ethical implications of AI use.<sup>10</sup> Evaluations of similar pilot programs in the U.S., such as MIT's AI + Ethics curriculum, show that students exposed to AI instruction develop stronger critical thinking and digital literacy skills than peers without such exposure.<sup>11</sup>

Investing in teacher training also creates multiplier effects: teachers trained in AI not only deliver the material more effectively but also adapt it for diverse classrooms, ensuring long-term scalability and equity.<sup>12</sup> This targeted investment in educators and curriculum will allow schools to build sustainable infrastructure for AI education, supporting both ethical integration and student readiness for the workforce of the future.

## Highlights

- Gaps in teacher preparedness, quality, and access stem from the lack of a cohesive national plan for AI in education. Standardizing AI literacy, encouraging moral AI use, and bridging the digital divide between affluent and underprivileged populations are necessary.<sup>5</sup>
- AI solutions such as DreamBox and Khanmigo provide individualized, real-time training that can

enhance student engagement and academic performance.<sup>7</sup>

- With federal and state financing for certification-based programs, teacher training modeled on Finland's AI curriculum would equip educators to incorporate AI in a responsible and effective manner.<sup>6</sup>
- AI tools would be utilized fairly and openly if ethical measures were in place, such as bias checks and data privacy requirements.<sup>11</sup>
- A \$500 million federal investment, supported by public-private partnerships, would fund the initiative and ensure broad access, innovation, and long-term impact.<sup>8</sup>

## Implementation

Implementing a national AI integration framework successfully calls for a methodical, well-defined strategy. The first step is to create a standardized, grade-level-specific AI curriculum for K–12 and higher education that emphasizes real-world applications, data protection, and ethical use.<sup>10</sup> Federal and state lawmakers should compel schools to embrace the curriculum to guarantee broad acceptance, and advocates should build bipartisan support by highlighting its advantages for the economy, labor market, and national security.<sup>8</sup> To show value and encourage cross-party support, pilot initiatives should be started in districts with a variety of political viewpoints.<sup>9</sup> To determine which districts to pilot, the joint task force should prioritize geographic, socioeconomic, and political diversity by selecting a representative sample of urban,

suburban, and rural districts across red, blue, and swing states. To advance this proposal through Congress, a bipartisan coalition of lawmakers should sponsor the initiative, supported by policy briefs and cost-benefit analyses that highlight AI education as a national economic and security imperative, helping to secure the necessary funding and legislative support.

Oversight would ideally fall to a joint task force composed of representatives from the U.S. Department of Education, state education boards, and a consortium of AI education experts. This group will coordinate funding, implementation, and evaluation efforts to maintain consistency and accountability across states. Continuous evaluation will guarantee accountability and aid in program improvement.<sup>12</sup> A key component of this rollout is teacher training. The federal government and the states should set aside at least \$1,500 for each instructor's classroom coaching, seminars, and certification programs.<sup>11</sup> Proper training ensures that educators teach AI effectively and equitably. Realistic and purposeful funding is required. Federal workforce and education grants, as well as public-private collaborations with digital companies, should provide the projected \$500 million. These businesses can help augment governmental resources, particularly in light of budgetary constraints, and have a clear interest in promoting a workforce prepared for the future.<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, a nationwide public outreach program is required to involve families, educators, and local stakeholders.<sup>12</sup> Long-term sustainability and local buy-in can be achieved by showcasing

community impact, providing student mentorships, and sharing success stories. With a clear implementation process that includes mandates, monitoring, training, funding, and outreach, this strategy provides a workable way to give every kid the fundamental AI literacy abilities they will need in the future.<sup>12</sup>

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# School Choice Without Sacrifice: Balancing School-Choice Options in Pennsylvania To Strengthen Public Education

By Rohith Tsundupalli, [rt535@cornell.edu](mailto:rt535@cornell.edu)

*To address underfunded public schools, the Pennsylvania State Legislature should cap existing voucher and charter school funding at 10 percent of state education funds, ensuring a baseline for public schools and automatically reducing allocations if funding falls below this threshold.*

## Background

School choice is popular among Americans, with 58 percent of adults across the US supporting taxpayer-funded K-12 vouchers in 2019.<sup>1</sup> Support for vouchers is predominantly driven by small-scale data showing that participants in voucher programs are more likely to graduate from high school and attend four-year colleges.<sup>2,3</sup> School choice programs also separate a family's housing location from their access to quality education, aiming to expand educational opportunities.<sup>3</sup> Currently, these programs primarily serve low-income students.<sup>4</sup> However, as school choice grows, concerns about its financial impact on public education have escalated. These programs often divert public funds from traditional public schools, where the majority of students are enrolled.<sup>5,6</sup>

In Pennsylvania, the expansion of private school voucher programs threatens further strain on public school funding and resources. The state currently allocates approximately \$470 million in taxpayer funds to two private school voucher programs: the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) and the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit (OSTC). Since 2001, these programs have

received around \$2.6 billion in total funding.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, reallocating state education funds toward private school options can lead to cuts in public school resources, including textbooks, technology, extracurricular programs, and staff positions.<sup>8</sup>

Private schools that benefit from these vouchers are not subject to the same accountability standards as public schools, driving a debate over school choice that has persisted since the late 20th century.<sup>9</sup> Without the standardized testing oversight and performance evaluations required in public schools, voucher-funded private schools may fail to meet the needs of all students.<sup>7</sup> This lack of accountability can result in unequal educational opportunities, where private schools may prioritize certain demographics over others, leading to a system of educational inequality that undermines public education's goal of providing access for every child.<sup>7</sup>

## Policy Idea

To address the financial strain on public schools caused by increased private school voucher programs, the Pennsylvania State Legislature should cap the percentage of public education funds allocated to vouchers and

charter schools at no more than 10 percent of total state education funding while guaranteeing a baseline level of funding for public schools. If public school funding falls below this threshold, the state will automatically reduce and adjust voucher and charter school allocations accordingly. By establishing a funding cap, the Pennsylvania State Legislature can alleviate the financial burden on public schools, mitigating overcrowded classrooms and resource and staff shortages.

## Policy Analysis

School vouchers remain a contentious issue, with supporters citing possible benefits and critics emphasizing their financial toll on public education. A 2016 National Center for Education Statistics study found that 77 percent of private school parents were "very satisfied" with their child's school, compared to 60 percent of public school parents and 54 percent of assigned public school parents.<sup>3</sup> Despite parental support for private schools, four Brookings Institution research studies carried out in Washington D.C., Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio found that voucher programs negatively impact student test scores, particularly in math, with one study

also reporting lower reading scores.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, there is little evidence that current voucher programs improve test scores, graduation rates, or college enrollment, and insufficient data on how instructional differences between private and public schools may impact academic performance.<sup>10</sup> Research from New York University also found that Indiana's voucher program alone cost state public schools \$115 million in 2014-2015.<sup>11</sup> While vouchers increase educational options, their mixed academic results and financial strain on public schools raise concerns about their long-term effectiveness.

Capping school vouchers at 10 percent preserves school choice for low-income families while ensuring that public schools remain adequately funded. Other states have implemented similar policies. In Wisconsin, per-pupil funding increases for public and voucher schools are linked, with enrollment caps rising by 1 percent annually until reaching 10 percent.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Arkansas' Education Freedom Account enforces a 3 percent participation cap for 2024-2025, placing additional applicants on a waiting list.<sup>13</sup> This proposal strikes a balance between these approaches. Furthermore, Colorado's HB-24 1148 includes automatic adjustments to direct funding towards at-risk, special education, and rural students.<sup>14</sup> Overall, a balanced voucher cap preserves school choice while protecting Pennsylvania public school funding and resources for students who need them most.

### Highlights

- While school choice programs aim to expand

access to quality education, particularly for low-income students, Pennsylvania's \$470 million in taxpayer-funded voucher programs have redirected funds away from public schools.<sup>3,4,7</sup>

- The Pennsylvania State Legislature should cap voucher and charter school funding at 10 percent of total state education funds, while guaranteeing a baseline of support for public schools to prevent underfunding and resource loss.
- Though voucher programs enjoy some public support, multiple studies show they produce little academic benefit and can harm student performance, while placing major financial strain on public school systems.<sup>10,11</sup>
- Similar policies in Wisconsin, Arkansas, and Colorado show that funding caps can preserve school choice while protecting public schools, offering a balanced, proven model that Pennsylvania can adopt.<sup>12,13,14</sup>

### Implementation

The Pennsylvania State Legislature should draft and pass a bill requiring a 10 percent cap on total state education funds while guaranteeing baseline funding for public schools. State Senator Katie Muth should sponsor this bill and work closely with committee members to ensure it addresses both school choice and public school protection.<sup>15</sup> Senator Muth's strong record of supporting educational equity and commitment to improving the public education

system make her a proponent of this initiative.<sup>16</sup> The committee should determine baseline funding using factors like enrollment, special education programs, and local cost of living, reflecting each district's needs. Once introduced, the bill would garner bipartisan support, particularly given rising concerns over the financial health of public schools in Pennsylvania and growing recognition of the need to balance school choice with public school sustainability.<sup>17</sup>

To gain support for the bill, education experts and fiscal analysts could testify to the Pennsylvania State Legislature about the benefits of balancing school choice with public school funding. Dr. Robert Bifulco, a professor at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship & Public Affairs, has researched the financial and social implications of school vouchers and charter schools on public education, analyzing how these programs may affect the distribution of resources.<sup>18,19</sup> Dr. Bifulco should recommend that the Pennsylvania legislature implement a funding cap to balance school choice with the financial stability of public schools.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, organizations like the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA) and the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), which have consistently opposed school voucher programs, would likely support the funding cap. They could provide expert testimony and data displaying how these programs have contributed to resource shortages and disparities in public school funding.<sup>21,22</sup> The bill will likely receive strong support from Pennsylvania Democrats. However, its success will largely depend on

gaining the backing of moderate Republicans who understand the need to preserve the robust public school system while still offering families educational autonomy.<sup>23,24</sup>

Once the policy passes the Pennsylvania State Legislature, schools will need a transition period to adjust to the new funding structure. This time will allow districts to implement the cap on voucher and charter school funding while ensuring public schools receive the guaranteed baseline funding.

In the first few years following the implementation of this policy, officials from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, along with legislative committees and local school administrators, will closely track and assess its effectiveness to identify any necessary adjustments. Qualitative feedback methods like interviews with key stakeholders, such as school administrators, teachers, and parents, will provide insights into how the policy is affecting school operations and resources. Furthermore, quantitative metrics on student enrollment in public and private schools, academic achievement, and resource allocation will provide concrete evidence to evaluate the policy's success. This data will also provide lawmakers with a clearer picture of the policy's impact and guide any future revisions or expansions. With careful planning and review, this policy can deliver a more balanced, sustainable education system across Pennsylvania.

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# ENVIRONMENTAL & TECHNOLOGY POLICY

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# Establishing Energetic Independence in the Dutch Caribbean by Repurposing the Isla Refinery

By Noah Duguma, [ndd32@cornell.edu](mailto:ndd32@cornell.edu)

*With the Isla Refinery being closed for well over five years, it is time for the government of Curaçao to secure energy independence through the construction of a new solar farm.*

## Background

The Isla Refinery occupies a coveted position in the geographical heart of Curaçao. The ground that the Isla Refinery stands on was broken in 1915, underwent a construction period of three years, with the refinery starting operations in 1918.<sup>2</sup> The Refinery was built by the Dutch Shell oil company to process the plentiful crude oil flowing out of Venezuela's fecund Orinoco Belt. For over a century, the Refinery has been a stable employer for thousands of people on the Dutch Caribbean island.<sup>2</sup> However, the Refinery has simultaneously been an egregious public health hazard, leaking environmental pollutants onto the island's fragile ecosystem and threatening the health of Curaçao's most vulnerable residents.<sup>3</sup> The now shuttered Refinery now occupies a tenuous space within Curaçao's societal zeitgeist, with the island's residents recognizing both its environmental harms and its simultaneous economic prowess.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, in 2019 the Isla Refinery closed, which had numerous ripple effects within Curaçao's economy and population dynamics. Skilled workers and their families left the island, and as a result, Curaçao's population contracted. The closure of the Isla Refinery closed a polarizing century of fossil fuel processing, leaving

behind polluted land and a traumatized population.

## Policy Idea

The Government of Curaçao should reprise the 4.61 km<sup>2</sup> plot of land occupied by the Isla Refinery into a solar farm. Utilizing calculations ascertained from Google Earth, and withholding about 0.20 km<sup>2</sup> for administrative buildings and infrastructural outittings and another 0.01 km<sup>2</sup> to preserve the historic Jewish Beit Hayim cemetery, the Isla Refinery compound has the potential to support the installation of 2.7 million standard size solar panels, which results in a potential generation of around 3,153 gigawatts/hour. The construction of the solar farm on the Isla Refinery compound should be accompanied by a strengthening of Curaçao's energy grid for increased electrification and increased battery storage capacity.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

## Policy Analysis

The Caribbean island nation of Curaçao is one of the sunniest in the world, receiving over 3,000 hours of sunshine every year on average.<sup>7</sup> In fact, given the potential generation of 3,153 gigawatts/hour, Curaçao would only need to use about 27% of the Isla Refinery's area in order to completely fulfill its energy demand.<sup>5</sup> Curaçao could even completely fulfill the energy

needs of its two island neighbors (Aruba and Bonaire) while only utilizing around 61% of the total area of the Refinery.<sup>5</sup> Such an arrangement would be mutually beneficial to the land use needs of the three islands, as Aruba has a very high population density and therefore does not have the available land to dedicate to renewable energy development. Meanwhile, to Curaçao's left-hand side, Bonaire is well known as a crucial conservation site, with one-third of the island being dedicated as a national park.<sup>8</sup> Within these three islands, Curaçao is unique in that it has a pointedly large area of otherwise unusable land that is readily available for renewable energy development. Bonaire and Aruba would surely be willing to accept renewable energy from Curaçao as these islands could direct their precious land resources to more pertinent uses.

There are significant cost barriers associated with a solar farm of such gigantic scale. The solar panels alone would cost \$850 million in installation, and labor costs would easily increase the total cost burden of this project to well over a billion dollars. However, in spite of these cost and labor barriers, Curaçao stands to profit massively from the environmental, economic, and energetic benefits of this project in the long run.

## Highlights

- The Isla Refinery was a large source of pollution for Curaçao, and now is an economic liability for the island.<sup>1</sup>
- The land that the Isla Refinery stands on has significant potential to be converted into a 2.7 million-panel solar installation.<sup>4,5,6</sup>
- If constructed, this solar farm has the potential to produce thousands of gigawatt hours of energy, wholly fulfilling Curaçao's (and neighboring islands') energy needs, and provide hundreds of highly skilled green jobs.

## Implementation

This policy proposal comes at a very opportune time for Curaçao, as the EU recently proposed to make 100 billion euros available for clean technologies.<sup>9</sup> The EU has recently been quite gregarious in its willingness to invest in green energy, as evidenced by its passage of the European Green Deal.<sup>10</sup> Despite being in the Caribbean, Curaçao is a part of the greater European Union area due to its colonial connection to the Netherlands. Therefore, if the EU approved the funding proposal, it would provide ample financial support for Curaçao to make this project a reality. However, if the EU does not pass the funding for clean energy (which is quite unlikely), the solar project would face significant financial setbacks as the Curaçaoan government does not have the money for a project of such a formidable scale. The Curaçaoan government could try to finance the solar project by raising funds from private investors,

emphasizing Curaçao's solar reliability, which translates into stark economic potential for the solar project. Ultimately, potential EU funding is not the only source that Curaçao could solicit.

Curaçao needs labor diversification, as it is too reliant on tourism (especially after the closure of the Isla Refinery). Therefore, despite potential funding setbacks in the event of no EU funding, there is still substantial political will for a renewable energy project as it would create and attract hundreds, if not thousands, of skilled jobs in Curaçao.

Assuming that the EU can fund this project, the Curaçaoan Ministry of Health, Environment, and Nature would need to start with an environmental review of the land area, as there is most certainly sedimented chemical pollution from decades of oil production. After the review is completed, the Curaçaoan government must complete the remediation and deconstruction of the Isla Refinery Site, leaving the land bare and safe for construction. To commence with construction, the Curaçaoan government should recruit oil workers who worked for the Isla refinery, as studies show that 90 percent of oil and gas workers have transferable skills that lend themselves to the renewable energy industry.<sup>11</sup>

Curaçao's energy grid is not equipped to handle such large loads of electricity from the solar farm. Therefore, grid modernization is a necessary component of the policy proposal that the Curaçaoan government would need to undergo. Grid modernization would include installing new electrical wiring, establishing charging stations throughout the island for an increasing electric car population,

and installing requisite battery capacity in the event of intermittency. Even though repurposing the Isla Refinery into a solar farm might be a long and cumbersome process, Curaçao is in dire need of a revitalized energy grid and a new economic future. Repurposing the Isla Refinery is a requisite key for Curaçao to realize its green future.

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# Regulatory Legal Clinics: Empowering Startups with Compliance Support

By Kashyap Rajesh, [kr583@cornell.edu](mailto:kr583@cornell.edu)

*In order to reduce costly regulatory missteps that threaten the sustainability of startups, this policy establishes a network of federally funded Regulatory Legal Clinics (RLCs). These RLCs will offer tailored and accessible compliance assistance that will empower startups to responsibly innovate while complying with legal requirements.*

## Background

Startups often operate in a gray area of regulation, especially in fast-moving industries like Artificial Intelligence (AI), financial technology (fintech), and biotechnology (biotech). Early-stage companies lack the legal resources of large companies, yet they attempt to navigate the same, complex regulatory landscape. A 2024 survey found that 51% of small business owners view regulatory compliance costs as a barrier to growth, and 47% of small business owners believe they spend too much time fulfilling regulatory requirements in the early stages of their company.<sup>1</sup> Without clear guidance, early-stage startups unknowingly violate laws and industry norms, risking costly fines, lawsuits, or even startup shutdowns.<sup>2</sup> These violations pose serious barriers and limitations to the innovation and progress that these startups could otherwise bring to society if they had access to the appropriate legal counsel.

In 2023, a smaller AI health startup, Cerebral Health, halted operations after unknowingly breaching Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations on patient data.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, several fintech startups have faced Federal Trade Commission (FTC) crackdowns

over unclear consumer protection compliance laws.<sup>4</sup> The absence of accessible, structured compliance resources leaves many entrepreneurs navigating complex regulatory frameworks alone, leading to costly missteps or stifled innovation.

The fragmented nature of regulations only exacerbates the issue. In fact, research indicates that European Union's (EU) General Data Privacy Regulation (GDPR) compliance standards reduced profits by 8%, heavily stifling growth.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, in the EU, the Startup Nations Standard provides a unified regulatory framework for scaling companies, which helps mildly alleviate the fragmented regulatory climate that the GDPR contributes to. However, in the US, startup founders must wade through a messy patchwork of federal, state, and local-level policies, which at times conflict, often without the necessary legal expertise.<sup>6</sup> This results in unintentional noncompliance or excessive caution that slows U.S. innovation.

## Policy Idea

To address those challenges, this policy launches the Regulatory Legal Clinics for Startups (RLCs) initiative with an initial \$100M investment to fund its services. This would serve as a network of

federally funded legal clinics sourced from top-tier universities, business accelerators, and SBA hubs. They would provide eligible startups with discounted regulatory assistance, at the discount set at 20% of their annual revenue, based on the following criteria.

If a startup generates \$300,000+ in annual revenue, a startup is currently housed within major accelerators and incubators (e.g., Y Combinator, Techstars, NSF I-Corps, etc), or a startup has raised \$1 million+ in venture funding, they are required to engage with RLCs. Additionally, pre-revenue startups and early-stage companies that don't qualify for one of those three criteria above can still access those legal services at a reduced cost (subsidized up to 10%) but are not mandated to participate.

## Policy Analysis

Startups in the US are disproportionately being burdened by a fragmented and complex regulatory landscape, often lacking the in-house legal teams and services that many larger companies generally rely on. The RLCs initiative addresses this problem by standardizing the process of navigating these legal frameworks.<sup>7</sup>

There is a strong precedent for this kind of proactive intervention. Existing models like

the UK's Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) Regulatory Sandbox have helped over 92% of participating startups navigate compliance successfully and achieve successful authorization.<sup>8</sup> According to the Startup Nations Standards Report 2024, there has been a 61% implementation rate of these startup-friendly policies throughout Europe, indicating significant progress in creating favorable conditions for entrepreneurs to safely innovate.<sup>9</sup> Both these programs showcase that enacting a structured and centralized regulatory framework can drive both startup sustainability and investor confidence.<sup>10</sup>

Implementing the RLC initiative in the US won't be without costs, though. Clinics and legal counsel will require funding for wages and operational infrastructure. However, the economic benefit is incredibly evident. A recent study found that organizations face an average cost of \$14.8 million, with potential maximum costs nearing \$40 million in fines, litigation, and lost investments due to non-compliance with laws.<sup>11</sup> The issue here is that small businesses bear a disproportionately high burden when it comes to regulatory compliance costs compared to larger corporations. For instance, small manufacturers incur compliance costs averaging \$50,100 per employee annually, whereas large manufacturers face costs of \$24,800 per employee.<sup>12</sup> A preventative approach like RLCs could significantly reduce this burden, benefiting both startups and regulatory agencies in the long run. This policy would have a very strong return on investment. By embedding compliance support

early, startups are less likely to face legal action and instead can freely innovate and generate greater revenue. By reducing regulatory bottlenecks, startups can operate in a more innovation-friendly environment that stimulates and grows local economies, while simultaneously developing small businesses.

### Highlights

- Startups in America are drowning in red tape and complicated, unclear laws. These vague regulations often hamstring innovation, creating a growing need for legal support for these startups.
- The network of university-backed Regulatory Legal Clinics (RLCs) will offer valuable legal guidance and support by ensuring compliance with laws and legal standards. Participation in the RLCs is mandatory for startups above certain funding or revenue thresholds.
- By integrating compliance into the startup lifecycle early on, these resources will help reduce costly missteps and drive responsible innovation before violations occur.
- The RLC network will be funded by federal grants, corporate support, partnerships with startup incubators, and eventual startup reinvestment, ensuring long-term financial viability.

### Implementation

To pass the policy, this bill should be introduced into Congress

through the House or Senate's Small Business committees. Securing bipartisan support will require demonstrating the economic benefits of this policy. To do so, a bipartisan coalition of endorsements is essential to framing the bill as a "startup survival" bill rather than a "regulation-heavy bill to appease both parties. For example, according to NorthRow's 2023 State of Compliance Trends Report, 25% of business revenue is spent on compliance costs, and 18% of businesses spend over 50% of their revenue on compliance.<sup>13</sup> Hence, through the RLC program, at minimum, even if 10-20% of their compliance costs were offset, that could potentially translate into tens or even hundreds of thousands of saved revenue, which could create and protect many more jobs. Arguments like this could land well with conservatives who believe that excessive regulation can hamstring innovation.

Once the bill is passed, partnering agencies like the Small Business Administration (SBA) and the Department of Commerce (DOC) would help direct and execute its implementation. These agencies would fund the \$1 million investment with matching funds from private accelerators and corporate partnerships (e.g., Google for Startups, AWS Activate, Techstars Foundation, etc.), as well as donations from graduated startups.

The first step would be a 10-city pilot program stationed near strong startup areas with access to premier law schools. The SBA would issue grants, review discount requests, and coordinate the review process to selected clinics while a steering committee of legal experts and startup leaders collaboratively

develops compliance toolkits and services for their startup clients. Clinics would then open up in these pilot locations within the first year, offering their services to those who are eligible based on the aforementioned criteria. Following the clinic's initial launch, each qualifying startup will be assigned a dedicated regulatory attorney (either a licensed lawyer or supervised law student from a university clinic). These RLCs would provide tailored compliance packages, including pre-vetted regulatory filings and policies, quarterly risk assessments to ensure ongoing compliance as startups scale, and litigation assistance. Any non-compliant startups that meet the revenue thresholds but fail to participate will face fines, which will fund the RLC's operations. Mandatory participation is important because early regulatory missteps can lead to significant financial and operational consequences that harm individual startups and create systemic risks in the startup ecosystem.

One possible risk is that a one-size-fits-all approach to legal startups may leave startups in highly regulated or incredibly niche fields underserved, leading to ineffective compliance advice. To mitigate the issue, the legal support clinics should create individualized, tiered service models for different industries.

To determine if these efforts are successful, the policy will measure success by evaluating startup compliance rates (pre versus post-RLC), reduction in regulatory penalties, startup survival rates, as well as founder satisfaction rates via consultation surveys. If, at any point, the SBA or DOC determines that the changes are not substantive,

the RLC program will undergo a reevaluation. Through the evaluation metrics it can be ensured that this policy builds a community-rooted support system, powered by SBA grants, law school clinics, and industry partners, to help startups stay compliant, save money, and scale responsibly from day one.

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# Preserving New York's Farmland for the Next Generation

By Harrison Sachs, [hls89@cornell.edu](mailto:hls89@cornell.edu)

*As the average farmer in New York is nearing retirement age, millions of acres of agricultural land will be changing hands. The NY legislature should establish a policy to make this land more accessible to new and diverse farmers.*

## Background

According to the American Farmland Trust, farmers over 65 manage more than two million acres of farmland in New York, much of which is expected to change hands in the coming years.<sup>1</sup> There are over 33,000 farms across the state.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 23% of the State's total land area is in agricultural use and in some counties in the Finger Lakes, Western New York and Southern Tier, farmland comprises more than 40 percent of total land area.<sup>2</sup> Developers threaten permanently destroying New York farmland; an average of three farms a week have been destroyed for over 30 years.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the negative impacts on the food system, this devastates New York's ecosystems. Studies have shown that cropland emits 58-70 times fewer greenhouse gases per acre than developed land.<sup>3</sup> Farmland provides ecosystem services such as clean drinking water, carbon sequestration, and wildlife habitat.<sup>3,4</sup> Farms can protect land from damages such as flooding and wildfires, and can also support biodiversity and soil fertility.<sup>3</sup> New York is committed to New to support the national goal of conserving 30% of United States lands and waters by 2030. 30x30 source.<sup>5</sup> For this goal to be more attainable, legislators should further address policies that support farmland preservation.

As individuals retire and leave their farms without a succession plan, there is a new generation that would like to enter farming but faces a significant barrier. Establishing a farm requires a significant investment of capital, land, and time. In addition, agriculture has marginalized several communities. 98% of farmers in the state are white.<sup>6</sup> 51% of US farm operations had at least one woman operator in 2019, but women were the "principal operator" on only 14% of operations.<sup>7</sup> Minority farmers face increased barriers to accessing land and starting a career in agriculture (Legal Defense Fund).<sup>8</sup> Between 1920 and 1997, Black farmers lost approximately 90% of their land, with ownership decreasing from 15 million acres in 1910 to 2.4 million acres by 1997.<sup>9</sup>

## Policy Idea

The New York legislature should establish a bill to minimize farmland loss and grow the next generation of farmers in New York State. Incentivize retiring farmers to transition their land to beginning farmers through tax credits and land easements. Retiring farmers would receive a 50% reduction on their capital gains tax, which would encourage them to sell to beginning farmers and avoid sales to developers. NY Department of Agriculture and Markets should

administer the program and leverage funding through The NYS General Fund (via Department of Taxation and Finance). The first step should be to establish a pilot program in regions at high risk of development to demonstrate the policy's effectiveness and to examine potential weaknesses. To ensure land permanently remains conserved, the policy should require that land receive permanent easements. The policy would hold economic and environmental benefits, in addition to preserving farmland.

## Policy Analysis

The policy will slow the rate of land development, while developing a new agricultural workforce. A pilot program will ensure feasibility and test how effectively the policy preserves farmland. Although the threat for this land to become developed would increase, this policy would act as a strong mitigator. In addition, this policy targets to grow New York State's economy. Agriculture generates \$8 billion in the state annually.<sup>10</sup> In addition, NY agricultural sectors are responsible for nearly 200,000 jobs.<sup>10</sup> Land development risks destroying the state's strong agricultural sector. Once developed, it is nearly impossible to recover and bring back these lands to their prior state,

and it is very costly.<sup>3</sup> A loss of farms in New York, would imply risking a significant sector of New York's GDP, making this program critical.

A similar tax credit policy for beginning farmers in Minnesota has successfully supported over 600 land owners and around 400 beginning farmers from its implementation in 2018 to 2022.<sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup> A survey conducted by Indiana University indicated that nearly 60% of asset owners leased or sold to beginning farmers because of the tax credit.<sup>12</sup> The policy has been well perceived by legislators causing a credit increase from 5% to between 8% to 12%, expanding eligibility to family members and socially disadvantaged farmers.<sup>12</sup> This policy could expect similar positive outcomes, as New York faces severe threats of farmland development.

### Highlights

- The average age of a farmer in New York is 57 years old and about 20% of farmers in the state are younger than 35.<sup>10</sup>
- New York State is at risk of losing 452,000 acres of farmland to development by 2040.<sup>1</sup>
- A 50% reduction in capital gains tax when being sold to beginning farmers could help preserve farmland and prevent it from being developed.
- This policy would reduce barriers to entry for beginning and marginalized farmers through a decreased capital gains tax for landowners sellings to beginning farmers

### Implementation

Due to the large amount of land that will change hands over the next decade, this policy should aim to reach at least 25% of all agricultural land sales within 10 years of implementation to ensure enough young farmers are acquiring land as many retire. The tax incentive will lead to an increase in younger and more diverse farmers; farmers selling will want to reduce taxes paid through the land sale and will therefore try to sell to beginning farmers. On a semiannual basis, NY Ag and Markets should observe and compare the amount of land preserved to the amount of farmland at risk of development in targeted regions. NY Ag and Markets will continue to measure the increase in the number of agricultural-related jobs and any increase in farm income across the state, and should test that to the implications of the policy. Local farms have a strong contribution to the state's GDP, as NY farms generate \$3.3 billion annually.<sup>10</sup>

A key legislator is State Senator Michelle Hinchey.<sup>13</sup> She is the chair of the State Senate Committee on Agriculture and has sponsored several policies related to agricultural land use, such as S1056-A, which enables tax credits for start-ups and small farms.<sup>14, 15</sup> She can raise awareness of the bill amongst other state legislators and lead the bill to be a main priority of the agriculture committee. The American Farmland Trust would likely be a main player in lobbying for this bill. They have campaigned to protect farmland and to support the next generation of farmers and have several staff in New York State.<sup>15</sup> They could use their national resources to promote the bill, contact legislators, and get

farmers to give testimonies. Organizations such as the American Farmland Trust could also play an important role in campaigning and informing farmers about the benefits of this policy post-implementation to ensure farmers are utilizing the tax benefits.<sup>16</sup> New York FarmNet is an already established organization that helps farmers with succession planning. FarmNet employees can share information on the tax benefits and eligibility through their consultations and hotline. The program information, eligibility forms, and tax benefit applications will be housed on the NY Department of Agriculture and Markets Website, but organizations such as NY Farm Bureau, American Farmland Trust, and NY FarmNet can also serve as resource hubs to share information.

The NY Department of Agriculture and Markets should allocate a few staff to manage and monitor the program. The staff should also collaborate with the American Farmland Trust. If the targets above are met, the department could hire more staff members targeted to this program.

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# Giving a Dedicated Source of Funding to NJ Transit

By Connor Weiss, [cjw273@cornell.edu](mailto:cjw273@cornell.edu)

*New Jersey (NJ) Transit is facing significant fiscal problems due to a lack of dedicated funding. The NJ Legislature should pass a state constitutional amendment that codifies the existing Corporate Business Tax and mandates that the funds go towards NJ Transit.*

## Background

New Jersey Transit serves 270 million passenger trips each year, including the Jersey Shore, Philadelphia, and New York City, and is America's third-largest provider of rail, light rail, and bus transportation.<sup>1</sup> While this service provides a range of economic and environmental benefits, like eliminating 150 million vehicle trips each year, NJ leadership has historically neglected the service, especially under former Governor Chris Christie.<sup>2,3</sup> NJ Transit currently has no dedicated funding source, and with ridership of public transit during the COVID-19 pandemic falling 82% nationwide, NJ Transit has relied on pandemic-era policies, which pumped \$4.5 billion into the service to maintain operations.<sup>3,4</sup>

The transit service is projected to face a \$1 billion fiscal gap in 2026.<sup>5</sup> To combat this gap, the NJ Transit board passed a 15% fare increase in 2024 along with a 3% annual increase beginning in July 2025.<sup>6</sup> Yet, this price increase makes minimal changes in the fiscal cliff, and disproportionately affects low income NJ residents.<sup>3</sup> If services cease, it could be catastrophic for congestion and economic opportunity in NJ communities.<sup>4</sup>

In NJ, collected revenue in the General Fund cannot be

dedicated to a specific purpose unless mandated by a state constitutional amendment, which allows the governor to move funds independently of the legislature.<sup>7</sup> In 2024, the NJ Legislature passed a budget that included a 2.5% tax on businesses that pay NJ's Corporation Business Tax (CBT) and have taxable net incomes over \$10 million.<sup>8</sup> While this is promising, the funds have not all gone to NJ Transit, instead contributing to NJ's budget surplus.<sup>7</sup> Policy changes other than just rate hikes, which harm low-income families the most, are urgently needed to secure upgrades so that residents can have a reliable and affordable public transportation service.

## Policy Idea

To ensure that NJ Transit is funded for the future without any future governor interfering or changing the tax, the NJ Legislature should pass a constitutional amendment codifying the existing CBT and mandating that it solely goes towards funding NJ Transit. This CBT's rate would remain 2.5%, and would only affect companies that have a taxable net income over \$10 million, and would not include federal government entities, public utilities, or foreign embassies. The NJ Treasury Division of Taxation would

administer the tax, but the funds would be held separately from other CBTs and be given to NJ Transit within a month of collection. The net income calculated should only be for business conducted in New Jersey.

## Policy Analysis

There are many different ways in which states and foreign countries fund their public transportation system, ranging from sales taxes to payroll taxes. Due to the first Trump Administration's Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, the federal corporate income tax is at 21%—the lowest the tax has been since 1939.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, currently US corporate profits and assets are close to an all-time high, while wages are close to the lowest amount ever when measured as a share of GDP.<sup>10</sup> Corporations very clearly have the extra cash necessary to contribute to the system that transports many of their employees to the workplace. In this bill, there are important exclusions to extensions of the state government, and foreign governments and their consulates.

To understand the effectiveness of this tax in funding public transportation, one could look to New York State, which collected \$2.8 billion in 2023 through its Metropolitan Commuter Transportation Mobility Tax

(MCTMT) and contributed to the Metropolitan Transit Authority's overall operating budget of \$19.9 billion.<sup>11</sup> To reach these funding goals, the MCTMT collects a mobility payroll tax on corporations within the Metropolitan Commuter Transportation District encompassing much of New York City and the surrounding area. Abroad, France levies a similar mobility tax, which collected €8.5 billion (\$9.615 billion) in 2017 and covered 47% of the French transit system's investment and operating costs.<sup>12</sup> These case studies demonstrate the potential for these policies to raise funds while providing a dedicated funding source to public transit. Although it would not cover all of the costs in either example, it would provide a significant portion of operating costs and, therefore, create a more stable financial model and allow NJ Transit to upgrade existing infrastructure.

### Highlights

- The New Jersey (NJ) Legislature should pass a Constitutional amendment to dedicate the 2.5% Corporate Business Tax to fund the historically underfunded New Jersey Transit system.<sup>3</sup>
- Funds in NJ that are not constitutionally dedicated can be moved around by the Governor, which has led to Governor Phil Murphy moving funds from the Corporate Business Tax (CBT) from NJ Transit to the budget surplus, showing the necessity of a constitutional dedication.<sup>7</sup>
- NJ Transit is important to the state's economy,

providing a source of congestion relief, while serving nearly 270 million passengers per year.<sup>1,2</sup> Yet, the service is facing a fiscal cliff of \$100 million in 2025, and \$1 billion in 2026.<sup>5</sup>

- This type of legislation has succeeded in New York State and France, where their mobility tax levied on businesses has contributed a significant portion of the operating budget of their public transit system.<sup>11</sup>

### Implementation

When proposing an amendment to the State Constitution, there are two pathways. A three-fifths supermajority in both legislative bodies or a simple majority in both legislative bodies in two concurrent legislative sessions.<sup>13</sup> If the amendment passes the state legislature in either way, the amendment will be placed on the next election ballot for voters to decide. If the amendment is passed by a simple majority, the State Constitution is amended.<sup>13</sup> Currently, Democrats hold 25 out of 40 seats in the Senate and 52 out of 80 seats in the General Assembly, providing enough votes to pass the amendment on partisan lines.<sup>13</sup> NJ Democrats have historically supported funding NJ Transit through increases in the CBT, passing the original budget in 2024.<sup>8</sup>

The first step to build support for the bill would be to assemble a coalition of NGOs, trade associations, and policy actors. Some relevant organizations include the Regional Planning Association, NJ Sierra Club Chapter, Transport

Workers Union of America Local 2001, State Senator Bob Smith, and State Senate President Nick Scutari. Senate President Scutari would be a crucial supporter due to his ability to rally support within the Democratic caucus.<sup>13,14,15,16</sup> Senator Smith, who chairs the Environment and Energy Committee and is frequently involved in raising support for environmental bills, would also be a valuable supporter.<sup>17</sup> It would be necessary to mobilize both grassroots and existing political capital as the bill must be approved in the next election if passed by the Legislature.

This bill is unlikely to see bipartisan support. A similar bill narrowly passed along partisan lines while losing nine Democratic votes in the General Assembly and three Senate abstentions during the 2024 budget process.<sup>18,19</sup> Strong opposition has already formed, and an attempt to codify the funding would likely see even further opposition from Republicans and trade associations, like the NJ Business and Industry Association (NJBIA) and the NJ Chamber of Commerce. The NJBIA criticized the bill for further burdening NJ's largest job providers, all while NJ has the largest corporate tax of any state at 11.5%.<sup>20,21</sup> Proponents of the bill would argue that in the current political climate, where federal dollars have the possibility of being eliminated due to unilateral moves by the Trump Administration and possible austerity from Congress, it is important for states to have robust state funding for transportation.

Ideally, the amendment would be passed urgently by the NJ Legislature so that the amendment could be placed on the ballot in the

2025 gubernatorial election. But, if the bill does not reach the three-fifths required majority, supportive Democrats in the Legislature could pursue the other pathway to get an amendment to the ballot, which would delay the vote until the 2026 general election. If the amendment is passed by voters, the NJ Division of Taxation should promulgate rules as to how the collected funds from the extended CBT will be held separate from the General Fund, and how NJ Transit will receive the funds promptly.

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# Pedestrianizing Newbury Street: Boosting Business and Sustainability

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*Boston's Newbury Street suffers both economically and environmentally from its automobile traffic. The City of Boston should fully pedestrianize the street to remedy these issues by making its "Open Newbury" tradition a permanent measure.*

## Background

Undoubtedly, urban areas in the United States are infamously known for their traffic-laden roads and lack of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, which can prove to be economically harmful: in 2024, the average American lost around \$1,241, both in forgone income and fuel costs, due to traffic congestion.<sup>1</sup> Despite Boston being one of the nation's most walkable and inviting locations, Boston's Newbury Street suffers from these same issues. For one, the area is extremely congested — the city consistently ranks in the top five for worst traffic among US cities.<sup>1</sup> Outside drivers commuting through the city, not local, short-distance automobile travel, are the main cause of the problem, particularly in downtown areas. A 2019 study found that "radial drivers account for a greater share of downtown traffic than those who both live and work in the central zone, or those who live in the central zone and work elsewhere."<sup>2</sup> Additionally, buildings on the street are very tight and sidewalks are narrow which is economically problematic. For instance, it impedes the street's potential for "shoppertainment," which includes things like live music, unique restaurants, and other "omnichannel experiences."<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, the area has lost some of its economic

dominance. For example, several media outlets reported a near 10% vacancy rate before "Open Newbury Street" was put into place.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, the City of Boston unveiled "Open Newbury Street," an annual event during which, for a few select weekends, the city closes off an eight-block section of Newbury Street to all automobile traffic from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm.<sup>4</sup> Immediately, the initiative was deemed a "huge success," with local businesses reporting an uptick in sales and walk-in customers.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, this program also proved beneficial to the environment given its hand in a decrease in vehicular emissions due to reduced traffic resulting from an uptick in foot travel and public transportation use.

## Policy Idea

The Boston City Council should put forth an item of legislation mandating that the same section of Newbury Street included in "Open Newbury Street" be closed to vehicular traffic from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm throughout the entire year. Boston should establish a new city government department to oversee the installation, adaptation, and operation of this pedestrian-only street in order to actualize its resulting benefits to the local economy and environment. Businesses located on Newbury

Street should consult with this department so that both parties can work in tandem to report statistics and receive information on relevant developments.

## Policy Analysis

This policy would prove beneficial economically because, in similar cases, pedestrian-only streets are successful in other American cities and, especially, in European cities. For example, "Open Newbury Street" is part of a wider "Open Streets" movement present in several American cities which have also seen positive results: New York City, which has a much more extensive program, has reported that their open streets have a 12.1% lower vacancy rate than the city average.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, a 2022 study that observed the economic impact of street pedestrianization in fourteen Spanish cities concluded that pedestrianized streets generated higher sales revenue than those that were not, a difference of between around 12% and 40% in select months. The authors determined that this development was directly connected to the transformation of these streets into a pedestrian-friendly setting.<sup>6</sup> Given Boston's already similar level of relative walkability and size to these aforementioned examples, a permanent "Open Newbury Street"

could result in similar economic advantages.

On the other hand, one might question whether simply blocking car access to one street section would generate as much of a positive environmental impact. Though this plan may not have a substantial impact on commuters, it would greatly reduce the need for short-distance automobile travel, which a 2019 study found can amount to 10.9% of all car travel-related carbon dioxide emissions, which amounts to 2.8 kg of carbon dioxide emissions per person per week.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, this policy would extend beyond this simple measure, as its related governmental department would work to implement pedestrian and bike infrastructure such as increased greenery, cycling lanes, and walkways constructed of materials like brick or recycled plastic paving, more sustainable than asphalt used for car roads.<sup>8</sup> These efforts would all aid in reducing Newbury's environmental impact, a central driver for keeping the street pedestrianized. Funding for such projects could come from the city's Capital Grant Fund, which approves appropriations for various "public realm" improvements.<sup>9</sup>

### Highlights

- Boston's Downtown, which includes Newbury Street, is constantly congested and lacks sufficient pedestrian infrastructure, negatively impacting the street's economic vitality and sustainability.<sup>2,3</sup>
- In 2016, the City of Boston announced "Open Newbury," an annual event that prevents vehicular traffic on the street from

10:00 am to 6:00 pm for a few weekends each year. The program has proven successful in bringing more business to stores and increasing pedestrian traffic.<sup>3,4</sup>

- The City of Boston should make "Open Newbury" a permanent fixture and create a new government department to oversee this process. Financial resources could come from the city's Capital Grant Fund.<sup>9</sup>
- Research done in New York City and several Spanish cities has demonstrated that fully pedestrianizing streets leads to positive economic outcomes, such as lower vacancy rates and higher sales revenue.<sup>5,6,7</sup>

### Implementation

To introduce and pass this bill, the Boston City Council Chair would first need to bring it to a committee hearing, where stakeholders would give testimony on its contents, arguing either for or against the policy.<sup>10</sup> The current City Council Chair, Ruthzee Louijeune, is a Democrat who has historically proven to be sustainability-oriented and thus likely to initiate this process.<sup>11</sup> Either the Arts, Culture, Entertainment, Tourism, and Special Events committee or the Planning, Development, and Transportation Committee would be the most likely to hold the hearing for this policy, both of which are run by Democratic Councilmembers.<sup>12</sup> After the hearing is held, these committee chairs would work with the majority of the committee to send their recommendation to the full City

Council on whether or not the bill ought to be passed.<sup>10</sup> Given the committee chairs' party bias towards sustainability measures, this policy would likely have a favorable path to an eventual evaluation by all City Council members.

A potential obstacle to its passage is the possible opposition from individuals who regularly travel via automobile into or through Newbury Street. To counter this, the policy must include specific instructions for the newly created government department to adapt the surrounding areas for slight upticks in vehicular traffic. Furthermore, even if the committee does not initially recommend that the bill pass, the committee chair can decide to hold another hearing at a later date, giving it another chance to pass.<sup>10</sup> Once the bill has been recommended to pass, the full city council will vote on whether or not it should be sent to the mayor. Seven of ten active councilmembers identify as Democrats, indicating the bill would gain a majority of votes.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, Boston City Council members have historically supported similarly progressive, pedestrian-friendly legislation. It already passed the temporary version of Open Newbury as well as the 2023 Safety Surge Program, which contains measures to make city streets safer for pedestrians and bikers.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, the bill would need to be approved by Mayor Michelle Wu to pass. Mayor Wu, a Democrat, has continually demonstrated her commitment to sustainability.<sup>12</sup> For instance, she has repeatedly advocated for Boston to implement a "Green New Deal," a policy agenda to combat climate change in the city.<sup>14</sup> The city has

used American Rescue Plan (ARPA) funds from the federal government to finance several climate initiatives in line with this vision, such as an \$8 million project to create pedestrian-friendly city districts with wider, greener sidewalks.<sup>15</sup> Given her past, it is probable that Mayor Wu would approve this policy, putting it into law. Once enacted, the city government department created by this bill must conduct extensive research into its economic and environmental impacts. This data should be used to both guide the department on its future actions as well as to share positive results with stakeholders and citizens alike.

Given that Boston City Council has already created an existing framework for Open Newbury, the process of passing this policy should take no longer than ninety days. However, since this policy requires the creation of a new city government department as well as an overhaul of Newbury Street's physical infrastructure, fully implementing its contents will likely take several months. When finished, Newbury Street will fulfill its potential as a thriving, pedestrian-focused area that strengthens the local economy and advances the city's sustainability goals.

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# FOREIGN POLICY

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# Plan Ecuador: The US Must Intervene to Stop Ecuador's Drug Trade

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*To address the surging drug production and exports that are causing internal violence that results in mass migration out of Ecuador, the US should introduce a comprehensive aid package modeled after Plan Colombia.*

## Background

Ecuador is experiencing problems with growth in drug production, drug exports and rising internal conflict.<sup>1,2</sup> Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa subsequently announced a state of internal conflict in the country to tackle 22 principal criminal groups.<sup>1</sup> This decision comes as drug production occurs in Ecuador because of the favorable climate and has increased since the decriminalization of possession of most drugs and weakened penalties related to drug offenses.<sup>2,3</sup> Meanwhile, the massive smuggling of bricks of cocaine from Colombia and Peru into Ecuador continues unchecked, largely due to the state's political weakness.<sup>1,3,4</sup> A key example of this weakness is former President Rafael Correa's decision to focus the security apparatus on monitoring opposition political parties rather than targeting criminal organizations.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, integration of criminal organizations into the political system normalized criminal groups in the country while ensuing austerity measures eliminated key governmental security organizations.<sup>5</sup> This lack of control has enabled drug exports, aided by Ecuador's strategic location, free-trade agreements and dollarization.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the mass migration of Albanians to Ecuador in the 2010s

resulted in establishment of the linked international criminal organizations operating in the country.<sup>5</sup>

From January to March of 2024, President Noboa deployed 30,000 military personnel, yet authorities still reported 1,543 cases of extortion, and some towns have seen the homicide rate reach 145.43 per 100,000.<sup>1,5</sup> Similarly, the assassination of a presidential candidate mirrors the events of the 1990 Colombian Presidential Election.<sup>6,7</sup> This violence has caused Ecuadorian migration to the US to rise from 24,936 in 2022 to 124,023 in 2024 causing potential friction with northern neighbors.<sup>5,8</sup>

## Policy Idea

To simultaneously address the rise in drug production, the growth of drug exports, and the increasing internal conflict—along with the related external migration to the US—the US and Ecuadorian governments should implement a Plan Ecuador, modeled after the successes of Plan Colombia. Plan Ecuador will be a three-stage program that principally focuses on anti-narcotic and security initiatives, similar to Plan Colombia.<sup>13</sup> This would entail destroying coca crops, providing military and police training, and demobilization of armed groups. Plan Ecuador should have an

increased emphasis on improving the rule of law to ensure the long-term sustainability of the project.

## Policy Analysis

Plan Colombia successfully utilized US support to destroy coca crops and provide military and police training resulting in the demobilization of armed groups.<sup>10,11</sup> Coca production and transportation decreased by 25% between 2001 and 2012 because of targeted destruction efforts.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, military training enabled the demobilization of armed groups, eventually including FARC, causing the homicide rate to fall 60.86% between 2000 and 2021.<sup>12</sup> The training worked because the US focused on increased coordination between governmental and military actors and provided unique training in counterinsurgency and stability operations.<sup>11</sup> The program uses three phases because each phase provides the necessary conditions for the next stage.<sup>11</sup>

Several elements of Plan Ecuador should vary from Plan Colombia. Plan Ecuador should be a singular joint US-Ecuadorian venture rather than several short-term solutions patchworked together.<sup>14,15</sup> While the US contributed \$1.3 Billion dollars to Plan Colombia, the cost for Plan Ecuador should be roughly half because of Ecuador's better

situation and smaller size.<sup>14,16</sup> The US dedicated roughly four-fifths of its funds for Plan Colombia to military spending, primarily expanding counternarcotics operations, increasing interdiction efforts, and assisting Colombian police.<sup>14,16</sup> This funding would enable Ecuador to have the resources necessary to decrease drug production and trafficking and linked violence like Colombia did.

Plan Colombia's success came with trade-offs in human rights, rule of law, and lasting security.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Plan Ecuador should only invest 70% of funds towards military spending while doubling support for human rights and judicial reform to 20%, while 10% is allocated to assisting neighboring countries.<sup>14</sup> This change would strengthen the government and local communities by providing resources to promote justice for citizens in response to criminal offenses and investing in preventive educational programs which they currently are unable to do.<sup>1</sup>

### Highlights

- Ecuador is facing a massive surge in drug production and drug exports which is triggering related conflict causing an uptick in immigration the United States.<sup>1,2,3,5,8</sup>
- The United States and Ecuadorian governments should collaborate to introduce a Plan Ecuador, modeled after the successful Plan Colombia to destroy coca crops, tackle increased violence, drug exports, and internal violence.<sup>10,11,13</sup>
- Plan Ecuador should be a three-stage program

principally focused on addressing being an anti-narcotic and security initiative. The plan should give increased attention to human rights and improving rule of law.<sup>13,14</sup>

- Plan Ecuador is likely to be successful because it is a comprehensive approach rather than several short-term solutions.<sup>14,15</sup>

### Implementation

Plan Ecuador would be divided into three phases that mirror Plan Colombia. First, negotiations should occur with guerrilla and paramilitary groups with less capacity to fight against each other and the state.<sup>14</sup> These negotiations would provide the necessary conditions for the second phase, which involves manually removing coca crops, which is highly effective and cost-friendly.<sup>7,14</sup> Counternarcotics operations cost \$390.5 million in Colombia, including \$88 million for moving communities away from coca production, but would be significantly cheaper in Ecuador due to its smaller coca production, more compact territory, and reliance on cost-effective methods over expensive aerial spraying and heavy machinery.<sup>8,14</sup> Simultaneously, the state should focus on alternative community development projects implemented through local public management and NGOs which can facilitate transitions to alternative agriculture like acai or cacao and tourism of Quito and Cuenca's UNESCO World Heritage old towns. These NGOs are likely to have an increased willingness for involvement due to the improved security situation.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the reintegration of former criminal

organization members after rehabilitation through Ecuador's new EURESP program which focused on education and cultural training will increase Ecuador's workforce and expand its economic potential.<sup>18</sup> These workers will then be able to integrate into the growing tourism industries in Quito and Cuenca in a manner mirror Colombia's tourism boom.

President Noboa should promote Plan Ecuador in the Ecuadorian National Assembly, just as President Uribe of Colombia was principally responsible for promoting Plan Colombia. The promotion of the plan by such a high-ranking official would lend the necessary star power that could help enable the legislation to pass. Minister of the Interior Mónica Palencia and Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabriela Sommerfeld, whose departments have significant jurisdiction over this type of legislation, should aid the president's efforts.

Since this legislation does not include US troops fighting in Ecuador and features large funding from the United States, it is logical to assume there would be limited resistance from the Ecuadorian population.

While President Trump's administration has slashed international aid, his strong position against illegal immigration may incentivize him to support this legislation.<sup>19,20</sup> His agreement to suspend tariffs with Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum in exchange for tighter border security illustrates a potential willingness to negotiate on this issue.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, President Trump has already established a relationship with President Noboa, who was part of a limited group of foreign leaders

to attend President Trump's second inauguration.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, President Trump can leverage President Noboa on issues like military cooperation in the region and border security. President Trump is widely seen as susceptible to appeasement and flattery, which President Noboa can use to his advantage. As the leader of the Republican Party, President Trump's approval would likely pave the way for GOP support in Congress. US Senator Jim Risch and US Congressman Brian Mast, who respectively chair the Senate and House Foreign Relations Committees, should spearhead these efforts along with their fellow committee members. Senator Risch in particular has expressed support for deepening military ties with Latin America which would be achieved through Plan Ecuador.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Secretary of State Marco Rubio showed significant interest in Latin America during his tenure on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and he retains significant links to Capitol Hill, making him a valuable asset in passing this legislation.

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# China's Power Projection: Defending American and Allied Interests in Melanesia

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*China is actively seeking to challenge US and allied influence in Melanesia, making it critical to strengthen security partnerships with Melanesian nations and adjust the structure and focus of investment and aid to prevent further Chinese influence in the region.*

## Background

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has grown China's economic and political influence and its military capabilities in a direct challenge to the United States (US). The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), China's primary naval force, has grown considerably in recent years and analysis projects it to grow from 370 ships in 2024 to 395 in 2025 and up to 435 ships by 2030.<sup>1</sup> The CCP has been overtly messaging that its intention is to prepare for war with Taiwan and, consequently, with the US.<sup>2</sup> This preparation includes the ability to project power beyond their territorial waters and the South Pacific.<sup>3,4</sup> The PLAN conducted unannounced military exercises in Australia's exclusive economic zone—still considered international waters—and circumnavigated the continent in February 2025.<sup>5</sup> The People's Republic of China (PRC) has also made strides in its relations with Melanesian nations, such as the Solomon Islands, which signed a security pact in 2022, and the Cook Islands, which is a traditionally close ally of New Zealand and Australia, signed an economic deal in 2025.<sup>6,7</sup>

These diplomatic overtures by the PRC have resulted in the US expanding its efforts in the region by enhancing military cooperation

with nations such as Papua New Guinea and Fiji and opening embassies in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.<sup>8</sup> Increased Chinese involvement has also extended to its efforts to be directly involved with policing in the region and has explored options or has already deployed police officers in some Pacific Island nations.<sup>9</sup> Despite the shift in US policy towards more engagement with Melanesia, the Trump administration has signalled greater resistance towards foreign aid and regional issues that lack direct US concerns. It is unclear whether this rhetoric will impact US policy in Melanesia, given past criticism of military and economic agreements, but Secretary of State Marco Rubio highlighted engagement with Pacific Island Nations as an important opportunity.<sup>10,11</sup>

## Policy Idea

The US and its allies should invest heavily in economic, security, and governance partnerships, and expand American and Allied military presence in the region. The US should pursue this investment with a two-pronged approach:

- Create economic development and aid agreements with Melanesian island nations, both individually and through the

Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), that meet their needs and interests.

- Focus investment in high impact areas that are being prioritized by Melanesian nations such as electricity and broadband access.
- Form Security agreements to combat regional security issues, including illegal fishing, drug trafficking, and human smuggling, to improve the communication, relationship, and interoperability of US and allied navies and coast guards.

## Policy Analysis

The recent pause in US funding to international organizations like the World Health Organization and the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development significantly impacts Pacific island nations. However, Chinese investment does not necessarily equate to a permanent shift in influence in Melanesia.<sup>12,13</sup> More targeted funding of projects by regional partners like Australia, New Zealand and the Asian Development Bank can counterbalance Chinese influence.<sup>14</sup> For instance, The Solomon Islands has 24% of its population living without access to electricity and an

internet penetration rate of only 45%.<sup>15,16</sup> Targeted funding in high need areas can match development goals of Melanesian nations and their expectations regarding how agreements are structured, giving the West a significant advantage. Ensuring that deals are transparent, viable, and multilateral can improve competitiveness in a political environment where hesitancy to invest in foreign development projects limits resources.

Another primary concern for Melanesian nations is rising criminal activity. The UN Office on Drug and Crime, reports major increases in drug trade, human trafficking, and illegal fishing.<sup>17</sup> The US and its partners can counter these activities through support for the Pacific Transnational Crime Network (PTCN) and continued equipping of island police forces with the tools necessary to patrol their waters. Additionally, Joint operations with partner nations have historically been effective at countering criminal activity. The Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JITF-S) allowed greater coordination between the US Coast Guard and Latin American nations in the Gulf of Mexico, resulting in partner nations contributing to 65% of interdictions and achieving an 85% drug removal rate.<sup>18</sup> JITF-S was successful because it was voluntary, had clear objectives, and allowed unit-level leaders to communicate directly with partner nations, streamlining coordination.<sup>19</sup> A similarly structured initiative in Melanesia could result in comparable results given the region's security concerns and prevent greater Chinese police involvement. There is also an existing policing relationship, and would serve as an opportunity to

expand US and Australian presence in the region.

### Highlights

- China is determined to achieve the ability to project force beyond its claimed territorial waters and has openly challenged regional norms through economic and diplomatic coercion and promises in Melanesia and Australasia.<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>
- Actions by the Chinese government include unannounced military exercises as well as the attempts to undercut relations between the US, Australia, New Zealand, and Melanesia nations through development investments and controversial police deployments and partnerships.<sup>6,7,9</sup>
- The US and its partners can compete effectively with the Chinese government by providing funding to strengthen climate change resilience, Infrastructure development, and energy access.<sup>20</sup>
- Providing transparent funding for development projects through regional partners can provide a cost-effective alternative to investment from China and maintain the neutrality of Melanesian governments.<sup>13,14,15</sup>
- Greater coordination, training, and equipment transfers to Melnesian police forces provide an opportunity to limit malign influence in internal security issues of Melanesian states and effectively combat

human and drug trafficking.<sup>17,18,19</sup>

### Implementation

The goal of the US and its allies should not be to gain dominance over Melanesian countries but to ensure that relationships and agreements persist and prevent China from gaining regional hegemony. Chinese investments rose by 6% in 2022 to \$256 million USD, placing them second to Australia, which leads with \$1.5 billion. Despite the gap, Melanesian nations continue to welcome more Chinese investments.<sup>21,22</sup> More funding is not needed, but any aid and investment should intend to respond to the needs of the states of Melanesia. Given Australia's leading role in regional aid and investment, the Australian Agency for International Development should continue distributing funds while the US should channel investments through the more profitable, politically palatable, and multilateral Asian Development Bank (ADB). Funding should be allocated to local partners, which substantially improves support for and perceptions of foreign aid.<sup>14</sup> Countries can also earn support by partnering with the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), an intergovernmental organization that involves multiple regional partners, including Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and the ADB.<sup>23</sup> Focused, transparent programs built through multilateral partnerships offer the most cost-effective way to counter PRC influence.

Aid should advance MSG's goals of deeper integration with the Pacific and global economy, expanded youth development, and strong engagement in regional

problem-solving.<sup>24</sup> Two key areas of focus should include internet and electricity access. The US Development Finance Corporation and Australia's Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific should lead by investing in regional and state-owned telecoms like Fiji's ATH to curb the expansion of Chinese-owned enterprises.<sup>25</sup> Some nations in Melanesia also struggle with electricity access. For example, the power grid reaches only 20% of Papua New Guinea's population.<sup>26</sup> While there are projects by international organizations like the World Bank, the US, and its allies can boost the scope of electrification projects through their own development institutions or international organizations.

Another critical focus for Melanesian governments is security and law enforcement issues that threaten internal and economic stability. The Pacific Islands Forum announced the Pacific Policing Initiative in 2024, establishing multiple training centers and a regional crisis task force.<sup>27,28</sup> Additionally, future equipment transfers should include cost-effective unarmed drone technology to improve regional patrol capacity. Following these steps, The US and Australian Coast Guards should expand their footprint to support and improve interoperability with Melanesian law enforcement, including greater responsiveness to criminal activity through shiprider programs similar to successful examples of JTIF-S or the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>29</sup> However, This security participation may raise concerns regarding excessive militarization which may agitate China. Most

Melanesian nations are not willing to take sides in the rivalry between the West and the PRC.<sup>23</sup> As such, increased security cooperation with the West may provoke China into taking a more hardline stance and potentially responding with its own military presence. Any cooperation must avoid implying that Melanesian nations are aligning themselves with one side or that the West seeks to shift regional alignments. Consequently, agreements should be focused exclusively on regional stability and transnational crime prevention.

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# The Maquiladora Industry: Strengthening Mexican Labor Rights Through International Coalition

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*To combat labor exploitation in the maquiladora system, the US and Mexico should create a Cross-Border Labor Solidarity Initiative to support independent unions, enforce fair conditions, and build on proven advocacy models for corporate and government accountability.*

## Background

The expansion of global supply chains and the outsourcing of manufacturing has intensified multinational corporations' search for low-cost labor in countries with weak wage standards and limited labor protections. The maquiladora industry along the Mexico-US border exemplifies how economic dependence on foreign direct investment fosters exploitative working conditions. Spurred by the Mexican debt crisis of the 1980s and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, northern Mexico, previously marked by extreme unemployment, became a key region for export manufacturing in sectors like medical devices, electronics, and automotive parts.<sup>1</sup>

Under NAFTA, US corporations could import raw materials into Mexico duty-free and exempt from value-added tax, employing Mexican workers for low-wage labor and exporting finished products to the US. This system pressured Mexico to maintain its status as a global hub for low-cost production, with the maquiladora industry accounting for 58 percent of Mexico's manufacturing GDP and 48 percent of industrial employment.<sup>2</sup> However, it disproportionately disadvantages the workers essential to its operation. As a result, wages

for maquiladoras remain low, and workplace standards and safety measures are often minimized to reduce costs.<sup>3</sup> Workers are subjected to extensive hours, minimal breaks, employer discrimination, and negative environmental and health disparities.

While NAFTA tripled trade and generated rapid growth of the Mexican manufacturing sector, growth of the economy and industrial landscape was not met with equal development of labor protections.<sup>4</sup> Government funds centered on honing the comparative advantage of cheap, productive labor rather than upholding labor standards, subjecting maquiladoras to flawed grievance routes and limited freedoms of association. NAFTA was replaced by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in 2020, which aims to protect unionization and collective bargaining rights, yet transparency issues and the lack of support for industry-specific independent unions have allowed exploitation within the maquiladora system to persist.<sup>5</sup>

## Policy Idea

To ensure accountability in protecting maquiladora workers' rights, the U.S. and Mexico should establish a Cross-Border Labor Solidarity Initiative (CBLSI). This

binational coalition would unite unions, advocacy groups, and legal experts to monitor conditions, support independent unions, and educate workers. CBLSI would coordinate campaign strategies, training, and support for factory inspections by joint teams of government, unions, and watchdogs. A framework of legal aid, grievance procedures, and active monitoring would address violations. A public memorandum should outline CBLSI's scope, responsibilities, and outcomes, with legal experts using data to set goals based on worker needs. The initiative must publish annual reports on labor conditions and compliance, accessible to workers, unions, and policymakers. Inspired by EU transparency laws, this would improve enforcement and corporate accountability. CBLSI should also enable real-time coordination across borders to bolster collective bargaining and address legal challenges, ultimately improving wages, conditions, and rights within the maquiladora system.

## Policy Analysis

Multinational advocacy movements, like that of the proposed CBLSI, have established robust systems of social and political accountability and awareness for the needs of

marginalized workers. Going beyond the labor rights framework set by the USMCA, the proposed CBLSI can follow precedent cross-border movements to further strengthen workers' rights within the maquiladora system.

An example of the successful implementation of binational advocacy coalitions is the Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental (Chilpancingo Environmental Justice Collective), in April 2002. For over two decades, residents near industrial parks in Tijuana had voiced health concerns regarding lead and copper contamination from an abandoned US-owned plant.<sup>6</sup> The issue gained international attention in 1998 when San Diego's Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) and Colonia Chilpancingo residents petitioned the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (NACEC).<sup>6</sup> In February 2002, a NACEC report confirmed the severe health risks due to the plant and called for remediation. Local activists formed the Colectivo Chilpancingo in April 2002 to heighten pressure for a government-funded cleanup. By June 2004, they signed an agreement and received initial investments of \$500,000 by Mexican officials and \$85,000 by US EPA for an official cleanup.<sup>6</sup> By 2005, Baja California expropriated the site and assumed responsibility for remediation, resulting in removal of more than 2,000 tons of hazardous waste by end of year.<sup>6</sup>

The Chilpancingo Collective serves as a powerful demonstration of how a strategic combination of grassroots advocacy, research, and lobbying by intergovernmental and binational organizations can effectively pressure both US and Mexican officials to acknowledge

and address the adverse consequences of globalization, ultimately advancing the needs of Mexican manufacturing workers.<sup>7</sup> With the rapid advancement of communication tools and stronger cross-national ties, the globalization of recent decades could support a more streamlined, effective structure for the proposed CBLSI.

### Highlights

- US-Mexico goods trade reached \$839.9 billion in 2024, with a \$171.8 billion US trade deficit, reflecting a 12.7% increase from 2023.<sup>8</sup> Mexico remains America's second-largest trading partner, with extensive US manufacturing operations.<sup>9</sup>
- In 2021, maquiladoras accounted for 58% of Mexico's manufacturing GDP, 48% of industrial employment,<sup>10</sup> and 1 in 2 formal jobs in northern border cities, highlighting their critical role in Mexico's economy.<sup>2</sup>
- USMCA expanded workers' access to remedial actions for labor violations but introduced state control over unions, restrictions on strikes, and sector exclusions, limiting worker empowerment.<sup>11</sup>
- Maquiladora workers face persistent wage gaps, gender discrimination, and unsafe conditions, with weak unions and limited grievance procedures hindering access to legal remedies.<sup>12</sup>
- Mexico's \$6.57 average hourly wage remains far below those of the US (\$34.74), Canada (\$25.24), and Germany (\$27.18),<sup>2</sup>

driving foreign companies to maintain low-cost manufacturing operations within Mexico.

### Implementation

To ensure that Mexican maquiladora workers fully benefit from CBLSI, the United States and Mexico must initiate a structured coalition framework that formalizes cross-border labor solidarity. This framework should foster strong partnerships among stakeholders and ensure coordinated action. Key participants should include high-level entities such as the US Department of Labor and Mexico's Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, alongside independent labor unions, grassroots organizations, labor centers, and legal experts from both countries.

Building on models like the Migrant Workers Resource Center of Tijuana (MWRC), the solidarity initiative should integrate international, national, and local organizations to address labor issues while strengthening advocacy networks. MMWRC, managed by Sindicatos Unidos con México Moderno with support from the ILO, hosts U.S. and Canadian government delegates in developing partnership models to build a Latin American network of centers that work to improve migrant workers' access to labor rights and justice.<sup>13</sup> The Tijuana initiative illustrates how binational collaboration between government representatives and local partner organizations can create effective operational frameworks, share statistical findings, and provide direct worker support – serving 1280 migrant workers in Mexico in its first year.<sup>13</sup> Adopting this approach will help CBLSI

stakeholders define clear objectives aligned with labor rights principles, ensuring long-term sustainability.

Although multinational corporations, Mexican factory owners, and government officials will bear an increased administrative burden in implementing inspections and transparency documentation, the primary responsibilities under the CBLSI will rest with independent entities, such as labor research centers, worker advocacy groups, and autonomous unions. By shifting the responsibility for ensuring compliance with international labor standards and human rights goals to these independent bodies, the initiative helps maintain productive trade relationships between the US and Mexico while increasing administrative credibility. This delegation of duties not only strengthens the political feasibility of the binational coalition but also minimizes resistance from stakeholders who may be wary of direct government intervention or corporate overreach, allowing for a more balanced and collaborative approach to improving labor conditions. Though multinational corporations may resist loosening their control over international labor costs, the CBLSI's enforced compliance measures, paired with the reputational benefits of enhanced public credibility, could help counterbalance such opposition.

Historically, manufacturing entities and factory owners in the maquiladora system have prioritized cutting production costs over investing in labor compliance and worker protections.<sup>14</sup> To address this imbalance, the initiative should seek funding from a combination of public, private, and international

sources to ensure sustainable support of CBLSI efforts. The CBLSI should pursue government through labor-focused grants, budget reallocations, and public investments in fair labor practices. Multilateral agencies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), World Bank, and Inter-American Development Bank can provide grants or low-interest loans dedicated to labor rights initiatives.<sup>15</sup> Private sector contributions should be encouraged through corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, particularly by US multinational corporations operating in maquiladoras. Governments can incentivize companies that prioritize fair labor standards by offering tax benefits, public recognition, and preferential trade policies.<sup>16,17</sup> Binational collaboration between governments and grassroots groups will help embed fair labor standards as globalization continues to shape production.

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# Remediation for Ryukyans: Proposing Environmental Cleanup at US MCAS Futenma in Okinawa Prefecture

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*The United States Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma in Japan's Okinawa Prefecture is set for shutdown and return to Japanese control. Japan's defense and environment ministries should collaborate with Okinawa Prefecture's environmental apparatus to remediate the site's environmental contaminants.*

## Background

For over six decades, Japan's government has permitted the US Department of Defense (DoD) to establish and maintain military facilities in its territory under a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA).<sup>1,2</sup> Today, ~70% of the DoD's Japanese facilities are in Okinawa Prefecture—a chain of 160 islands located southwest of the Japanese mainland.<sup>3,4</sup> One such facility is Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma, which opened in 1945 and occupies 475.9 hectares (~1,176 acres) in the center of Okinawa Prefecture's Ginowan City, which is approximately 24% of the city's surface area.<sup>5</sup>

Okinawa Prefecture's Ryukyuan population has repeatedly protested the DoD's presence on the island and MCAS Futenma's operation, including its harmful environmental practices.<sup>6</sup> Between 2002 and 2016, over 270 environmental incidents occurred at the facility and contaminated nearby soil and water sources due to volatile organic compounds (VOCs) from aviation fuel, petroleum, and hydraulic fluid spills.<sup>7</sup> Per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), emerging contaminant chemicals linked to reproductive defects and cancers, are elevated and present in groundwater

connected to irrigation channels and sacred sites due to industrial flame retardant usage.<sup>8,9,10,11,12</sup>

Additionally, the US's accident reporting procedures are often inconsistent. The DoD only informed the Japanese government about 6 instances out of 270 aforementioned incidents.<sup>7</sup> SOFA clarifications also grant the US final authority on all environmental remediation matters, which has permitted inaction.<sup>13,14,15</sup> In 2012, the US and Japan agreed to incrementally cede the facility's premises back to Japan, relocate 9,000 Marines, and construct a new MCAS facility at a separate location.<sup>16,17,18</sup> The US ceded 10 acres in 2017, and relocation efforts began in late 2024 with an expected end date in the 2030s.<sup>17,19,20</sup> Japan's plans for MCAS Futenma, however, remain unclear.

## Policy Idea

Considering that the land will eventually fall under Japan's jurisdiction, its Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Ministry of the Environment (MoE) should use this opportunity to freely apply their environmental policies. To do so, the Ministries should collaborate with the Okinawa Prefecture Environment Department's Environmental Policy Division

(OPEPD), which is authorized to investigate environmental matters related to the US military facilities, to investigate and remedy the scope of MCAS Futenma's environmental damage.<sup>21</sup> All three bodies should develop a joint MCAS Futenma remediation plan with the following actions:

1. An initial 2-3 year soil, groundwater, and surface water assessment to determine VOCs and PFAS levels using gas chromatography-flame ionization detection (GC-FID) and liquid chromatography-mass spectrometers (LC-MS), respectively
2. Depending on the contamination's severity, an independent 20 to 40-year removal of VOCs and PFAS using various environmental technologies to protect public health and enable future redevelopment

## Policy Analysis

The US's previous successes in similar cleanups demonstrate the effectiveness of government-led environmental restoration efforts on similar military facilities.<sup>22</sup> MCAS Cherry Point, situated near North Carolina's coastline, has undergone

US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) and local VOCs contamination investigations since 2005.<sup>23</sup> Remedial actions on seven out of nine of its sites showed steady progress.<sup>23</sup> Six other sites concluded remediation due to environmental threat elimination.<sup>23</sup> The investigation demonstrates the several decades required for legacy contaminant elimination, but does not discuss emerging contaminants such as PFAS. Most PFAS assessments on US military facilities are preliminary due to regulations' nascency.<sup>24</sup> From 2022 to 2024, the USEPA and US Navy found elevated PFAS levels at MCAS El Toro and proposed several remedial measures, but cleanup was paused due to the US's 2025 PFAS rules rescission.<sup>25,26,27,28</sup> Nonetheless, the brief investigation highlighted the 2-3 year time requirement for determining PFAS levels and the importance of defense apparatus involvement.

A cleanup effort is imperative because VOCs and PFAS can potentially harm local Ryukyuan's health. Several studies on US servicemen with long-term exposure to VOCs at military facilities have linked the compounds to severe illnesses, suggesting that local populations have likely also been affected. For example, Army women working in occupations with high VOCs exposure were 48% more likely to develop breast cancer.<sup>29</sup> The US also correlated Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune's VOCs contamination with several cancers and disorders in exposed servicemen.<sup>30</sup> Kyoto University and the US National Institute of Health have already chronicled PFAS levels two times the national average in local Ryukyuan's blood

and resulting high immunotoxicity risk, respectively.<sup>12,31</sup> These factors demonstrate the urgency of MCAS Futenma's cleanup.

### Highlights

- US Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma in Ginowan City, Okinawa Prefecture, Japan, has caused grievances among the local Ryukyuan population due to several aspects of its operations, including environmental damage.<sup>5</sup> In 2012, the US and Japan finalized a plan to return MCAS Futenma's land to Japanese control by the mid-2030s.<sup>16,17,18</sup> Japan, however, currently lacks an environmental remediation plan.
- To remedy environmental issues at the former base, Japan's Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Ministry of Environment (MoE) should collaborate with Okinawa Prefecture's environmental apparatus to assess the site's legacy and emerging contaminant presence and conduct a 20 to 40-year remediation project depending on the severity.
- Legacy and emerging contaminants' health risks and the US's past MCAS facility cleanups demonstrate the importance and feasibility of environmental remediation spearheaded by national and local environmental and defense bodies.<sup>12,22,23,24,25,26,27,29,30,31</sup>

### Implementation

Investigation and remediation, which should begin on the 10 acres already ceded back to Japan, would require several technologies.<sup>17</sup> GC-FID allows scientists to separate and identify VOCs in MCAS Futenma's environmental samples.<sup>32,33</sup> Japan's primary method of PFAS detection in the same environmental materials is LC-MS, which also separates PFAS from the sample.<sup>34</sup> Soil vapor extraction technologies can remove soil and groundwater VOCs by drawing VOCs vapors to the surface for treatment. This method can remove soil contaminants within four years, as seen in MCAS Cherry Point, and prevent further groundwater breaches.<sup>23</sup> To ensure groundwater and surface water VOCs elimination, Japan can use cost-efficient and environmentally friendly activated carbon removal on contaminated water.<sup>35,36</sup> PFAS remediation research is ongoing, but Japanese institutions are developing several effective systems.<sup>37,38,39,40</sup> All three parties should determine which method they wish to pilot due to ongoing developments.

Japan's national government will likely have the political will to commit to environmental projects, with Yale University's 2024 Environmental Performance Index ranking Japan 27th out of 180 countries.<sup>41</sup> Its legislature enacted environmental regulations that the US lacks, such as drinking water PFAS caps, and investigated violations near US military facilities.<sup>42,43</sup> Japan permits prefectures' governors to determine environmental cleanup measures under existing legislation, eliminating legislative delays.<sup>44</sup> This cleanup is also financially feasible for the Japanese government. DoD reports estimate

that 1,700 of its facilities' general cleanups would cost \$11.9 billion, and 50 facilities' PFAS remediation would require \$31 billion—about \$627 million for facilities under both categories when divided evenly.<sup>45,46</sup> Using this approximation and currency conversions, MCAS Futenma's cleanup may cost Japan about ¥94 billion—5.4% of its ¥1.75 trillion 2024 environmental budget.<sup>47</sup> Japan has pursued costlier projects in the interest of public health, such as Fukushima's \$76 billion (~¥11 trillion) 30 to 40-year nuclear cleanup.<sup>48</sup>

The project's environmental premise should not encounter resistance from Ryukyuan, who have repeatedly petitioned the US and Japan to resolve environmental issues.<sup>6,49</sup> However, the plan's prolonged deconstruction and return timeline may cause controversy. Unpredictable environmental issues at the new US Marines facility's site and political controversies caused its delay to the mid-2030s.<sup>50</sup> MCAS Cherry Point and MCAS El Toro's cleanups are ongoing, with the latter's groundwater decontamination expected to continue into the 2040s.<sup>23,51</sup> Okinawa Prefecture also has high private land ownership rates on US military land, which may affect the MCAS Futenma property plans.<sup>49</sup> All three parties should candidly discuss sudden changes and emphasize the property's serious health risks when negotiating with locals. Given that 90% of Okinawa Prefecture residents approved of the islands' return to Japanese control and Japan is ranked first in environmental issue realization globally, convincing the populace to accept the project's prolonged timeline may be achievable.<sup>52,53</sup> By

remediating MCAS Futenma's property, the MoD, MoE, and OPEPD can resolve one source of Ryukyuan contention and ensure their prosperity.

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# HEALTHCARE POLICY

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# Breaking the Bag: Federally Banning White Bagging Practices to Promote Patient-Centered Care

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*“White bagging,” a pharmaceutical distribution practice that grants health coverage based on specialty pharmacies supplying medication, contributes to unregulated safety provisions, operational difficulties, and diminished quality of patient care. A federal white bagging ban would address these issues and advance patient-centered care.*

## Background

The practice of “white bagging” is a pharmaceutical distribution model in which insurers cover the supply of patient-specific medications contingent on third-party specialty pharmacies holding and dispensing them.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, patients’ coverage rates under white bagging policies have increased significantly, rising from 15 to 27 percent in oncology therapy between 2019 and 2022.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, one-third of infusion drugs administered in outpatient departments were dispensed through white bagging distribution.<sup>3</sup> Insurance companies find white bagging policies advantageous due to the diminished costs for the insurer through the coverage of patients’ pharmacy benefits that rely on higher patient copays and deductibles instead of medical benefits.<sup>4</sup> However, the administration of white bagging policies, as opposed to traditional “buy-and-bill” models in which healthcare providers directly supply medication, comes at a cost to the patient.<sup>3,5</sup>

White bagging policies pose substantial risks to consumers and suppliers. In a 2021 survey conducted by Vizient, a healthcare performance improvement

company, 95 percent of health system respondents reported operational or safety issues associated with white bagging policies.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, 92 percent of respondents experienced patient care difficulties due to problems with received medications, such as delayed delivery, incorrect dosage, outdated prescriptions, or damaged products.<sup>6</sup> By depending on separate pharmacies to deliver patient medication, white bagging can bypass essential safety regulations and compromise supply-chain integrity.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, white bagging practices may fail to comply with the Drug Supply Chain Security Act (DSCSA), a law currently being implemented to create electronic systems that trace all distributed prescription drugs.<sup>1,7</sup> White bagging adds an additional party to pharmaceutical care that widens the gap between the patient and insurer, increases patients’ material costs, and diminishes the quality of healthcare provided. Addressing the implications of white bagging is crucial to promoting patient-centered care.

## Policy Idea

To address the systematic challenges of white bagging, the US Food and Drug Administration

(FDA) and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) should implement a policy banning white bagging techniques in which insurers conditionally grant coverage on specialty pharmacies’ prescription medication distribution. This policy would prohibit insurers from requiring prescription drugs to arrive from a specialty pharmacy and ensure that insurance coverage is not denied based on the distributing pharmacy.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the policy intends to increase transparency in pharmacy supply-chain distribution by administering regulations that prioritize medication security to improve overall medication efficacy, accuracy, and timeliness. Finally, the policy aims to regulate pharmacy benefit manager business practices by prohibiting higher copays or out-of-pocket fees for patients obtaining medications from their personal preferred provider or pharmacy.

## Policy Analysis

Federal action to combat white bagging policies is essential in maintaining patient-centered approaches to healthcare delivery, requiring commitments from the FDA, CMS, insurance carriers, healthcare providers, and patients.

Reverting to “buy-and-bill” methods or other patient-centered mechanisms is feasible given that the vast majority of drug distribution models still rely on “buy-and-bill” methods as the standard practice both in physician offices and hospital outpatient departments.<sup>9</sup> A system where the healthcare provider or hospital directly purchases, stores, and manages medication is less subject to delivery delays and is easily accessible.<sup>1</sup>

With clear tracking ability, the more transparent methods of distribution comply with the DSCSA, allowing for improved safety provisions and increased patient awareness.<sup>1,7</sup> Studies indicate that the concept of drug safety heavily impacts patient health and should possess firm regulations.<sup>10</sup>

While white bagging lowers costs for insurers, the practice raises patients’ out-of-pocket obligations and appears economically inefficient for nearly all groups involved.<sup>11</sup> The estimated annual financial burden of white bagging is approximately \$310 million, and an additional \$114 million is spent on supplemental administration costs corresponding to bagging policies.<sup>6</sup> Specialty pharmacies are also subject to medication waste due to prescriptions being patient-specific and untransferable with constantly changing requirements.<sup>1,4,6</sup> This wastage incurs additional expenses of up to \$652,000 per site annually.<sup>12</sup> By implementing a policy that prohibits white bagging, financial obligations would decrease for all parties and ensure patient accessibility rather than prioritizing insurers’ profits.

Ultimately, white bagging practices have a disruptive nature

that can jeopardize patient care. Other methods of specialty medication distribution are more adaptive to patient-specific requirements and current treatment pathways.<sup>1</sup> Banning white bagging dispensing can be applied to other harmful bagging practices and benefits all patients by improving financial outcomes, efficiency, and quality of care.<sup>4</sup>

### Highlights

- “White bagging” is a pharmaceutical distribution practice that relies on insurers providing coverage for specialty medications if a special pharmacy distributes the prescriptions.<sup>1</sup>
- While white bagging is favored by insurers, patients suffer the burden of higher costs, bypassed safety regulations, increased barriers to supplying medication, and diminished quality of care.<sup>4,6</sup>
- To address the dangers of white bagging, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) should implement a policy banning white bagging practices by prohibiting insurers’ conditional coverage.
- Reverting to “buy-and-bill” practices for specialty medications as opposed to white bagging is viable because “buy-and-bill” practices are still the standard methods of distribution. In addition, eliminating white bagging would allow for easier accessibility with fewer

safety or operational issues, while removing unforeseen expenses placed on the patient, provider, and pharmacy.<sup>1,6,9</sup>

### Implementation

To implement a federal white bagging ban in Congress, the policy would obtain support from pertinent national organizations such as the American Society of Health-System Partnerships (ASHP), which advocates for the enforcement of safety regulations within the DSCSA and urges state policymakers to restrict insurers from mandating white bagging practices.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the ASHP has already collaborated with the American Hospital Association (AHA) and strongly recommended that the FDA evaluate and take action on white bagging’s safety and supply-chain risks.<sup>13</sup>

Passing federal legislation restricting white bagging would gain additional bipartisan support given the extensive amount of state legislation already introduced to combat white bagging. Since 2021, 32 states have introduced legislation to limit white bagging practices, including North Dakota, Tennessee, and Virginia, banning payer-mandated white bagging, with other states implementing regulatory provisions.<sup>14</sup> Through advocacy from cancer and infusion therapy organizations, a further 23 states introduced legislation addressing white bagging in 2023, 10 of which remain active through 2024.<sup>14</sup> The overwhelming support for previous legislation surrounding white bagging indicates the profound approval that such a policy would receive. While there may be backlash from private insurers, the policy’s bipartisan support and

emphasis on long-term cost savings and improved quality of patient care would help alleviate this issue.

Upon the authorization of a federal white bagging ban, the FDA and CMS would initiate a coordinated effort to regulate insurers by ensuring that health coverage is dependent only on pre-existing factors (age, location, family status, etc.). The policy would authorize a one-year transition period to allow insurers sufficient time to modify their guidelines and healthcare providers to directly obtain and dispense specialty prescription medication. For patients who still choose to obtain medication from a preferred pharmacy, the CMS would regulate pharmacy benefit managers by prohibiting higher copayments, coinsurances, or deductibles based on the patient's choice of pharmacy. The federal government would administer strict oversight to verify compliance with the policy's requirements by requiring periodic data reports and employing regular audits and inspections of insurers. To induce greater transparency in the pharmaceutical supply-chain distribution, pharmacies providing specialty medications would be required to adhere to the DSCSA and maintain comprehensive records concerning a prescription drug's origin, movement, and trajectory.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the FDA and CMS would enact stricter guidelines and testing to ensure that medication is accurately dosed, up-to-date, and undamaged for drug distribution via pharmacies.

Patients, healthcare providers, and insurers would form advocacy groups in collaboration with organizations like the ASHP or AHA to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy. Having diverse and

representative groups in the evaluation process would empower the FDA and CMS to understand various perspectives surrounding the quality of patient care, efficacy of medication distribution, and prescription drug prices, enabling them to refine and regulate methods of drug distribution after the policy's passage. Overall, the proper implementation of a federal white bagging ban would promote patient-centered care and relieve onerous burdens placed on providers and patients.

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# Trapped in the Emergency Room: How Federal Policy Can End Dangerous ED Boarding

By Tanirika Choudhry, [tc769@cornell.edu](mailto:tc769@cornell.edu)

*The implementation of the Emergency Department Boarding Reduction Act would allow the United States Department of Health to improve boarding times through bundled payments and national standards, improving patient outcomes, reducing medical costs and errors, while preventing staff burnout.*

## Background

Emergency room “boarding” has become a critical issue in the United States. Boarding refers to a patient who remains in the emergency department (ED) after being admitted but is awaiting transfer to an inpatient unit.<sup>1</sup> In 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported approximately 139.8 million ED visits, with 13.1% resulting in hospital admissions.<sup>2</sup> This statistic grows annually, exacerbating the boarding problem. Most hospitals now report average boarding times between three to nine hours, well beyond the recommended four-hour limit.<sup>3,4</sup>

Current boarding practices reflect systemic healthcare failures. Experts point to payment incentives encouraging hospitals to operate at or over capacity, often prioritizing elective admissions—planned, non-urgent procedures—over ED patients. This is because insurers like Medicare only reimburse inpatient care and ignore admission routes, making ED admissions less profitable due to unreimbursed emergency department charges.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, ED boarding compromises patient safety and outcomes, leading to healthcare staff burnout, preventable medical errors, and rising healthcare costs.<sup>6</sup> For example, ambulances may be forced to redirect to other facilities,

delaying urgent medical care.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, a study by the Annals of Emergency Medicine found that the daily cost per boarded patient was \$1,856, nearly double the \$993 for those receiving inpatient care.<sup>8</sup> Boarding disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, including older adults and mental health patients, who often require specialized inpatient care that is in short supply. In Massachusetts, for example, nearly half of patients with mental health-related ED visits experienced boarding times of 12 hours or more in 2024.<sup>9</sup> A study by the American College of Emergency Physicians found that 43% of adults would delay or avoid going to the ED as boarding meant they could face long wait times.<sup>5</sup> Overall, Emergency department boarding delays care, increases costs, and worsens outcomes.

## Policy Idea

To mitigate the effects of boarding, it is crucial to increase the efficiency of ED departments and provide a standard quality measure for boarding via federal legislation. The proposed “Emergency Department Boarding Reduction Act” would include three components:

1. Incentivizing efficient patient flow through bundled payments.

2. Increasing resources available in EDs, particularly for vulnerable populations
3. Increasing transparency and accountability by requiring hospitals to publicly report ED boarding times and introducing a national quality standard on acceptable boarding times.

This bill would also establish a task force through the Department of Health and Human Services focused on the redevelopment of ED flow comprised of representatives from sub-agencies, such as the Center of Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS), the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ).

## Policy Analysis

The “Emergency Department Boarding Reduction Act” addresses ED boarding times through financial incentives, which reforms payment structures through different admission routes and encourages hospitals not to prioritize elective admissions over ED patients.<sup>11,12</sup> Under most payment structures of fee-for-service (FFS) models, Medicare reimbursements are, on average, \$700 more per elective admission than ED admission, demonstrating

that hospitals have little financial motivation to prioritize ED admissions over elective admissions.<sup>13</sup> The proposed legislation focuses on implementing bundled payments for ED admissions, giving hospitals a lump-sum fixed payment for an entire episode of care. This incentivizes unnecessary delays, ensuring hospitals are financially incentivized to improve patient flow. The bundle payment also allows hospitals to invest in resources, ultimately improving patient safety and reducing the negative impacts of ED crowding. Boarding strains hospital resources, especially for vulnerable populations.<sup>4</sup> A University of California, Irvine study found that expanding psychiatric inpatient and crisis stabilization units while increasing geriatric care resources would reduce the amount of ED boarding by directly allocating more resources to the populations most impacted.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, accountability would be enforced by requiring hospitals to publicly report ED boarding times and introduce a national boarding time quality standard. Although the Joint Commission recommends a maximum boarding time of four hours, the guidelines are not enforced.<sup>4,15</sup> The UK introduced a “4-hour target” in 2004, requiring 98% of ED patients to be treated, admitted, or discharged within that timeframe.<sup>16,17</sup> Australia’s National Emergency Access Target (NEAT) and New Zealand’s six-hour target followed similar models.<sup>17</sup> These policies improved ED efficiency and patient flow, despite disruptions from COVID-19. International examples show that national time-based targets, paired with

accountability and investment, can lead to meaningful reform. Introducing a boarding metric would compel U.S. hospitals to prioritize patient movement and reduce ED stays.

### Highlights

- Emergency room boarding refers to a patient who stays in the emergency department (ED) after being admitted under observation but is waiting to be relocated to an inpatient unit.<sup>1</sup> ED boarding times increase annually and often exceed the recommended four hours.<sup>3,4</sup>
- To address this issue, the Emergency Department Boarding Reduction Act would introduce reform Medicare and Medicaid payment structures to financially incentivize emergency room patient flow using bundled payments. This would allow for the increase of resources available in EDs for vulnerable populations, and implement standard ED boarding times with increased transparency.
- A task force led by the Department of Health, with representatives from different sub-agencies, would focus on allocating federal funding on increased resources in emergency room units that often face the longest boarding times, as well as holding the hospital system accountable with a standard boarding time and transparent metrics.

### Implementation

The Emergency Department Boarding Reduction Act would require a phased approach, necessitating the involvement of multiple stakeholders. First, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should develop a task force comprising representatives from the CMS, HRSA, and AHRQ to oversee the development of bundled payment, resources provided, quality measures, and compliance. CMS and HRSA would focus on the shifting payment reforms to a bundled payment program to incentivize hospitals to prioritize ED admissions with reimbursement rates equivalent to those of elective procedures. Concurrently, the HRSA would allocate federal funding to expand ED resources for vulnerable populations, including psychiatric and geriatric patients, by increasing inpatient capacity and investing in crisis stabilization units. Additionally, HRSA would support hospitals, especially in rural areas, to upgrade information technology (IT) systems for real-time tracking of patient flow and reporting compliance.

To ensure accountability, the AHRQ would develop standardized national quality metrics for ED boarding times, which hospitals or the larger hospital systems must report publicly through a national dashboard. The task force would use this reported data to implement structural changes to the program the act focuses on and tailor it accordingly. The AHRQ would regularly audit hospital systems annually to ensure the act achieves its goals.

This act would likely encounter resistance from hospital

systems and federal agencies due to concerns over costs, staffing shortages, or increased administrative burdens, such as compliance concerns. Additionally, with recent federal workforce cuts, the feasibility of this legislation would be challenged as the capacity of agencies would be strained. Thus, this act should be implemented in a phased manner to ensure its feasibility, adjustment, and scalability. Phase 1 would involve creating the HHS-led task force and piloting bundled payment models and quality metrics in select high-boarding regions such as the Northeast United States.<sup>18</sup> Phase 2 would expand funding through the HRSA to build inpatient capacity and IT infrastructure, and roll out staff training programs. Phase 3 would be focused on bundled payments being used nationwide and requiring a nationwide adoption of standardized boarding metrics, public reporting, and regular audits, ensuring long-term accountability and sustained improvement. Overall, the Emergency Department Boarding Reduction Act would provide structure to address dangerous ED boardings and improve emergency care delivery by realigning hospital incentives, expanding critical resources, and enforcing accountability.

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# Using Community-Engaged Learning to Address Health Illiteracy in Los Angeles County

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*Health literacy is a key determinant of health that has been decreasing in the United States, especially in Los Angeles (LA) County. LA County should address the health illiteracy that many of its constituents experience by developing a robust partnership with local universities to conduct public health workshops to teach each respective community about prevalent public health issues in the area and the United States healthcare system, and address community health concerns.*

## Background

Los Angeles (LA) County, with a population of about 9.6 million, is one of the biggest counties in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Because of its large geographic size and high population, LA is predisposed to more public health issues, including poor health literacy.

Health literacy is the ability to access, understand, and utilize health information and services to make informed decisions about one's health and others.<sup>2,3</sup> It is key to protect one's health, preventing future health problems, and managing health conditions.<sup>2,3</sup> Key factors influencing health literacy are educational attainment, race, language, cultural competency, and healthcare access.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH), about 53% of working adults have low literacy levels, which impair their ability to understand health information.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, nearly nine out of ten adults have low health literacy levels across the United States.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, health illiteracy disproportionately affects people of color and immigrants because of limited English proficiency, socioeconomic disparities, lower educational

attainment, and community distrust.<sup>7</sup> This disparity leads to an increased risk of chronic disease development, poorer disease management, higher hospitalization and mortality rates, and worse overall health outcomes.<sup>3,8</sup> Because of the high proportion of working age adults in LA County with poor health literacy and overall literacy levels, as well as growing health illiteracy rates across the United States, exploring programs to address this public health issue on a county, state, and national level is becoming increasingly more imperative.

## Policy Idea

Because of the severity and vastness of this problem, LA County should increase the number of public health education workshops held in disadvantaged areas and incorporate local undergraduate, graduate, and high school students to serve as volunteers or interns to help facilitate, translate, and teach these public health workshops under the supervision of a public health analyst or other LACDPH worker. Through bi-monthly public health workshops to ensure accessibility and consistent frequency, LACDPH can improve health literacy by teaching community members about

prevalent health issues in their community, the United States healthcare system, and healthy lifestyle habits. Furthermore, partnering with local universities and high schools helps build trust within each respective community, creates opportunities for students to give back to their community, and develops a robust public health program and partnership.

## Policy Analysis

A community public health initiative can address low health literacy in diverse populations effectively.<sup>9</sup> This initiative is not a substitute for medical care, but an opportunity to improve the community's health literacy. These public health education workshops enhance health outcomes by increasing disease testing awareness, reducing the burden of disease, and improving the individual's understanding and management of diseases, lifestyle choices, and patient experience with providers.<sup>3,9,10</sup> Along with improving health outcomes, community health initiatives decrease healthcare costs by reducing hospitalization days spent in hospitalization by about 34% and Medicaid spending by 23.8%.<sup>10</sup> Community-based health initiatives address large populations by design,

making it the optimal way to improve community health. Community health initiatives provide a cost-effective, preventive intervention to improve health outcomes, improve health outcomes, address healthcare disparities that many marginalized communities experience, and reduce healthcare spending for the government, insurer, and patient.

Partnering with universities in the county allows students to discover their interest in healthcare and address health inequities in the community. Each workshop will include English or other languages spoken in each community in LA (e.g., Mandarin, Tagalog, and Spanish) to increase accessibility since language barriers make are a key barrier.<sup>11</sup> Local universities, such as the University of California, Los Angeles, can have public health, nursing, medical, graduate, and undergraduate students volunteer in health education workshops through internships and volunteering. Through an LACDPH and public university partnership, it provides a free way for LACDPH to expand its public health education workshops to the community, making it cost-effective since hiring a new community health specialist would cost about \$62,860 per year.<sup>12</sup> Through this robust partnership, LA and universities can pool resources to address health illiteracy and other future public health issues.

### Highlights

- Health literacy is the ability to access, understand, and utilize health information and services to make informed decisions about one's own and others' health.<sup>2,3</sup>

- Poor health literacy causes difficulty understanding health issues and is a risk factor for many diseases and poor health management, leading to poorer health outcomes.<sup>3,8</sup>
- Health illiteracy is very prevalent in Los Angeles (LA) County; 53% of residents have low literacy levels.<sup>5</sup> Plus, the variety of languages spoken in LA County affects health information access and comprehension.<sup>5,11</sup>
- A partnership with local universities would allow the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) to pool its resources with these schools to create a robust, cost-effective public health program and address health illiteracy through public health workshops.

### Implementation

To initiate these partnerships, LA County should contact local universities, like the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of Southern California, and California State Universities, including Long Beach, Dominguez Hills, and Los Angeles. Maintaining an open and honest relationship with LA's people would be crucial to rebuilding trust. Teaching health educators patience, active community listening, and transparency about the program's goals would help achieve this goal. These public health programs should also be specific to each community's needs, based on research, community feedback, and concerns. To understand each community's issues, LACDPH

analysts can mentor undergraduate and graduate student volunteers in research to identify community health issues and literacy levels. Additionally, volunteers and LACDPH workers can conduct in-person and virtual surveys and contact community members to identify health concerns. This two-pronged approach allows LA to address community public health concerns and improve the understanding of health.

LACDPH would reach out to community members by including surveys in popular areas, streets, and publicly funded buildings in disadvantaged communities, such as San Gabriel Valley and South LA.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, LACDPH would contact local non-profits and trusted community institutions to gauge their willingness to collaborate.

Ideally, LACDPH would finish identifying university and community partners prior to the academic year. Afterward, universities and communities can advertise the volunteer application on social media, school buildings, posters, and pamphlets. The application for undergraduate and graduate volunteers would be open for the first quarter/half of the semester. Then, LACDPH would train them to become presenters on public health and health literacy. After training, volunteers will collaborate with LACDPH analysts and nurses while professors facilitate in-person and digital data collection, research the most prevalent health issues in each area. LACDPH workers and professors will supervise volunteers during training and the public health workshops. After training, student volunteers and LACDPH workers should visit local cities and

facilitate public health workshops catered to each community's needs. These workshop topics could include type 2 diabetes prevention, prescription drug safety and management, proper nutrition, and US healthcare system navigation.<sup>14, 15, 16, 17, 18</sup>

Furthermore, having a diverse public health workforce with local students helps address community concerns as it provides key insight into their respective communities' issues: thus, improving the relationship LACDPH has with marginalized communities, addressing health literacy. Additionally, these public health workshops must be in accessible locations, like community centers or schools, to ensure communities' equitable access, credibility, and trust.

The initiative's success would be evaluated multidimensionally. Three components are the effectiveness at improving health literacy, community perception and feedback, and student volunteer feedback. These questionnaires would gauge community reception for community compliance, issue identification, health literacy improvement, and student satisfaction.

Although establishing partnerships may be difficult, public health does not operate in a vacuum; it requires interdisciplinary collaboration to be sustainable, efficient, and equitable. Collaboration between public health government agencies and local universities would form succinct, consolidated information of communities, increased resources for public health initiatives, and student opportunities; thus, helping LA students and residents.

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# Ensuring Equitable Access to All Forms of Medication for Opioid Use Disorder in New York State Correctional Facilities

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*Exemptions allowing correctional facilities to forgo full Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) access leave incarcerated individuals vulnerable to withdrawal and overdose. Mandating universal MOUD availability in New York's facilities and expanding provider access would close treatment gaps.*

## Background

New York State's current correctional system recognizes the necessity of providing Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) as a critical component of jail-based substance use disorder treatment and transition services.<sup>1</sup> Under SECTION 19.18-C of the Mental Hygiene Law, incarcerated individuals should be offered at least one formulation of each Food and Drug Administration-approved medication for opioid use disorder.<sup>2</sup> However, the law allows for a significant loophole: jails and prisons may receive an exemption from providing full agonist MOUD, such as methadone, if there are no accredited providers within a "reasonable distance."<sup>2</sup>

This exemption undermines the intent of the law and creates disparities in access to treatment, leading to increased withdrawal-related suffering and higher overdose risks upon release, and a failure to meet the medical standard of care for opioid use disorder.<sup>5</sup> Upon request of said services, incarcerated patients report having waited months to see providers, attesting to the detrimental effects of such leniency in guaranteed access to care.<sup>8</sup>

The state's failure to ensure universal access to all forms of

MOUD is particularly concerning given the well-documented public health and safety benefits of these treatments.<sup>5</sup> Methadone and buprenorphine can reduce overdose mortality rates, improve retention in care, and decrease recidivism.<sup>5</sup> Yet, without clear mandates for the provision of all MOUD formulations in every facility, incarcerated individuals continue to fall through the cracks, exacerbating the opioid crisis and disproportionately affecting marginalized populations.<sup>6</sup>

## Policy Idea

To close this gap and ensure that incarcerated individuals have equitable access to all three types of MOUD (methadone, buprenorphine, and naltrexone), New York State should mandate full MOUD availability by removing the exemption clause that allows jails and prisons to forgo providing full agonist MOUD due to limited provider availability. Instead, the state should require all facilities to contract with accredited providers to ensure access to medication.

Mobile MOUD units and telemedicine expansion with which the state can provide remote MOUD prescription and monitoring to facilities that lack on-site providers

can bridge the gaps in correctional settings.<sup>10</sup> This access could be ensured through establishing a statewide MOUD provider network, a centralized, state-funded program to deploy licensed MOUD providers to correctional facilities with demonstrated need. This program would prioritize staffing at facilities lacking access and offer financial incentives for healthcare professionals to work in underserved regions.

## Policy Analysis

Eliminating the provider exemption and mandating access to all three MOUD options aligns with best practices for opioid use disorder treatment.<sup>4</sup> Research consistently shows that individuals receiving MOUD in correctional settings experience lower rates of overdose deaths post-release, improved treatment retention, and reduced recidivism.<sup>5</sup> A recent 2023 study conducted on both continuation and initiation of MOUDs during incarceration showed compelling evidence of increased community-based treatment engagement post-release.<sup>11</sup> By removing logistical barriers and enforcing compliance, New York State can significantly enhance the effectiveness of its correctional substance use disorder

programs in deep consideration of post-release impact. The MAT program implemented by the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC) consists of all three drug therapies that aid in reducing withdrawal symptoms. This degree of comprehensive treatment, although not the traditional role of correctional facilities, is shown by RIDOC to be feasible and deserves to be adopted as a national model outline for New York State in this policy proposal.<sup>12</sup>

Creating a statewide provider network would be a cost-effective strategy to expand access without imposing undue burdens on individual facilities.<sup>9</sup> It would ensure that facilities follow through on their obligation to provide life-saving treatment, reducing wait time and preventing unnecessary suffering among incarcerated individuals. Following said implementation, SECTION 19.18-C's law allowing for a significant loophole through exemption due to a lack of accredited providers within a "reasonable distance" will be invalidated and subsequently dissolved.<sup>2</sup> Criteria for success of the statewide program should offer a structured and enforceable pathway to closing the treatment gap and ensuring that incarcerated individuals with OUD receive the care needed to recover and reintegrate. This initiative would offer a structured, enforceable pathway to closing the treatment gap and ensuring incarcerated individuals with OUD the care needed to recover and reintegrate into communities.

### Highlights

- New York State correctional facilities can currently bypass full Medication for

Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) access requirements if no accredited providers are within a "reasonable distance," leaving incarcerated individuals vulnerable to withdrawal and overdose.<sup>2</sup>

- Mandating universal access to all three types of MOUD and removing provider exemptions would close treatment gaps and ensure equitable care across all facilities. Expanding provider access through a statewide MOUD provider network, mobile treatment units, and telemedicine would address logistical barriers and improve service delivery.<sup>11</sup>
- Criteria for success should include universal MOUD access across all correctional facilities, improved post-release outcomes such as reduced overdose deaths and higher treatment retention, reduction of racial and geographic disparities in access, and operational feasibility through timely and coordinated care delivery.<sup>12</sup>

### Implementation

New York State's Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) should establish a phased, multi-agency strategy to enforce full MOUD access in all correctional facilities. The first step is repealing the exemption clause that allows facilities to avoid providing full agonist MOUD due to provider shortages. To ensure an adequate supply of medical personnel, the

Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS) should create an MOUD Provider Deployment Initiative that prioritizes staffing in high-need facilities.<sup>13</sup> This initiative would include expanding contracts with federally accredited addiction treatment centers, providing tuition reimbursement for healthcare workers who serve in correctional settings, and creating competitive salary incentives for MOUD prescribers. Additionally, the state should require all correctional healthcare staff to undergo annual training in MOUD best practices and opioid overdose prevention, ensuring consistent care delivery across facilities.

Beyond personnel, the state should expand telemedicine infrastructure, mandating that all facilities implement virtual MOUD assessments, remote prescribing, and follow-up care through secure electronic health record integration. Facilities without in-person prescribers should be required to establish mobile MOUD units capable of dispensing methadone, and buprenorphine, and naltrexone directly on-site. These units should be funded through opioid settlement funds and federal correctional healthcare grants, ensuring long-term sustainability.<sup>14</sup> Enforcement mechanisms should include a specialized DOCCS audit unit responsible for conducting unannounced inspections, reviewing prescription records, and ensuring adherence to treatment standards. Facilities found to be non-compliant should face progressive penalties, including financial sanctions, mandated corrective action plans, and potential loss of state funding for healthcare services exercised by DOCCS through the OASAS.

Ultimately, strengthening MOUD access in New York State’s jails and prisons is not just a matter of public health but a moral and legal imperative. By implementing these measures, New York can ensure that every incarcerated individual receives equitable, uninterrupted MOUD treatment, significantly reducing overdose deaths, improving reentry outcomes, and setting a national standard for correctional healthcare equity.

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# Improving New Mexico's Healthcare Access Through a Statewide Community Paramedicine Program

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*New Mexico should implement a statewide community paramedicine program enabling emergency medical services to provide basic primary care. This policy would help address the consequences of New Mexico's primary care shortage and improve health outcomes statewide, especially in rural areas.*

## Background

Poor primary care access presents a significant public health problem and barrier to health equity in rural areas nationwide. Despite rural residents comprising 20% of the United States population, only about 10% of American physicians practice in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> According to the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), rural regions have only 5.1 primary care practitioners per 10,000 residents, compared to 8.0 in urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Access to primary care is a key social determinant of health, and insufficient primary care coverage contributes to the health disparities rural residents face.<sup>3</sup> Such inadequacy leads to increased all-cause mortality, decreased life expectancy, worsened chronic disease management, and delayed condition diagnosis.<sup>4,5</sup> Additionally, low primary care access contributes to the overutilization of emergency departments (ED) for nonemergency care, with up to 45% of patients using the ED due to primary care barriers.<sup>5,6</sup>

In New Mexico, rural residents comprise one-third of the state's population and face significant health disparities, including high rates of chronic disease, premature mortality, and problematic substance use.<sup>7,8</sup> A key

contributor to these disparities is rural New Mexico's poor and worsening primary care access, with HRSA classifying all 14 rural counties as Health Professional Shortage Areas.<sup>7</sup> This issue is worsening, as New Mexico's primary care workforce shrank 30% from 2017 to 2021 and is the oldest in the nation.<sup>8,9</sup> Additionally, geographic isolation creates further barriers to healthcare access, with long driving times and high transportation costs.<sup>10</sup> While recently enacted policies such as the Healthcare Delivery and Access Act (2024) and Medical Malpractice Act (2023) aim to increase funding for rural hospitals and support physician retention, further action is needed to promptly address the rural primary care shortage.<sup>11,12</sup>

## Policy Idea

New Mexico should implement a statewide community paramedicine program (CP) to address its primary care access shortage and associated health consequences. A statewide CP program would improve basic healthcare access for medically underserved populations statewide, improving health outcomes and reducing rural health disparities. CP programs leverage paramedics to provide basic primary and

preventative care, care coordination, and health education tailored to their community.<sup>13</sup> Paramedics and EMS professionals undergo additional training and certification to provide these services and become healthcare providers as CPs.<sup>14</sup> New Mexico should expand CP capabilities within EMS providers statewide based on Minnesota's successful 13-year initiative, and integrate this program into the New Mexico Department of Health Emergency Medical Systems Bureau (EMSB).<sup>15</sup> This policy would include a CP education and certification process through EMSB and the University of New Mexico, ambulance modifications to provide primary care, and funding provision through grants and Medicaid reimbursement.

## Policy Analysis

Implementing a statewide community paramedicine program in New Mexico is an evidence-based intervention to expand primary care coverage and improve health outcomes. CP programs benefit chronic disease management through improved care coordination and treatment adherence, reduce hospital readmission, and increase patient satisfaction and quality-of-life rates among patients.<sup>16,17</sup> Additionally, as members of their

community, community paramedics are well-positioned to understand and assist with the unique needs of underserved rural New Mexico. A qualitative evaluation of the CP program in New Mexico's Laguna Pueblo noted that paramedics developed close relationships with patients and engaged in targeted skills training to address their needs, such as wound care among older residents.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to their health benefits, CP decreases the burden on strained local health infrastructure and reduces costs. In multiple studies, CP programs reduced costly ED utilization by 40-60%, with one pilot program also noting a 53% reduction in primary care visits after CP implementation.<sup>16,19,20</sup> This success is particularly valuable in medically underserved areas like rural New Mexico and eases pressure on healthcare professionals who face heavy workloads and high burnout rates.<sup>9</sup> Given the high costs of unnecessary ED utilization and the workforce and infrastructure challenges of expanding primary care access, CP is a distinct, cost-effective intervention with a 20% return on investment.<sup>21</sup>

### Highlights

- Poor primary care access presents a key threat to public health, particularly in rural areas. Rural New Mexico faces a significant primary care shortage and access barriers, contributing to poor and disparate health outcomes.<sup>3,7,8,9,10</sup>
- Community paramedicine (CP) utilizes trained paramedics to provide basic care, health education, and care coordination to

patients, which can help mitigate the effects of New Mexico's primary care shortage.<sup>13</sup>

- New Mexico should implement a statewide CP program through legislation that creates a state training and licensing framework, equips ambulances, and incorporates CP into the New Mexico Department of Health Emergency Medical Systems Bureau (EMS).
- CP programs benefit chronic disease management, reduce hospital readmission, and improve overall health outcomes. Studies have found CP to reduce healthcare costs through decreased emergency department utilization, with a significant return on investment. They also ease the burden on strained primary care systems, such as in New Mexico.<sup>16,17,19,20,21</sup>

### Implementation

To implement a statewide program, the New Mexico legislature should pass a bill authorizing EMS providers to provide a broader scope of practice, including CP, and establish a training and certification program. New Mexico's Department of Health, in conjunction with the University of New Mexico (UNM), would provide the training and certification program for community paramedics. UNM would implement the National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians (NAEMT) Community Paramedicine Series curriculum, a series of courses to prepare and certify paramedics following the International Board of Specialty

Certification Community Paramedicine exam.<sup>22</sup> UNM could fund its CP curriculum, exam fees, and continuing education stipends through Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Program – Emergency Medical Services Supplement grants from HRSA.<sup>23</sup> The New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship, which provides free tuition to all New Mexico residents for higher education at in-state institutions like UNM, would facilitate CP recruitment and training.<sup>24</sup>

Initial implementation steps include vehicle equipment and modifications and program integration into New Mexico's EMSB. The New Mexico Health Care Authority's Rural Health Care Delivery Fund and HRSA's Rural Health Care Services Outreach Program grants could fund these costs.<sup>25,26</sup> Like in Minnesota, New Mexico's state legislature must designate CP as Medicaid reimbursable, which would provide sustainable, long-term funding.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, lawmakers should secure private insurance reimbursement, using CP's cost-effectiveness as a strong coverage incentive.

Initially, the CP program would be a one-year pilot in Mora and McKinley counties, which rank among the lowest in health outcomes and primary care access.<sup>27</sup> To assess efficacy and feasibility, policy analysts would collect data on changes in ED utilization, hospital readmission, patient outcomes, select chronic disease management, and a mixed-methods impact assessment. New Mexico EMSB's EMS Tracking & Reporting System would receive a monthly data report and the prehospital data required for other EMS systems.<sup>28</sup> The results from

these pilot programs would guide optimal statewide implementation pending positive results.

There are a few potential obstacles to CP implementation. Buy-in from physicians, hospitals, and existing paramedics presents a potential barrier, but education and policy measures can address this issue. Education initiatives will highlight how CPs reduce the burden on overextended health professionals and infrastructure by preventing unnecessary ED utilization and improving health outcomes. The state legislature must extend state liability protections to cover CP; precise triage, clinical, and physician oversight protocols would also mitigate risks.<sup>29</sup> Recent cuts to federal funding, including HRSA and the Department of Health and Human Services, could threaten grant funding availability for initial costs. However, state funding can fill potential gaps. New Mexico reports an \$812 billion budget surplus in 2025, and the recent passage of legislation like the Healthcare Delivery and Access Act indicates legislative willingness to fund and implement healthcare initiatives.<sup>11,30</sup>

Overall, a statewide community paramedicine program is an evidence-based, cost-effective policy to improve healthcare access and health outcomes, particularly in rural areas. New Mexico is well-positioned to implement this policy, and the legislature must prioritize its passage.

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# Medical Legal Partnerships: Bridging Legal and Social Services for Immigrant Healthcare Equity

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*The US immigrant population faces many barriers to equitable healthcare access, highlighting a lack of holistic care practices. To improve outcomes, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should implement a Medical-Legal Partnership preventive intervention model to address patients' legal and social needs.*

## Background

Nearly 44.7 million immigrants comprise a considerable portion of the US population (14 percent).<sup>1</sup> Yet, the current system leaves their healthcare needs in the shadows. A quarter of the immigrant population is undocumented; consequently, one-eighth do not possess healthcare insurance due to various factors, including federal ineligibility or fear of seeking care arising from immigration enforcement policies.<sup>1</sup> Others are eligible for comprehensive coverage but have not sought it out or are unaware of the possibility.<sup>1</sup> Language barriers are highly prevalent, with 8.4 percent of households possessing Limited English Proficiency.<sup>5</sup> Still, only 39.7 percent of physicians are proficient in languages other than English.<sup>7</sup> Overall, high out-of-pocket expenses, lack of aforementioned language resources, and lack of cultural competence among physicians are barriers to equitable healthcare access for many US immigrants and necessitate action.

Medical Legal Partnerships (MLPs) embody a tangible, holistic approach to healthcare by integrating attorneys into the patient care team to bridge the gap between the social, legal, and medical care that patients receive.<sup>6</sup> This is especially helpful for immigrants

given that MLPs provide additional support in navigating inherently complex policies of the healthcare system, the legal assistance they receive, or other logistical aspects of their care.<sup>1</sup> Though lawmakers have introduced policies advocating for MLP implementation in the healthcare system in Congress, such as the H.R. 3950 Veterans Medical Legal Partnership Act of 2021 and the Elder Justice Reauthorization and Modernization Act of 2023 (which involved linkages to MLPs), they did not pass either bill.<sup>12,13</sup> In addition, these bills do not include immigrants and lack a tangible action plan (such as guidelines for excellence) outside of grant allocation and eligibility. Hence, the need for legislative action arises.

## Policy Idea

This congressional bill will support the patient population and healthcare workers' legal-related needs by expanding the MLP Program nationally, with a focus on immigrant populations. While centered on immigrants, healthcare institutions may tailor MLP services to their specific communities. The goal is to empower patients to advocate for themselves, understand the insurance policies impacting their care, and ensure healthcare teams address underlying social needs.

Providers will be mandated to adopt a holistic assessment approach, including brief interview questions during checkups to identify medical and social root causes. If providers identify legal assistance as appropriate, healthcare providers will issue “legal prescriptions” for follow-ups with MLP-affiliated attorneys. These “legal checkups” will address issues outlined by the I-HELPTM acronym: income and insurance, housing and utilities, education and employment, legal status, and personal and family stability.<sup>8</sup> A public marketing campaign and expanded language access will increase MLP reach within immigrant communities.

## Policy Analysis

MLPs will increase care accessibility through their prevention approach, leading to fewer emergency hospitalizations.<sup>6,9</sup> For example, the Cincinnati Children's Medical-Legal Partnership has successfully provided mothers with legal assistance in navigating the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) enrollment process to feed their newborns despite financial barriers and work to decrease infant mortality rates.<sup>10</sup> This tailored patient care approach is conducive to improved patient health outcomes. A 2016 Survey of

MLPs nationwide reported that 86 percent of participating facilities saw improved patient health outcomes (physical and mental), and 64 percent reported improved patient compliance with prescribed treatment after the integration of legal services into care.<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon also demonstrates that the convenience of providing legal and health services in the same facility reduces the stigma surrounding seeking care.<sup>1</sup>

Many MLPs have advocated for policy solutions related to medical-legal care trends they saw within their practice. For example, an MLP at Seattle Children’s Hospital advocated for increased accessibility of home-nursing care for children relying on ventilation treatment via solutions to reimbursement rates in 2018. In DC, Whitman-Walker Health’s MLP worked to prevent the elimination of specific insurance plans utilized by patients with chronic illnesses in the insurance marketplace.<sup>11</sup> MLP advocacy work is a positive externality of this policy as it not only benefits their patients but also community health as a whole.

These MLPs will provide a legal rights advocacy focus within the healthcare practice by fostering bi-directional education exchanges between legal and healthcare teams.<sup>1</sup> This focus influences healthcare workers to feel more empowered within their practice, which contributes to increasing healthcare job satisfaction, especially lacking in the current professional climate due to post-pandemic burnout trends.<sup>8</sup>

## Highlights

- The US healthcare system hinders the immigrant population from adequately accessing healthcare due to societal inequities, including anti-immigration sentiments and policies, difficulties in obtaining insurance coverage, and not receiving culturally inclusive care that addresses personal needs. These impact health outcomes, but legal action can mitigate their social roots.<sup>1</sup>
- Medical-Legal Partnerships (MLPs) are an intervention to bridge social care, legal support, and healthcare to provide more holistic healthcare delivery, integrating attorneys into the practice. Any patient can benefit from MLP services, but targeting them to immigrant populations specifically in relevant areas is an effective method to advocate for their needs and improve their outcomes.<sup>6,9,10</sup>
- MLPs in current institutions have improved patient health outcomes and treatment compliance, decreased emergency hospitalizations, and increased healthcare worker job satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>

## Implementation

There are hundreds of MLPs across 49 US states. However, to fully address the healthcare inequities immigrant populations face, more MLPs would be established.<sup>11</sup> A national oversight committee would head expansion and compliance evaluation. The National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership and the Network for

Public Health Law under the US Department of Health and Human Services would lead the committee. The committee would serve as a support system for all MLPs, providing professional guidance in navigating any issues that arise with any issues that arise. The committee would also manage funding efforts, advocating with a select few House of Representatives committees (House Energy and Commerce Committee, House Subcommittee on Labor, Health, and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies under the Committee on Appropriations) and Senate committees (Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions) to secure federal funding for participating federal practices and private funding from sponsor organizations and donors recruited in earlier outreach efforts.

At the facility level, interdisciplinary teams composed of attorneys, paralegals, and social care navigators would collaborate with the healthcare team, providing intervention in patient care as ordered by physicians via individual consultations (through aforementioned legal prescriptions), and additional guidance by patient request. Common services these teams would assist patients with would include applying for insurance or welfare programs (Medicaid, SNAP, etc.), connecting them to immigration legal aid (pro bono or paid based on financial need), obtaining necessary accommodations in professional settings (disability, language services), and preventing unlawful evictions.<sup>11</sup>

The policy mandates the committee to conduct annual performance audits of MLP facilities to ensure compliance

under three domains and their respective metrics.<sup>9</sup> The first would be standards of care (referral-service completion rate for MLP cases, and social and legal case time to resolution in comparison to reasonable amounts for case type). The second domain would be successful integration of legal teams into healthcare teams (percentage of total cases resolved through MLP/legal intervention, joint case conference frequency, and perception of team collaboration). The third domain would be worker and patient satisfaction (burnout indicators for staff according to Maslach Burnout Inventory, patient-reported health-related and legal awareness outcomes from interviews during consultations, and satisfaction scores).<sup>14</sup> Mandatory brief, multilingual questionnaires for faculty and patients, with a voluntary option to provide incentivized additional, long feedback via a separate form would provide confidential feedback. To ensure high response rates, surveys would be integrated into routine workflows after scheduled team meetings and by random selection of patients while on site.

University-affiliated Academic MLPs (A-MLPs) are a specialized subset of existing MLPs, typically staffed by professors in law-related universities. In addition to providing standard MLP services, they would focus on evaluating the efficacy of the MLP health intervention model and inform policy development.<sup>9</sup> A-MLPs would serve a key role on the national oversight committee, compiling findings into an annual policy review to guide future amendments. Through continuous improvement, this policy would

effectively promote equitable healthcare access and improved patient outcomes for immigrants by executing federally coordinated MLP expansion.

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