

# JOURNAL OF AFFAIRS

## CORNELL POLICY GROUP

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# SPRING 2026 CORE EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

## **Sejal Sekhar '27, *Co-President***

Sejal Sekhar is a junior studying Public Policy with minors in Business and Law & Society. She joined the Education Center in her freshman year and has since served as the Assistant Education Center Director, Education Center Director, and now Co-President of CPG. Sejal 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 the Community Partnership Funding Board, and a dancer on Cornell's competitive Bhangra Team.

## **Elliott Serna '27, *Co-President***

Elliott Serna is a junior at Cornell University's Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, studying Public Policy. Elliott joined Cornell Policy Group in the fall of 2023, working as an analyst and later Director of the Center for Domestic Policy, before serving as Co-President. His work centers on the U.S. administrative state, with a focus on how the micro-level behaviors of public servants shape macro-level policy outcomes. Outside of CPG, Elliott is an Undergraduate Research Fellow at The People Lab at Harvard Kennedy School of Government and a research assistant for Dr. Jan Voelkel and the Cornell Econometrics Lab.

## **Jaiden Fisher-Dayn '27, *Director of Internal Affairs***

Jaiden Fisher-Dayn is a junior in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, majoring in Public Policy. He joined the Cornell Policy Group during the fall of 2023 as an Analyst in the Center for Education Policy. Since then, he has been the Director of New Member Education and is currently the Director of Internal Affairs. Jaiden is a lifelong New Yorker and is passionate about New York policy and politics. During his summers, he has interned with the Department of Justice and the Legal Aid Society. Outside of CPG, Jaiden helps lead the Cornell University Parole Initiative, is a member of the Compassionate Release Project, and is the President of the Club Basketball team.

## **Alix Kerebel '28, *Director of External Affairs***

Alix Kerebel is a sophomore at the Brooks School studying Public Policy. Within CPG, she writes for the Center for Environmental & Technology Policy and serves as the Director of External Affairs. Her policy interests lie in environmental policy, and more specifically, environmental justice.

## **Merrick Word-Brown '28, *Director of Advocacy***

Merrick Word-Brown is a sophomore at Cornell University, majoring in Public Policy with a minor in Global Health. He joined CPG in the spring of 2025 as an analyst in the Center for Health Policy and now serves as Director of Advocacy. Merrick is passionate about developing and advocating for data-informed policies to address issues such as climate change, health disparities, and income inequality.

## **Keten Abebe '27, *Director of Equity***

Keten Abebe is a junior 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 the fall of 2023 as an analyst for the Foreign Policy Center and currently serves as CPG's inaugural Director of Equity. 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 Corporate Relations for the Black Ivy Pre-Law Society, an Institute of Politics and Global Affairs Scholar, a Brooks School course assistant, and the university's Student-Elected Undergraduate Trustee. She also conducts legal review and sustainable development projects as a Research Analyst for Regenerative Africa Consulting and loves exploring the intersection of policy and the law.

## SPRING 2026 CORE EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS (CONT.)

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

Zain Ali is a senior from Houston, TX, studying Public Policy in the Brooks School, where his primary policy interests are in Foreign and Education Policy. He is also active in the Cornell Political Union as Events Director, the Cornell Veterans Association, and with the Ithaca Big Brothers Big Sisters as a mentor. In his free time, Zain loves to read, play video games, and watch sunsets.

### **Enrico Hernandez '28, *Program Assistant to New Member Educators***

Enrico Hernandez is a sophomore at Cornell University's College of Human Ecology, studying Global and Public Health Sciences with a minor in Health Policy and concentration in Human Development. Enrico serves as the Program Assistant for CPG's New Member Education initiative, supporting each new CPG member during their matriculation and first semester in CPG. Outside of CPG, Enrico is the Undergraduate Representative for the Cornell Filipino Association (CFA). In this role, Enrico is responsible for fostering community in CFA, serving as a liaison between the executive board and general body members, and developing social events to increase club activity.

### **Kaitlyn Z Varriale '25, *Graduate Strategic Advisor***

Kaitlyn Z Varriale is a Cornell Sloan MHA Candidate and Fellow, and an alumna of the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, where she graduated in three years with a Bachelor of Science in Health Care Policy and minors in Health Equity and Law & Society. She currently serves as CPG's Graduate Strategic Advisor, having begun as an Analyst in the Center for Health Policy in her freshman year and risen to its Director by her sophomore year. Kaitlyn brings extensive experience from Northwell and is passionate about advancing health justice and operational excellence through strategic administration. Outside CPG, she is Vice President of Strategic Planning for Sloan's Women+ in Healthcare Leadership, a Teaching Assistant for U.S. Healthcare Systems, and a Legislative Policy Committee member on the Breakthrough T1D Young Advocates in Action Council, as well as other roles on and off campus. Kaitlyn enjoys outdoor recreation, working out, and spending time with family and friends. She aspires to become a health system administrator, leading strategies to elevate the health of all.

## SPRING 2026 EDITORS

### **Isabela Virginia Wilson '26, *Editor-in-Chief***

Isabela Virginia Wilson is a senior pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Government in the College of Arts & Sciences with minors in Law & Society and East Asian Studies. She joined Cornell Policy Group in the fall of 2023 as a Foreign Policy Analyst and currently serves as its Editor-in-Chief. Her policy interests pertain to national defense and human rights issues affecting East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Outside of CPG, she is a research assistant for the Cornell Government Department's Gender and Security Sector Lab and is a fellow of Pi Lambda Sigma (POLIS). After graduation, Isabela plans to pursue a Juris Doctor and practice in national security law.

### **Arjun Anugole '28, *Associate Editor***

Arjun Anugole is a sophomore, majoring in Biological Sciences with a minor in Health Policy on a pre-medical track. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 as an analyst for the Center for Health Policy 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 teaching assistant for CHEM 2070.

### **Suhani Chawla '28, *Associate Editor***

Suhani Chawla is a sophomore studying Industrial and Labor Relations and minoring in Business. She was born in New Delhi, India, later moved to Dhaka, Bangladesh, and now lives in Shanghai, China. She joined Cornell Policy Group in Fall 2025 as a Foreign Policy Analyst and currently serves as an Associate Editor. Her policy interests focus on international arbitration and human rights, particularly improving the effectiveness of international law. Outside of CPG, she is the Editor-in-Chief of the Phi Alpha Delta Pre-Law Fraternity Undergraduate Law Review, an Associate Editor for the Undergraduate International Law Review, and a Speaker Curator for TEDxCornell. After graduation, Suhani plans to pursue a Juris Doctor and practice international arbitration.

### **Quinn Friedman '28, *Associate Editor***

Quinn Friedman is a sophomore studying Industrial and Labor Relations, pursuing minors in Law and Society and Labor Economics. He joined CPG in the spring of 2025 as an analyst in the Center for Domestic Policy and currently serves as an Associate Editor. His policy interests focus on labor issues and improving the conditions of working people. Outside of CPG, Quinn is the Vice President of Cornell Club Boxing.

### **Krystlove Yeboah '27, *Associate Editor***

Krystlove Yeboah is a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences studying Government and Sociology with a minor in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She joined the Cornell Policy Group in the spring of 2024 as an analyst for the Foreign Policy Center and currently serves as an Associate Editor. Her policy interests include educational policy, youth empowerment, and social equity within the African Diaspora. Outside of CPG, Krystlove serves as a Peer Mentor for the College of Arts and Sciences, a Writing Tutor for the John S. Knight Institute, and a Research Fellow with the Jeb. E. Brooks School's Center on Global Democracy.

## SPRING 2026 CENTER DIRECTORS

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

Avery Prince is a sophomore studying Public Policy at the Brooks School. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 as an analyst in the Center for Domestic Policy and served as the Assistant Domestic Center Director in the spring of 2025. His policy interests lie in the fields of criminal justice, policing, and education. Outside of CPG, Avery is a news writer for the Cornell Daily Sun, a member of Cornell Sports Analytics, the Prison Reform and Education Project, Cornell University American Civil Liberties Union, and the Philanthropy Executive of Pi Kappa Phi.

### **Samuel Stille '26**, *Assistant Director, Center for Domestic Policy*

Samuel Stille is a senior studying Public Policy at the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy. He joined CPG in Spring 2023 in the Domestic Policy Center and currently serves as the Assistant Center Director for Domestic Policy. Samuel is interested in corporate regulation, transportation policy, and income inequality. Outside of CPG, he is a teaching assistant for two classes and the Treasurer for Friends of Médecins Sans Frontières.

### **Aryan Shah '28**, *Director, Center for Economic Policy*

Aryan Shah is a sophomore studying Public Policy, with intended minors in Data Science and Applied Economics. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 as an analyst in the Economic Center and currently serves as the Director of the Center for Economic Policy. Aryan's policy interests lie at the intersection of economic policy and data analysis, specifically in the fields of infrastructure, urban development, and economic inequality. Outside of CPG, Aryan is an Undergraduate Democracy Fellow for the Cornell Center on Global Democracy, an analyst for the Cornell Data Journal, and a member of a social fraternity.

### **Adam Azevedo '28**, *Assistant Director, Center for Economic Policy*

Adam Azevedo is a sophomore pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Urban and Regional Studies in the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning. He joined Cornell Policy Group in the fall of 2025 as an Economic Policy Analyst and currently serves as Assistant Center Director for the Center for Economic Policy. His policy interests center on housing, transportation, and urban development. Beyond CPG, he is a member of the Sustainable Mobility Subteam at Cornell University Sustainable Design.

### **Rhith Tsundupalli '28**, *Director, Center for Education Policy*

Rhith Tsundupalli is a sophomore studying Public Policy at the Brooks School of Public Policy. He joined Cornell Policy Group as an education policy analyst in the spring of 2025 and now serves as the Director of the Center for Education Policy. Rhith's policy interests focus on educational inequality and economic mobility. Outside of CPG, Rhith is the Executive Administrator of Cornell's Kappa Alpha Pi Pre-Law Fraternity, an editor for the Cornell Undergraduate Economic Review, and a contributing news journalist for The Cornell Daily Sun.

### **Kiran Chaudhry-Bishop '29**, *Assistant Director, Center for Education Policy*

Kiran Chaudhry-Bishop is a freshman pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Public Policy in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy. He joined Cornell Policy Group in the fall of 2025 as an Education Policy Analyst and currently serves as the Assistant Center Director for the Center for Education Policy. Outside of CPG, he is an analyst with Cornell Political Strategy Group and an undergraduate global democracy fellow with the Jeb E. Brooks Center for Global Democracy. After graduation, Kiran plans to pursue a Juris Doctor and practice in education law.

## SPRING 2026 CENTER DIRECTORS (CONT.)

### **Kashyap Rajesh '28**, *Director, Center for Environmental & Technology Policy*

Kashyap Rajesh is a sophomore studying Information Science and Government, with a minor in artificial intelligence. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 and currently serves as the Director of the Center for Environment & Technology Policy. His policy interests span a range of tech-related issues, including AI-generated deepfakes, AI companions, surveillance and data privacy, national security risks, and chip/export control policy. On campus, Kashyap is involved in the Kappa Alpha Pi Pre-Law Fraternity, Cornell Tarana A Cappella team, Cornell Consult Your Community, and the Cornell Political Strategy Group.

### **Finn Woodman '28**, *Assistant Director, Center for Environmental & Technology Policy*

Finn is a sophomore studying Urban and Regional Studies in the College of Art, Architecture, and Planning. He joined CPG as an Environment & Technology Policy Analyst in the spring of 2025 and now serves as the Assistant Center Director for Environment & Technology Policy. He is interested in contributing to the fight against the climate crisis and hopes to use his skills and knowledge to contribute to sustainability-focused policy in the future. Outside of CPG, Finn is a sub-team leader for Cornell University Sustainable Design and a member of Cornell Club Table Tennis and Sigma Alpha Epsilon.

### **Zaki Ahmad '28**, *Director, Center for Foreign Policy*

Zaki Ahmad is a sophomore majoring in Industrial and Labor Relations with minors in Finance and International Markets & Development. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 and currently serves as the Director of the Center for Foreign Policy, where he focuses on writing about labor and international economic issues. Outside of CPG, Zaki competes in consulting case competitions, is an active member of UCHA, a social fraternity, and enjoys running in his free time.

### **Jorge Mariño '26**, *Assistant Director, Center for Foreign Policy*

Jorge Mariño is a senior studying Government at the College of Arts & Sciences. He joined CPG as a Foreign Policy Analyst in the Spring of 2024 and now serves as the Assistant Center Director of the Center for Foreign Policy. Jorge's policy interests intersect between Latin American politics, democratic backsliding, and economic development. Beyond CPG, Jorge is the Secretary of Democrats at Cornell University.

### **Kimia Shahriyar '28**, *Director, Center for Health Policy*

Kimia Shahriyar is a sophomore at the Brooks School pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Health Care Policy. She currently serves as the Director of the Center for Health Policy, where her policy and research interests include harm reduction, drug legislation, and equitable access to healthcare. Outside of CPG, Kimia is the recruitment chair for End Overdose Cornell and a member of Alpha Iota Gamma. She hopes to integrate her background in clinical care and health policy to advance more sustainable health systems.

### **Tanirika Choudhry '28**, *Assistant Director, Center for Health Policy*

Tanirika Choudhry is a sophomore studying Healthcare Policy on a pre-medical track in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy. She joined the CPG's Health Policy Center in Fall 2024 as an analyst and now serves as the Assistant Center Director. Tanirika's interests include mental health care delivery, health equity, and insurance reforms. Outside of CPG, she is involved in research through Weill Cornell and is a dancer in Cornell Bhangra.

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

Dear Reader,

On behalf of Cornell Policy Group, I am pleased to present the twenty-fifth edition of the *Journal of Affairs*.

I have had the pleasure of continuing to assist our analysts in developing and crafting their unique policy ideas during my second semester as Cornell Policy Group's Editor-in-Chief. With assistance from our organization's Associate Editors, Center Directors, Assistant Center Directors, and the entire executive board, Cornell Policy Group's work continues to distinguish our publication on and beyond Cornell University's campus.

This semester's *Journal of Affairs* contains 36 policy proposals across our six policy centers. Cornell Policy Group's analysts have proposed several unique policy initiatives, including but not limited to a state-level justice reinvestment framework, a legislative amendment aimed at encouraging Americans to pursue career and technical education, and modifications to the Medicare Advantage risk-adjustment payment eligibility system. Each analyst's research provides groundbreaking and timely policy solutions to some of the most critical issues affecting our world.

Cornell Policy Group's new analyst class continues to impress our entire organization with their innovative and thoughtful policy proposals. The continued dedication of our organization's New Member Educators, Zain Ali '26 and Enrico Hernandez '28, equipped this semester's class with key analytical and professional skills that will assist them within our organization and in their future careers.

Furthermore, I have been pleased to oversee the further development and expansion of the *Journal of Affairs* chapter "Crossroads." This nascent section of our publication contains intersectional policy proposals written by two authors who are members of different policy centers. By allowing analysts to compose a proposal with a peer outside of their policy field, Cornell Policy Group aims to reflect real-world policy discourse and promote diverse policy perspectives. This semester, "Crossroads" includes three joint policy proposals spanning four policy centers. I extend my gratitude to the six analysts whose work has made this second release memorable.

As a graduating senior, this semester also marks my final semester serving as Cornell Policy Group's Editor-in-Chief. I first joined the organization as a sophomore in the Fall 2023 semester and became an analyst for the Center for Foreign Policy. As a student who had recently transferred into the College of Arts & Sciences to study Government, Cornell Policy Group was a welcoming, like-minded student community that helped me understand policymaking beyond the classroom. Over the past three years, I have had the honor and pleasure of watching our club grow and producing our publication in various capacities. Thank you to Cornell Policy Group, particularly the Center for Foreign Policy, for entrusting me with these responsibilities and making my undergraduate career an experience I will never forget.

After another successful publication, I am confident that our organization will continue to evolve with the world's dynamic policy ecosystems. With support from Cornell Policy Group's next executive board and team of editors, our organization will certainly publish an outstanding twenty-sixth edition in Fall 2026.

Thank you to everyone who has supported Cornell Policy Group and this publication. I hope you enjoy reading our analysts' policy proposals from this semester.

Sincerely,

Isabela Virginia Wilson '26  
*Editor-in-Chief*

# “CROSSROADS”

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*INTERSECTIONAL, CROSS-CENTER POLICIES*

## Domestic and Education Policy

“Housing Teachers Where They Teach:  
Improving Teacher Retention in California’s High-Needs Districts”

Avery Prince: Center for Domestic Policy  
Rohith Tsundupalli: Center for Education Policy

## Domestic and Foreign Policy

“Strengthening Enforcement Against Iranian Shadow Fleets”

Arrow Peretz: Center for Domestic Policy  
Harrison Keyser: Center for Foreign Policy

## Education and Environmental & Technology Policy

“Every Student, One Planet:  
Incorporating Climate Education into Fourth-Grade Classrooms Nationwide”

Kiran Chaudhry-Bishop: Center for Education Policy  
Kevin Chang: Center for Environmental & Technology Policy

# Housing Teachers Where They Teach: Improving Teacher Retention in California’s High-Needs Districts

By Avery Prince, [asp356@cornell.edu](mailto:asp356@cornell.edu), and Rohith Tsundupalli, [rt535@cornell.edu](mailto:rt535@cornell.edu)

*To address teacher retention disparities in California's high-need districts, the California State Legislature should implement a state-backed mortgage assistance program for teachers who commit to working in these districts. To address teacher retention disparities in California's high-need districts, the California State Legislature should implement a state-backed mortgage assistance program for teachers who commit to working in these districts.*

## Background

Since California passed the Teacher Housing Act of 2016, school districts across the state have sought to provide affordable housing for educators on district-owned land.<sup>1</sup> However, the state has not done enough to create more housing for teachers and staff. Only 12 educational housing projects currently exist, and all are either occupied, nearing completion, or under construction.<sup>2</sup> High housing prices prevent school staff from living where they work, leaving almost one-third of teachers “rent-burdened,” or spending more than 30% of their income on rent.<sup>1</sup> Of these teachers, roughly half are considered “severely rent-burdened,” spending more than 50% of their income on rent.<sup>1</sup>

California’s rising housing costs are contributing to teacher turnover and exacerbating retention challenges, especially in high-need school districts. As housing costs rise, many teachers cannot afford to live in their school communities, leading to financial strain or relocation.<sup>1,3</sup> Between 2016 and 2018, 12% of teachers left their school districts annually, with 9% leaving the public school system entirely and 3% switching districts.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, teacher turnover remains an issue. About one in ten districts reports rates of 25% or higher, with the highest among districts serving larger shares of students from low-income families.<sup>3</sup> This trend suggests a gap between low teacher salaries and high regional housing costs, as the California School Boards Association (CSBA) recognizes housing affordability as a roadblock to teacher retention.<sup>4</sup> A recent survey found that 84% of California educators cannot afford to live near the schools where they work.<sup>5,6</sup> Schools serving low-income communities already experience higher turnover and shortages, and when teachers cannot afford housing, school districts struggle even more to retain teachers.<sup>7</sup> California must adopt targeted housing solutions to keep teachers living and working in high-need districts.

## Policy Idea

The California State Legislature should create a state-backed home loan program for teachers in high-need districts, offering reduced fees and stronger loan terms for teachers who commit to staying longer. Through this program, California would

guarantee a portion of mortgage loans issued by private lenders, enabling teachers to buy homes without requiring a down payment. To encourage retention, the program will offer teachers the choice between a five-year commitment with no fees or a three-year commitment with 1.5% fees.

This policy would prioritize teachers in the highest-need districts, particularly those with high turnover rates, high shares of low-income students, and high housing cost burdens. By offering a loan program that prioritizes teacher retention and supports teachers in the early stages of their career, this program would help teachers stay in the communities where they work and ease the burden of long-term service in high-need districts.

## Policy Analysis

Implementing a state-backed home loan program for teachers in California’s high-need districts would expand access to stable housing, offering a targeted way to improve teacher retention without requiring the state to build housing units directly. Rising housing costs have made it difficult for teachers to live in the communities they serve, and research in California indicates

that teachers are increasingly rent-burdened or unable to afford housing near their schools.<sup>5,6</sup> By reducing the upfront barrier to housing, California could support teachers while maintaining long-term stability in its highest-need districts.

Unlike broad salary increases or building housing, a service-linked home loan program ties support directly to retention, protecting homeownership and helping teachers build long-term wealth.<sup>8</sup> Teachers who commit to staying for longer periods of time would receive more favorable terms, a policy that has gained interest from teachers.<sup>9</sup> By rewarding continuity and directing benefits to districts facing the most severe shortages and financial needs, this policy would create clear incentives for lasting success. While California already offers some benefits to homebuyers through down payment support, targeting this policy to teachers using a similar model would ensure feasibility rather than creating an entirely new system.<sup>10</sup>

This policy also addresses current inequities in California housing policy, increasing access for teachers who are unable to save enough for a down payment. While resources that support mortgages or financing exist, they may not be sufficient to overcome the underlying issues behind limited retention in high-need districts.<sup>11</sup> Offering direct loan support to teachers combats the soaring costs of teacher turnover, as current estimates report roughly \$25,000 per teacher in large districts.<sup>12</sup> By implementing a targeted home loan program, California would address a structural cause of teacher turnover while promoting stability

and retention in the schools that need it most.

### Highlights

- Approximately one-third of teachers in California are “rent-burdened,” and roughly half of this group is considered “severely rent-burdened.”<sup>1</sup> About 84% of teachers cannot afford to live near their schools, especially in high-needs districts.<sup>6</sup>
- Rising housing costs have driven 12% of teachers to leave their home districts, costing large districts an estimated \$25,000 per teacher in turnover.<sup>3,12</sup>
- To alleviate this burden on educators, the California State Legislature should create a state-backed home loan program that targets teachers in high-needs districts to incentivize teacher retention without building new housing units.
- The program targets lasting success and stability by addressing equity concerns, mitigating turnover costs, and combating staffing shortages in high-needs districts.<sup>8,11,12</sup>

### Implementation

California should utilize its current momentum to pass legislation for a state-supported mortgage assistance program. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond and State Senator Jesse Arreguín (D-07) have already shown interest in the issue through Senate Bill 502, and they should be advocates for a mortgage-backed assistance program.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Thurmond’s office, which

recognized pre-development costs and housing affordability as major barriers to educator retention, would likely co-sponsor this legislation with the Senate Education or Housing Committee.<sup>13</sup> The California Housing Finance Agency (CalHFA), which manages existing mortgage and down payment assistance programs, should be the lead agency overseeing implementation, while the California Department of Education should be responsible for identifying high-need districts and verifying educator employment and service commitments.<sup>14</sup>

Support from advocacy organizations would be critical in building traction for this proposal. Organizations like the California School Boards Association (CSBA) currently advocate for education workforce housing and offer training and resources for teachers.<sup>15</sup> Utilizing CSBA’s statewide platforms would help generate public awareness of how housing assistance could directly improve recruitment and retention in schools, particularly in high-need communities experiencing staffing shortages. Additionally, the California Education Workforce Housing Alliance could help broaden support for the program by connecting it to larger statewide conversations about workforce housing and framing it as a practical response to housing instability.<sup>16</sup> Together, these organizations could strengthen legislative support by advancing this policy into the public spotlight and advocating for its broad positive impact as a bill that invests in teachers and affordable housing more generally.

After enacting the policy, California should phase in implementation over a roughly two-

year period. In the first six months, the California legislature and CalHFA should finalize eligibility rules and clarify and define the loan terms, ensuring that funding would meet the policy's financial needs. In the next six months, CalHFA and the California Department of Education should create an application and verification process and identify a pilot group of the highest-need districts based on turnover rates, the share of low-income students, and housing cost burdens. In the second year, California could begin to guarantee loans through participating lenders while monitoring preliminary teacher participation and retention outcomes to ensure future success.

One limitation of this policy is the potential fiscal risk to California of backing mortgage loans for teachers who may ultimately be unable to sustain monthly payments. By reducing upfront barriers to homeownership, there could be a risk of long-term repayment difficulties in high-cost regions or during periods of economic hardship. To address this concern, California should carefully consider the qualifications for receiving state-backed loans, requiring certain repayment standards and particularly rewarding long-term financial security.

Critics who believe participation will be concentrated in specific regions or among specific demographics could also oppose this policy. California should thus emphasize supporting teachers in the most burdened areas and ensuring that knowledge of the program is widespread and accessible to diverse populations.

Effective implementation will result in broad support for

teacher retention, serving populations most in need.

### Works Cited

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# Strengthening Enforcement Against Iranian Shadow Fleets

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*The US should implement port-centric sanctions and mandatory maritime transparency requirements to effectively dismantle the shadow-fleet infrastructure that allows China to bypass Iranian oil sanctions and undercut American energy producers.*

## Background

The United States is one of the world's largest oil producers, largely due to the rapid expansion of the shale industry over the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> As a major producer reliant on high-cost shale, the US is highly sensitive to price fluctuations. When Iran increases global supply by exporting discounted oil to China, it lowers prices and reduces US producer revenues, as seen when Brent crude oil prices declined in 2025.<sup>2,3</sup> In an effort to limit Iran's oil exports, the US and European Union (EU) implemented oil sanctions targeting its petroleum sector.<sup>4,5</sup> Despite these measures, Iran continues to export large quantities of oil to China, which accounted for 91% of its exports in early 2026.<sup>6</sup> Chinese refineries like the Zhejiang Petroleum and Chemical (ZPC) complex in Zhoushan and the Sinopec Zhenhai Refinery in Zhejiang face US financial penalties if they directly import sanctioned oil, incentivizing alternative channels.<sup>7,13,14</sup>

To circumvent restrictions, China relies on "shadow fleets," networks of opaque tankers that often disable tracking systems like the automatic identification systems (AIS). Iranian oil is transferred at sea to compliant, non-sanctioned vessels, allowing it to enter Chinese ports without triggering

enforcement.<sup>9</sup> This trading system relies on Chinese yuan and intermediary networks, obscuring transactions and reducing exposure to US regulators.<sup>9</sup> Chinese buyers have a clear financial incentive to use this system: in 2025, China purchased more than 80% of Iran's seaborne oil exports, with Iranian crude trading at roughly \$8-\$10 per barrel below Brent, the primary global benchmark.<sup>10</sup> By reducing reliance on the dollar and enabling discounted purchases, this system weakens American sanctions by allowing Iran to sustain high export volumes and maintain access to global markets despite Western restrictions.<sup>11,12</sup>

## Policy Idea

To limit Chinese importation of Iranian crude oil and reinforce US sanctions on Iran, Congress should implement extensive sanctions on Chinese ports that handle the illegally acquired Iranian oil from shadow fleets. The sanctions should target the ZPC complex in Zhoushan and the Sinopec Zhenhai Refinery in Zhejiang, two of the largest oil refineries in China.<sup>13,14</sup> Domestically, the United States should require vessels seeking access to US maritime infrastructure to disclose complete AIS tracking histories, beneficial ownership structures, and records of

lighterage. Reinforced sanctions on Iranian oil exports would target vessels with unexplained AIS gaps, scattered ownership structures, or evidence of shadow-fleet activity.

## Policy Analysis

Recent US sanctions against the Iranian-Chinese oil trade have been effective in disrupting shadow fleets' two-part journeys by creating a shipping bottleneck onshore.<sup>15</sup> The US has targeted Chinese ports before, namely in the case of the Lanshan Port, operated by Shandong Jincheng Petrochemical Group.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Congress introduced the Sanctioning Harborers and Dodgers of Western Sanctions Act of 2026 (SHADOW) in January 2026.<sup>17</sup> The act imposed sanctions on all vessels, operators, and insurers of Russia's shadow fleet, and a similar bill can be used regarding Iranian tankers.<sup>17</sup> Though the act awaits a vote, the Iranian conflict and China's economic gains incentivize Congress to hinder both nations' prospects.

Shadow fleets rapidly change flags, managers, and ownership to evade traditional sanctions enforcement, which targets individual vessels.<sup>4</sup> Targeting the networks that enable oil transport is more effective because it offers a more durable solution: fleets can easily replace individual vessels, whereas

replacing the ports or financial systems that allow illicit trade is far more difficult.

Recent enforcement efforts demonstrate how governments can instead target the operating environment itself. The G7 Price Cap Coalition, for example, requires maritime service providers, insurers, and financial institutions to monitor vessels for sanctions risks and report suspicious activity.<sup>18</sup> Coastal states in the EU have also begun detaining suspicious vessels using maritime safety and infrastructure protection laws.<sup>19</sup> In one recent case, Finnish authorities seized a vessel linked to Russia's shadow fleet, after investigators connected it to damage to an undersea power cable in the Baltic Sea.<sup>20</sup>

The US Treasury finds that stricter compliance requirements increase shadow-fleet transport costs and reduce Iran's per-barrel revenue.<sup>21</sup> By conditioning access to US financial systems and port infrastructure on adherence to these standards, the policy effectively utilizes the private sector as a continuous enforcement layer.

### Highlights

- China bypasses Western sanctions on Iranian oil through a shadow fleet of unmarked tankers that import discounted oil to Chinese refineries, undermining US foreign policy and hurting American energy producers.<sup>2,10</sup>
- The US Congress should impose sanctions on major Chinese refineries and ports that handle illicit oil and require any vessel using American ports to provide

transparent ownership and tracking histories.

- Congress has successfully targeted ports and maritime services, indicating that this proposal is an efficient alternative to direct intervention and can build upon existing legislative frameworks like the Sanctioning Harborers and Dodgers of Western Sanctions (SHADOW) Act of 2026.<sup>7,17,20</sup>
- Following the G7 and the European Union, Congress can leverage private institutions to detect and seize these shadow-fleet ships, targeting broader illicit systems rather than individual vessels.<sup>5,13,19</sup>

### Implementation

If passed, the SHADOW Act would lead to sanctions on Chinese ports that accept Russian crude oil. Similar provisions should be extended to cover Iranian crude oil, specifically targeting the ZPC complex and Sinopec refinery.<sup>13,14,22</sup> The new bill should also incorporate the language of International Maritime Organization Resolution A.1192, which urges increased state oversight of mid-ocean ship-to-ship transfers (STS).<sup>23</sup> Because Chinese shadow fleets rely heavily on these transfers to evade sanctions, strengthening oversight of STS activity would directly target a key evasion method.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, rather than relying on broad EU coordination, the US should prioritize domestic tools and leverage private-sector actors as enforcement mechanisms. The State Department and US Treasury should require financial

institutions, insurers, and maritime service providers to move beyond static sanctions lists and actively monitor evolving risk indicators, including AIS systems, insurance structures, and STS. Furthermore, compliance frameworks should shift from list-based screening toward network-based analysis. Instead of merely checking lists of individual sanctioned ships, firms would be required to track ownership history and detect patterns of illicit activity across affiliated vessels and companies. This transition ensures that no shadow vessels, regardless of their shell company, can obtain access to US maritime services.

By barring shadow fleets from US ports and certain insurance and financial systems, the State Department and Coast Guard can force the tankers into inefficient, one-way routes. This approach mirrors the 2012 Western insurance ban, which successfully collapsed Iranian crude exports by 57% over seven months by severing access to Western shipping infrastructure.<sup>24</sup> As for oversight, the legislation should require the Secretary of State to report on the visible effects on the Chinese-Iranian oil trade every four months, a timeline consistent with Russian shadow fleet documentation.<sup>22</sup>

Senator Jim Risch (R-ID), as Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is well-positioned to introduce this legislation. Senator Risch has consistently taken a hardline stance on both Iran and China and has supported policies that strengthen US energy competitiveness, making him a natural sponsor.<sup>25</sup> While broader US policy toward Iran remains politically contentious, this proposal targets sanctions enforcement rather than military

engagement, increasing its appeal across party lines.<sup>26</sup>

Republicans are likely to support the bill as a means of countering Iran and China while protecting US energy producers. Democrats would support it because it offers a demilitarized strategy to combating Iranian and Chinese growth.<sup>27,28</sup> Because the proposal builds on existing sanctions frameworks and does not require significant new spending, it has a plausible path to bipartisan support despite broader disagreements over Iran policy. The bill should also be proposed after the current oil shocks subside, as Congress's current concern is rectifying that crisis, and this bill could reduce the amount of oil on the market.

By prioritizing port-centric sanctions and private-sector enforcement, this proposal offers a bipartisan framework to protect US energy interests and dismantle the foundations of the Iranian-Chinese shadow trade.

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# Every Student, One Planet: Incorporating Climate Education into Fourth-Grade Classrooms Nationwide

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*To address gaps in climate literacy, Congress should amend the Every Student Succeeds Act to require states to integrate climate education into fourth-grade science curricula as a condition for receiving Title IV-A funding.*

## Background

The US faces a climate literacy deficit. A 2023 Allianz SE survey found that only 5% of American respondents qualified as highly climate-literate, while over 55% demonstrated low climate literacy.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, a 2025 *This Is Planet Ed* survey revealed that only 12% of American teens feel they know a substantial amount about the causes of climate change, and only 10% expressed confidence regarding solutions.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, states like New York and New Jersey have enacted legislation requiring K-12 public schools to integrate elements of climate education into all subjects.<sup>3,4</sup> Additionally, 20 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) framework, incorporating earth system science into elementary and secondary coursework, but several others have resisted integrating climate studies into traditional curricula.<sup>5,6</sup> Although Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) funding established under Title IV, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) encourages states to fund “Well-Rounded Education” (WRE) programs, no standardized national framework for climate education exists.<sup>7,8</sup>

Increasing climate literacy is important for many reasons. First, climate change has had profound effects on the future job market. Professions like environmental engineering and climate risk analysis are experiencing considerable growth, and both fields require a working knowledge of Earth’s climate systems.<sup>9,10</sup> Second, greater climate literacy can help promote climate resilience in marginalized communities that are more likely to experience natural disasters and face higher mortality rates from them.<sup>11,12</sup> Curricula designed to increase awareness about local climate risks can increase support for protective infrastructure and help communities respond swiftly when emergencies strike.<sup>13,14</sup> Finally, climate literacy is central to improving environmental decision-making and combatting climate change, as educated individuals make more sustainable choices in their daily lives.<sup>15,16,17</sup>

## Policy Idea

Congress should pass the Elementary Climate Literacy Act (ECLA) to amend Title IV, Part A of the ESSA, making the incorporation of climate education into fourth-grade science curricula an additional condition for receiving SSAE funding.

Developmental psychology research indicates that environmental attitudes solidify before age 11, making fourth grade a uniquely effective intervention point for building lasting climate awareness.<sup>18</sup>

States should maintain full authority over curriculum design, consistent with the Tenth Amendment’s reservation of educational powers to the states. They should submit implementation plans to the Department of Education (ED), describing how fourth-graders will learn about Earth system science, climate change, and associated environmental solutions. These proposals should also outline the creation of statewide climate literacy tests designed to evaluate the effectiveness of climate science instruction. The ED would provide model curricula, teacher training resources, and technical assistance to support state compliance.

## Policy Analysis

A meta-analysis synthesizing five decades of environmental research across 119 studies and participants in 33 countries found that environmental education produced statistically significant improvements in students’ environmental knowledge, attitudes, and self-reported

behavior.<sup>19</sup> The analysis found large effect sizes for knowledge gains and moderate effects for attitudes, demonstrating the effectiveness of climate curricula.<sup>19</sup>

In the US, New Jersey adopted a policy in 2020 requiring K-12 schools to integrate climate education into all subject curricula, and has since experienced subsequent increases in instructional quality and student engagement.<sup>4,20</sup> The state's implementation of new curricula and associated professional development efforts has led to 95% of teachers reporting greater confidence in teaching climate change, and student-driven climate resilience projects partnering with 48 local organizations to explore practical solutions.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which linked federal educational aid to states implementing challenging academic standards, provides precedent that conditioning federal funding can drive measurable increases in achievement.<sup>22</sup> As schools across the nation began to implement higher-quality curricula in accordance with NCLB, average math and reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress for fourth-grade students increased from 226 to 240 and 213 to 223, respectively, from 2000 to 2015.<sup>23,24</sup>

Finally, there is strong evidence that increasing climate literacy can help mitigate the effects of climate change. Researchers at San Jose State University found that students who took a climate education course made environmentally-conscious decisions that decreased the average participant's carbon footprint by 2.86 tons annually.<sup>17</sup> They

concluded that if colleges implement similar courses nationwide, the corresponding reduction in emissions would be comparable to large-scale measures like a societal transition to electric vehicles.<sup>17</sup>

### Highlights

- The United States faces a severe climate literacy deficit, with only 5% of Americans qualifying as highly climate-literate and only 12% of teenagers feeling knowledgeable about the causes of climate change.<sup>1,2</sup>
- To address this, Congress should pass the Elementary Climate Literacy Act, amending the Every Student Succeeds Act to condition Student Support and Academic Enrichment funding on states integrating climate education into fourth-grade science curricula.
- A meta-analysis encompassing 119 studies from 33 countries found that climate education generated statistically significant improvements in environmental knowledge, attitudes, and self-reported behavior regarding the environment amongst students.<sup>19</sup>
- Researchers at San Jose State University have determined that students who took a climate education class at the college have made environmentally-conscious decisions in subsequent years that have decreased their individual carbon

footprints by 2.86 tons annually, on average.<sup>17</sup>

### Implementation

Congress should introduce the ECLA through the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions or the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.<sup>25,26</sup> To broaden this proposal's appeal and secure legislative adoption, climate education should be framed as essential to increasing workforce readiness and US competitiveness in STEM fields. Developing climate literacy skills as students can open pathways to future jobs in expanding green sectors, and a Stanford analysis found that environmental education broadly improved knowledge in science and math, helping US students compete globally.<sup>9,10,27</sup> These benefits align with the Trump administration's current focus on workforce development and historical emphasis on STEM education, and sponsors should highlight them to solicit bipartisan support.<sup>28,29</sup> Furthermore, they should emphasize that by placing conditions on broad grants rather than imposing direct regulations, and preserving state authority over curricula, the ECLA follows the ESSA's bipartisan approach of requiring accountability from schools nationwide while maintaining state-level flexibility.<sup>30</sup>

Following adoption, states should submit plans for curricula and corresponding assessments to the ED by the start of the 2027-2028 school year, and start teaching new curricula by the start of the 2029-2030 year, following the ESSA's original implementation timeline.<sup>31</sup> To address concerns about partisan influence, the ECLA

should mandate that plans align with peer-reviewed scientific standards like the NGSS, rather than relying on political officials to determine the parameters of climate science content.<sup>32</sup>

Teachers should be directly involved in the implementation process, and the ED should reserve a portion of SSAE funds for professional development. States should model staff trainings on New Jersey’s Climate Change Learning Collaboratives approach, which paired schools with higher education institutions and local nonprofits for workshops on new curricula, helping to improve confidence in teaching climate change for 95% of educators.<sup>21</sup>

Following implementation, states should also submit annual progress reports containing key evaluative criteria. These reports should include documentation of professional development hours for each district, anonymous surveys on educator confidence in teaching new content, and student outcome metrics, like climate literacy assessment scores, surveys on environmental attitudes, and enrollment rates in environmental science electives in secondary schools.

Finally, Title IV, Part A lists environmental education as an eligible use of SSAE allocations under the WRE designation, providing a clear funding stream for this proposal.<sup>7</sup> Currently, the ESSA requires states to distribute 95% of SSAE funds to school districts, and mandates that districts receiving upwards of \$30,000 spend a minimum of 20% of funds on WRE initiatives.<sup>33,34</sup> States retain the remaining 5% of total SSAE grants though for discretionary spending on statewide activities, and the

ECLA should mandate that they dedicate this portion to state-level WRE programming, specifically the development of curricula, assessments, and teacher trainings related to climate science.<sup>33</sup> This design ensures that incorporating climate education into fourth-grade science courses nationwide does not divert funding from established WRE programs.

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# DOMESTIC POLICY

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# Employing Public Healthcare Systems for Immigration Detention Centers

By Rachel Baron, [rlb399@cornell.edu](mailto:rlb399@cornell.edu)

*Private, for-profit healthcare contractors in immigration detention centers often practice widespread, systemic medical neglect. Transitioning to a public healthcare workforce would improve legal accountability and federal oversight while lowering costs.*

## Background

One of the Trump administration's largest projects has been the extensive expansion of immigration enforcement, namely through the mass detention of undocumented immigrants.<sup>1</sup> In one year, widespread immigration raids across the country have raised the number of noncitizens being held in detention centers by 75%, with 73,000 individuals in detention as of mid-January.<sup>2</sup> To process the drastic increase in detention, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is undertaking the "ICE Detention Reengineering Initiative." Instead of the usual model, in which ICE contracts private or state-owned prisons to hold detainees, the initiative aims to centralize detention at 34 federally owned centers.<sup>3</sup> This model can make oversight and accountability for prison conditions more challenging, as the supremacy clause and other legal findings substantially limit the ability of states to influence correctional affairs.<sup>4,5</sup>

ICE Health Services Corps (IHSC) provides healthcare in detention centers using a combination of civil servants and private, for-profit contractors.<sup>6</sup> To maximize profits, these private contractors strategically refuse or delay treatment, limit or reject patient preferences, and understaff

facilities.<sup>7</sup> Compared to public systems, these cost-cutting strategies can result in between 18% to 58% higher mortality rates for inmates.<sup>7</sup> Even with these strategies, private contractors can end up costing governments more than public healthcare.<sup>8</sup>

Government oversight has long documented medical neglect in immigration detention centers, which is the most commonly cited complaint by detained immigrants.<sup>6,9</sup> Reports from the Office of the Inspector General document failure to treat medical conditions, lack of informed medical consent, including forced sterilization, lack of beds, blankets, and food, and untreated outbreaks of illnesses.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, despite established healthcare standards for immigration detention centers, ICE has repeatedly failed to hold private contractors accountable for thousands of documented violations of these regulations.<sup>11</sup> As the federal government progresses through the reengineering initiative, it is vital to restructure detention healthcare to protect detainees.

## Policy Idea

To ensure compliance with mandatory healthcare standards for the ICE Detention Reengineering Initiative, Congress should mandate that ICE refrain from contracting with private, for-profit healthcare

providers for their new detention facilities. Congress should direct ICE to gradually replace private providers within IHSC with an expanded public healthcare workforce. Additionally, Congress should require annual oversight and accountability checks conducted by the Office of the Inspector General, with results submitted to the House Committee on Homeland Security and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Costs for physician services should be matched to the Medicare Part B fee schedule for the current year.

## Policy Analysis

In 1976, the Supreme Court ruled that deliberate indifference to prisoners' serious medical needs constituted cruel and unusual punishment, violating the Eighth Amendment.<sup>12</sup> Despite this ruling, for-profit healthcare contractors are regularly responsible for serious medical neglect, including failure to report injuries, lack of treatment contrary to medical necessity, and lack of supervision for prisoners on suicide watch, which has resulted in wrongful death.<sup>13</sup> When such neglect occurs, indemnification provisions in contracts shield governments from legal liability for violations of proper care standards.<sup>7</sup> Private providers often settle the case outside of court, which

prevents both meaningful recourse for victims and a legal mandate to address root issues with medical neglect.<sup>7</sup>

While a public healthcare system does not necessarily guarantee higher-quality care, de-privatization would subject public healthcare providers to greater disclosure requirements and legal liability.<sup>7</sup> For example, New York City’s transition to provide public healthcare for inmates at Riker’s Island was followed by heightened investigative and reporting requirements as well as new opportunities for legal challenges to the city.<sup>14,15</sup> These changes could encourage providers to deliver better care, and increase the costs of failing to do so.

A public healthcare system would allow regular documentation of detention healthcare standards, judicial rulings to improve IHSC medical standards, and public attention to larger, systemic issues with detention centers.

Transitioning to a public system would also likely save the federal government money in the long run. Research on Virginia’s privatization of prison healthcare found that private contracts increased healthcare spending by an average of \$5.40 per inmate per day.<sup>10</sup> Private healthcare also can result in higher costs for the same treatment; in 2014, the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ medical contracts resulted in an excess of \$100 million over what they would have paid at Medicare rates.<sup>16</sup> By de-privatizing and setting costs equal to Medicare rates, the federal government could save significant amounts of money while creating opportunities to hold healthcare providers to a higher standard of care.

## Highlights

- Government oversight has consistently documented systemic medical abuses in prisons and detention centers that contract with private, for-profit healthcare providers.<sup>13</sup>
- The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Detention Reengineering Initiative presents ample opportunity for Congress to reform healthcare in immigration detention centers, ensuring compliance with the Eighth Amendment’s “cruel and unusual punishment” clause.
- Transitioning to public staffing of ICE Health Services Corps will improve legal recourse for medically neglected detainees by strengthening public disclosure requirements and holding public violators accountable to victims of neglect.
- Research into healthcare contractor spending at non-Medicare rates reveals that public spending would likely save the federal government upwards of \$100 million in the long run.<sup>10, 16</sup>

## Implementation

Members of Congress should introduce a bill to direct ICE to transition away from private healthcare contractors to the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement.<sup>17</sup> The bill should allow temporary funding for the transition towards a civil servant workforce, as well as

comprehensive oversight infrastructure.

Heightened polarization would likely create significant opposition to the bill. Members of the Congressional Problem Solvers Caucus, a group dedicated to fostering bipartisanship, may be useful allies in advancing the bill in a bipartisan manner.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, multilateral coalitions of organizations such as the Prison Policy Initiative, the American Immigration Council, and the Acacia Center for Justice should develop and disseminate information campaigns in the months following the bill’s introduction to overcome partisanship and increase support.<sup>19, 20, 21</sup>

Even with such campaigns, the support generated may not be enough. In this case, the bill would benefit from waiting for a more favorable partisan distribution in Congress, or multiple reintroductions should it fail to pass.

Given an absence of precedent for similar cases, it is difficult to estimate the costs associated with this project. While it would likely take a considerable amount of money to hire enough healthcare workers to fully staff IHSC, this cost would at least be partially offset by the money otherwise going toward paying contractors. However, Congress has demonstrated significant willingness to fund ICE and the reengineering initiative: legislators passed \$75 billion for the agency—\$45 billion of which is going towards the reengineering initiative—more than tripling its previous budget.<sup>22</sup> Given such heightened funding attention,

remaining costs could be realistically approved by Congress.

Upon passage, ICE would be directed to use its existing public healthcare workforce to the maximum extent possible in its new detention facilities. ICE must also begin actively recruiting healthcare employees to meet the minimum standard of workers per detainee, as determined by the legislation. ICE should strive to recruit 2.5 healthcare workers per thousand detainees, or about 183 workers, in compliance with the World Health Organization's standard for medical availability.<sup>23</sup> In order to plan for challenges in healthcare infrastructure and technology, ICE should follow New York City's model as an example. The city successfully ended its contract with the private contractor Corizon and assumed all healthcare responsibilities for Rikers Island inmates in 2015, demonstrating that structural healthcare changes are possible.<sup>9, 24</sup>

Because strictly replacing one workforce with another does not necessarily mean detainees will receive a higher quality of care, regular oversight and investigations of healthcare conditions will be paramount to protecting detainee health. The Office of the Inspector General should prepare annual reports and submit them for review by the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement. Legislators can use these reports as the basis of additional reformatory legislation.

By transitioning to a public healthcare system for immigration detention centers, detainees could finally find legal recourse for medical neglect while the federal government lowers costs.

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# Beyond the School Week: Expanding the National School Lunch Program

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*The federal government should expand the National School Lunch Program to include a “weekend backpack program” that provides elementary school-age students with food packs for the weekend to increase food security and overall well-being among children living in economically disadvantaged households.*

## Background

Food insecurity is defined as a household having limited or uncertain access to nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the uncertain ability to acquire food in socially acceptable ways (without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, or theft).<sup>1</sup> It is both an economic and a social condition characterized by limited access to food, resulting from either insufficient income or residing in food deserts.<sup>1</sup>

In 2023, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that 17.9% of US households with children were food insecure.<sup>2</sup> In 2024, 47.9 million people in the US lived in food-insecure households, 7.3 million of whom were individuals under the age of 18.<sup>2</sup>

Inadequate nutrition in children can have severe impacts on their physical, mental, and emotional health. Children between two and 17 years old residing in food-insecure households display a higher prevalence of asthma, depressive symptoms, and visits to the emergency rooms, as well as lower test scores, compared to food-secure children.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, inconsistent food

availability may lead to problematic eating and feeding patterns for developing youth.<sup>4</sup> This is because food-insecure households experience increased consumption when they first receive SNAP benefits, which are followed by restrictions towards the end of the month in a cyclical pattern.<sup>4</sup>

Current programs such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provide low-cost, nutritionally balanced meals to public school children during the school week.<sup>5</sup> While the NSLP effectively provides meals to food-insecure youth during the school week, weekends are left unaccounted for, thus creating a “weekend hunger gap” that must be addressed through certain policy avenues.

## Policy Idea

Public elementary schools should implement weekend backpack food programs to promote students’ physical and emotional well-being. Lawmakers should implement this policy as an expansion of the NSLP that incorporates weekend meal packages. Schools will gauge the need for these programs based on the percentage of students participating in the free

or reduced-price school meals program. Students already enrolled in reduced-price school meals would automatically be enrolled in the Weekend Backpack Program. Schools will distribute these packages on Friday, which will contain breakfast, lunch, dinner, and a snack item, and would follow the same nutritional guidelines as meals served during the school day.<sup>6</sup>

## Policy Analysis

As local and state policies demonstrate, Weekend Backpack Programs are most effective when they cater to children from households with fewer resources, thus pointing to their potential in addressing inequalities in the academic system.

A 2021 University of New Hampshire study tracked Weekend Backpack Programs across 12 counties in North Carolina over three years. Results showed that the presence of a Backpack Program led to a one-to-two point increase in both reading and math scores, corresponding to a 0.09 and 0.07 standard deviation increase, respectively. These results were especially pronounced for economically disadvantaged students.<sup>7</sup> In fact,

these improvements translate into a 15% reduction in the performance gap between economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students.<sup>7</sup>

Another study, published by The School Nutrition Program, analyzed hunger survey results and on-task behavior among 250 kindergarten through sixth-grade students across three midwestern schools whose students displayed high rates of reduced lunch participation.<sup>8</sup> While there is minimal evidence for increased hunger-satisfaction and on-task behavior, 98% of the 138 sampled parents reported that the program made a difference in the well-being of their child. 14% reported that they or another adult would have needed to skip a meal in the absence of this program.<sup>8</sup>

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign published another study assessing 300 families across 16 schools in Illinois, with two-thirds of all children participating in the Backpack Program. After nine months, 13% of the families moved from low food security to food security.<sup>9</sup> In fact, 20% of very low food secure and 9% of low food secure parents described the program as having a big effect on their budgets.<sup>9</sup> Evidently, Weekend Backpack Programs reduce stress on parents and increase overall food availability in the household. Based on the positive outcomes resulting from local weekend Backpack Programs, a federal program for

elementary schools would be effective and viable.

### Highlights

- In the US, millions of children live in food-insecure households while current policies, such as the federal National School Lunch Program, provide free or reduced lunches only during the school week, resulting in a “weekend hunger gap” for food-insecure youth.<sup>1,2,5</sup>
- Inconsistent access to safe and healthy food during childhood leads to lower test scores, adverse health outcomes, and an increased potential of developing irregular eating patterns in the future.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Elementary schools with a high proportion of students enrolled in a free/reduced lunch program should implement a “weekend backpack program” that provides students with prepared, nutritious meals to take home for the weekend.
- Research on weekend Backpack Programs has reported higher student test scores, a reduction in reported hunger levels, and decreased stress on parents, pointing to the effectiveness of this policy in improving student well-being and addressing food insecurity.<sup>6,8,9</sup>

### Implementation

Representatives of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce can introduce this policy in Congress as an amendment to the NSLP. After introduction, this bill will proceed through committee hearings, where representatives will bring forth evidence from previous backpack programs and testimonies from non-profits in support of this policy. While this amendment is more likely to receive support from Democrats, policymakers can frame the bill as a cost-effective investment in child development—while emphasizing its positive impact for working families—to sway fiscally conservative members of Congress. The Department of Education (ED), in coordination with the Department of Health (DOH), would implement this program through a state-level expansion of the NSLP.

The ED would determine eligibility across elementary schools by evaluating the number of students already enrolled in the reduced lunch program, all of whom will be automatically eligible for the weekend backpack program to reduce administrative burden and avoid stigma. The ED would allocate funding based on the number of students in each school enrolled in the reduced lunch program, ensuring that the schools with the greatest number of food-insecure students receive the highest funding. Funding will follow a federal-state model, where additional state funding

and local partnerships can supplement funds from the NSLP.<sup>10</sup> An Economics of Education study reported that each pack costs around \$5.<sup>11</sup> Food packs will contain child-friendly, single-serving, non-perishable items such as instant oatmeal, microwavable pasta bowls, packaged sandwiches, and fruit cups.<sup>9</sup> Meals will follow the Food and Drug Administration’s nutritional guidelines for meals served during the school week.

One program operating in Guilderland, New York, estimates that weekend food packs cost approximately \$185 per student per year.<sup>12</sup> With roughly 29.4 million students currently enrolled in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), this estimate implies a total federal cost of approximately \$5.55 billion annually to provide weekend food packages to students who have already demonstrated need. While this figure represents a 31% increase over current NSLP spending, it is a proportionally smaller increase than the expansion in service coverage, which extends support from five to seven days per week.<sup>13,14</sup> Numerous non-profit organizations already provide weekend food packages to local students in their areas, such as Blessings in a Backpack and Feeding America.<sup>15,16</sup> The ED and DOH can coordinate with these non-profits to increase efficiency in sourcing and distributing these weekend food packs, which may bring down costs. Every Friday, school food service personnel will assemble and place these

packs into a “pick-up zone” for students. Students can grab the packs right before exiting the school, allowing for easy distribution that minimizes stigma associated with participation in this program.

To ensure accountability, the ED and DOH should mandate that schools conduct annual evaluations of food insecurity rates, attendance, and academic performance. Additionally, schools can send out surveys to parents to evaluate the effectiveness of weekend Backpack Programs in reducing financial and emotional burden.

Overall, this policy builds upon existing infrastructure and legislation to efficiently address weekend food insecurity while promoting student well-being and academic success.

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# Justice Reinvestment for Public Defense Caseload Limits

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*A state-level justice reinvestment framework that reallocates incarceration savings to public defense expansion and caseload reduction will improve representation quality, reducing racial disparities in case outcomes while generating net fiscal savings through decreased reliance on pretrial detention and incarceration.*

## Background

Racial disparities in the criminal legal system persist in large part because defendants do not receive equal quality legal representation.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Public defense offices across the United States are chronically underfunded and understaffed, leaving public defenders responsible for two to three times the recommended number of cases at any given time.<sup>1</sup> The National Public Defense Workload Study finds that the average public defender handles nearly 350 cases per year, more than double the nationally recommended threshold of 150 felony cases.<sup>1</sup>

Unequal representation produces unequal outcomes—defendants represented by public defenders face a 62% higher likelihood of conviction in murder cases compared to those with private counsel.<sup>2</sup> Because access to private defense is closely tied to race and income, these outcomes are racialized.<sup>2,3</sup> Based on recent federal court data, Black defendants rely on public defense or court-appointed counsel at a rate of 83.4%, Hispanic defendants at 77.6%, and White defendants at 69.5%, meaning overburdened defense systems are more likely to represent people of color.<sup>3</sup>

Excessive caseloads further worsen racial and ethnic disparities.

Research finds that every additional 100 cases assigned to a public defender increases the odds of pretrial detention by nearly 200%, while high support-staff caseloads are associated with 14-89% longer sentences.<sup>4</sup> These effects are not race-neutral: Black and Hispanic defendants face 1.3-1.4 times higher odds of pretrial detention and incarceration than similarly situated White defendants.<sup>5</sup> These disparities highlight a structural failure in the provision of public defense, underscoring the urgent need for policy intervention to ensure equitable legal representation and reduce system-wide inefficiencies.

## Policy Idea

State legislatures should establish a statutory justice reinvestment framework that compares annual corrections expenditures to a legislatively defined baseline based on average corrections expenditures over the previous three fiscal years. Realized savings, which state budget offices would certify at the end of every fiscal year, would be appropriated into a public defense fund. State governments would allocate these funds to public defense offices to support increased defender employment and to set workload limits. By aligning workloads with the national standard of 150 felony

cases per year, defenders would have sufficient time to investigate cases, meet with clients, and mount effective defenses. Funding in this form makes workload limits achievable and sustainable without creating new taxes.

## Policy Analysis

State budget offices can evaluate the effectiveness of expanding public defense through caseload limits with three research objectives: (1) the effect of defender resources on case outcomes, (2) the fiscal impact of pretrial detention, and (3) the potential efficiency gains from alternatives to incarceration.

Reducing each defender's caseload from 350 to 150 cases per year would allow for more thorough investigation and client contact. In this manner, attorney resources substantially affect criminal case outcomes; empirically, a study of public defender effectiveness found that defendants with marginally indigent status experience worse outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Clients of public defenders in the study received sentences about five years longer than those represented by private counsel.<sup>6</sup> Anderson and Heaton find that higher-quality representation lowers conviction probability by 19%.<sup>2</sup> This evidence directly links the policy mechanism to the legal outcome.

Additionally, by reducing caseloads, public defenders can mount stronger pretrial advocacy. The American Economic Review demonstrates that initial pretrial release decreases the probability of conviction by 14 percentage points and reduces guilty pleas by 10.8 percentage points.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the Federal Judicial Center reports that daily detention expenses are ten times higher than community supervision.<sup>8</sup> With this in mind, the implementation of caseload limits can reduce the expense of pretrial and posttrial incarceration.

Evidence from pilot programs further supports this approach. A San Francisco pretrial release unit reduced jail use by 4,689 bed-days and generated \$806,000 in savings over the course of five months, nearly double the program's operating cost.<sup>9</sup> By reallocating corrections funds to hire additional defenders, states can achieve these savings at no new tax cost.

Together, these findings indicate that increasing public defense capacity by aligning caseloads with professional standards can improve legal outcomes, decrease racial disparity, and generate fiscal savings, all of which are measurable objectives for evaluating the program's effectiveness.

### Highlights

- Public defenders carry excessive caseloads, with the average public defender taking on 350 cases a year, well over the recommended 150-case felony threshold.<sup>1</sup>
- State legislatures should establish a statutory justice reinvestment framework that directs verified corrections

savings into a dedicated public defense fund to hire attorneys and reinforce caseload limits.

- Lower caseloads allow public defenders to strengthen case preparation, reduce pretrial detention, and improve legal outcomes while reducing racial disparities.<sup>1,2,3,8,9</sup>
- This policy maintains revenue neutrality by matching funding to reductions in state prison spending.

### Implementation

This policy targets state-level public defense systems, where public defense offices can enforce caseload limits and hire additional staff. State legislatures would enact this policy through legislation introduced in their respective judiciary and appropriations committees, establishing a justice reinvestment framework tied to public defense funding and compliance with workload standards.<sup>1</sup>

Savings in such a framework would not be immediate; thus, implementation should proceed in phases. States would phase in staffing increases through interim caseload targets, such as reducing workloads toward approximately 200 cases per attorney before achieving the 150-case standard. In the first year, states would pilot the program through a conservative initial projection of corrections savings, focusing on high-volume districts where caseloads are most severe. The Oregon Public Defense Commission's experience illustrates the importance of pairing caseload limits with sufficient phased

capacity: the state's implementation of workload standards without paired funding contributed to representation gaps, while subsequent investments in defense capacity reduced those gaps.<sup>10,11</sup> To support adoption and offset transition costs, the federal government should provide matching grants and incentive funding through programs such as the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant, a federal program that distributes criminal justice funding to states.<sup>12</sup> As expanded defense capacity reduces detention and incarceration, states can certify savings and reinvest them into the system, allowing the policy to become fiscally self-sustaining over time. A state fiscal or legislative budget office would certify annual savings using pre-implementation and post-implementation corrections expenditures relative to a baseline year. States would make reinvestment contingent on a verified reduction in jail and prison spending.

Oversight agencies at the state level would collect and report caseload data, pretrial detention rates, representation gaps, and changes in jail and prison utilization to ensure compliance. The state public defense commission would assume the responsibilities for fund distribution and enforcement of caseload limits. States would condition continued eligibility for reinvestment funding on compliance with workload standards and reporting requirements. When standardized, annual reports would provide transparent overviews for evaluation and subsequent adjustment.

Success metrics would include reductions in average

defender caseloads, declines in pretrial detention rates, decreases in jail bed-days, decreases in unrepresented defendants—outcomes already shown to generate fiscal returns through reduced incarceration in local pilot programs.<sup>9</sup> These metrics directly indicate whether increased defense capacity is translating to reduced detention and improved case outcomes.

Building political support would require coordination between public defense organizations, bar associations, and civil rights groups, alongside engagement with fiscally oriented stakeholders. Framing the policy as a cost-saving efficiency reform that reduces corrections expenditures while improving system performance is likely to increase political viability, particularly among centrist and fiscally conservative policymakers. Even so, adoption is likely to face political resistance from stakeholders in the criminal justice system, including local prosecutors and corrections agencies that are reluctant to cede budgetary authority or accept funding reductions to incarceration-based systems. As a result, implementation feasibility would increase through phased buy-in across jurisdictions.

With a defined funding mechanism, phased implementation strategy, and measurable outcomes, this proposal offers a practical pathway to strengthening public defense systems. By reinvesting savings from reduced incarceration into defender capacity, states can improve legal representation paired with long-term fiscal efficiency.

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# Closing the Gap: Increasing Language Access Programs for LEP Immigrants Through a Centralized Federal Language Program

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*Public departments and federal agencies, especially with the recent overturn of EO 13166, do not adequately account for the language needs of LEP immigrants in the US. Creating a centralized federal language program will help ensure more reliable access to translation for LEP individuals.*

## Background

As of 2024, about 50.2 million immigrants were living in the United States, with approximately 47% had Limited English Proficiency (LEP), meaning they spoke English at a level below very well.<sup>1,2</sup> Despite the US's large immigrant population, public service accommodations have struggled to support their language needs.

Executive Order (EO) 13166, which the Clinton administration issued in 2000, aimed to improve language access services for LEP individuals. This policy extended language access requirements directly to federal agencies and federally delivered programs. The policy continued Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act—an act which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin—and largely applied this requirement to federally funded agencies as opposed to federal agencies themselves.<sup>3</sup> Last year, however, President Trump signed EO 14224, which declared English as the US's official language and revoked EO 13166.<sup>3</sup> Although EO 14224 does not mandate federal agencies to alter their current language access initiatives and Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act remains

unchanged, EO 14224 does dismantle the original goals of EO 13166, particularly regarding mandates targeted toward federal agencies. This dismantling could lead to more inconsistent efforts from federal agencies to provide Language Access Programs for LEP individuals.<sup>3</sup> Language barriers continue to obstruct accessibility to a wide range of basic resources for those in these communities, including healthcare, social services, housing services, and public benefits as provided by federal agencies such as the HHS, ACL, HUD, etc.<sup>4</sup>

## Policy Idea

Congress should create a centralized Federal Language Program that provides readily available interpreters for in-person interaction, remote interpretation, and document translation, and requires access to federal services such as Social Security, tax assistance, and postal services. The US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division should coordinate the implementation of this program, as it already enforces compliance under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Federal agencies would be responsible for the program's internal implementation, though they would not need to develop new

language programs individually, as the program is centralized.

## Policy Analysis

New York and California have implemented Language Access Programs at the state level, meaning that centralizing this proposed program at the federal level is feasible, provided proper implementation.<sup>5,6</sup> California, for instance, has established a language access complaint process, making 34 different languages accessible to individuals looking to resolve issues.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, New York language access requires that vital documents offered by an agency be translated into the 12 most common non-English languages spoken by LEP individuals.<sup>6</sup>

Translation inaccessibility has grave consequences for immigrants trying to get through the asylum process, including possible family separation, and prolonged detention.<sup>7</sup> Asylum hearings in the immigration court, interactions with officers, and reporting abuse are events that can only be achieved with adequate communication, but language barriers for non-English speakers makes success in these areas difficult.<sup>7</sup> A study from the Refugee Advocacy Lab found that when people can understand public services, the gaps between

necessities and individual accessibility are bridged, ensuring LEP individuals are connected to the services they need to improve their overall mental and social connectedness.<sup>8</sup>

A centralized access program that covers federal agencies would not only meet the mental, social, physical, and language needs of so many LEP immigrants in the US, but also prevent serious consequences such as wrongful deportation and lack of self-advocacy.

### Highlights

- Language accessibility in the US public service does not account for LEP immigrants, especially with the recent implementation of EO 14224.<sup>2</sup>
- Congress should implement a centralized federal Language Access Program that the Department of Justice's civil rights department should coordinate, building on already-established goals under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In-person, document, and remote translation should be available and funded through federal agency allocations.
- Centralized federal Language Access Programs would ensure that LEP individuals also receive accessible language services in federal contexts, not just within federally funded agencies, including, but not limited to, tax assistance and the postal service.
- Studies have found that a lack of language access has

poor implications for immigrants going through the asylum process, and that increasing language accessibility would improve the overall mental and social connectedness of LEP immigrants in the US.

### Implementation

This policy would build on the pre-existing goals established under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, so that the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division will not be subject to a completely new and unfamiliar program that does not already align with targeted goals. Additionally, the federal centralization of this program ensures that [1] individual agencies would not be responsible for building up new programs, [2] federal agencies would be mandated to provide language access to LEP individuals rather than only those organizations that are federally funded, increasing accessibility to general resources for individuals who need language access services, [3] a new department will not need to be materialized as this already builds off the goals of the DOJ Civil Rights Division, ensuring the cohesion and consistency of Language Access Programs implementation across the country.

This bill should be proposed by the House Judiciary Committee, as they already oversee the DOJ, though the bill would likely face pushback from Republican opposition. To combat this dispute, this bill should be presented as a means of advancing Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and improving public well-being with advocacy support led by the DOJ. Accordingly, Congress should outline provisions and allocate

funds for the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division's Language Access Program, while also requiring individual agencies to maintain a minimum level of internal funding each year to support the program, similar to previous funding models under EO 13166.<sup>9</sup> This funding should include outlets for in-person translation, remote and hotline interpretation, and translated documents.

The first year of this program would involve a pilot phase in which only the most frequently utilized federal agencies, such as the US Postal Service and Social Security Administration, would implement the new centralized program. This program should aim to first serve the most widely spoken languages, such as Spanish, Chinese, and Tagalog, at the start of its implementation.<sup>10</sup> Translation in additional languages will be implemented based on later demand, ensuring resources are not overextended, and that the most widely spoken languages are prioritized first.

Over the next two to three years, this centralized program should be implemented across a wider array of federal agencies. Since this will be a new initiative for many agencies, the DOJ should work to guide organizations. The DOJ can measure effectiveness by the number of LEP individuals served, the percentage of translated documents, and interpreter wait times, both in person and online. Based on these results, the DOJ can adjust the program's layout to meet any immediate needs.

Following the program's solidification, the DOJ should formally mandate its implementation across federal agencies by the fifth year,

respectively, cementing rules and requirements under the mandate. At this point, a centralized language program should be the expectation for all federal agencies. If centralized Federal Language Programs are implemented in this way, the gaps between public service and personal accessibility can be narrowed, improving LEP immigrants' abilities to access resources and support in the US public service.

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# The Sound of Theft: Protecting Musical Likeness in the AI Era

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*To protect artists from unauthorized uses of their likeness via deepfake technology, there should be a federal property right in one's voice and likeness, increased liability for streaming companies for illegal distribution, and a cultural movement toward labeling artificially created music.*

## Background

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) has revolutionized society, enabling accelerated data processing and automating complex tasks. However, progress has come at a cost: a host of legal and ethical questions regarding artificial intelligence's ability to reproduce one's voice, likeness, ideas, and style. Nowhere is this more pressing than in the music industry, where these creative factors are crucial to one's success. The problem is twofold: (1) legal ambiguity is present over the ownership of artificially generated music, leaving artists unprotected, and (2) replacing human originality with artificial intelligence degrades musical culture.

The most prominent example of unauthorized deepfake technology in the music business is "Heart on My Sleeve" by the anonymous ghostwriter977. The song cloned Drake and The Weeknd's vocals, garnering millions of views and thousands of dollars without authorization from either artist.<sup>1</sup> Other notable uses of deepfakes include Drake's "Taylor Made Freestyle" and Kanye West's *Vultures 2*.<sup>2,3</sup>

Unauthorized songs typically fail to be removed due to the legal gray area that deepfake vocal technology encompasses. Spotify only removes an estimated

7% of unauthorized songs.<sup>4</sup> Courts have ruled that the copying of another artist's "style" is permissible, as it is an intangible idea rather than a tangible expression within the music; however, this has not been updated for modern contexts.<sup>5</sup> Beyond copyright issues, deepfake technology can be used to produce songs and statements that are starkly opposed to what an artist stands for, maliciously damaging their public image. This has been addressed for visual media through the TAKE IT DOWN Act, but not audio media.<sup>6</sup> Hundreds of artists have called on technology and streaming companies to prevent the misuse of their voice and likeness, both regarding deepfakes and AI training procedures.<sup>7,8</sup> While there are proper uses for AI in the music industry, it is imperative that the Department of Justice ensures these usages do not commandeer unauthorized vocals or undermine human creativity.

## Policy Idea

Congress should amend Title 17 of the US Code, containing existing copyright protections, to add a federal property right for one's voice and likeness.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Congress should extend the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) to hold streaming companies liable for the

known distribution of illegal material, requiring active removal rather than passive takedown requests.<sup>10</sup> These liabilities would come in the form of proportional fines through the U.S. Department of Justice. To solve the second issue of cultural degradation, there should be a bottom-up approach that encourages music distribution companies to label tracks with authorized deepfake usage or credit the use of AI within producer credits.

## Policy Analysis

Policy experts and the U.S. Copyright Office agree that policymakers must update legal frameworks to accommodate artificial intelligence in music.<sup>11</sup> Numerous states have successfully implemented pro-artist policies. Tennessee, with its substantial \$5.8 billion music industry, passed the first-in-the-nation ELVIS Act, prohibiting the unauthorized use of one's voice and likeness, even after death.<sup>12</sup> The act defines a voice as a sound that is "readily identifiable and attributable to a particular individual", regardless of whether that sound is real or a simulation.<sup>13</sup> This language is consistent with the first prong of this proposal, ensuring the law covers all instances of vocal replication. California and Illinois have passed similar bills: AB 2602 and HB

4875, respectively.<sup>14,15</sup> Some states have a right to publicity, which is defined as a protection against “the unauthorized commercial use of an individual's name, likeness, or other recognizable aspects of one's persona.”<sup>16</sup> While a right to publicity could serve as a defense against deepfake technology, this strategy is legally unproven and an incomplete solution, given that they are reproductions, not direct appropriations.

Regarding the cultural issue, the closest parallel to this proposal is the implementation of the Parental Advisory Label. This was a ground-up approach, starting with parents who banded together to form the Parents’ Music Resource Center.<sup>17</sup> Through economies of scale, the organization advocated for labels, eventually making their way into a Senate hearing and garnering the support of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). Through this voluntary support, age-appropriate listening was promoted while preventing burdensome industry overregulation. This labeling is necessary to protect the cultural integrity of the music profession, with artists emphasizing the status of music as a “special skill” in which original human input is critical.<sup>18</sup>

### Highlights

- While the use of artificial intelligence and deepfake technology in the music industry has ballooned, lawmakers have not updated legal frameworks to protect artists and musical culture from these novel technologies.<sup>1</sup>
- Congress should create a federal property right to

one’s voice and likeness, along with a modification to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) to hold streaming companies liable for the distribution of unauthorized material.<sup>12,13</sup>

- Federal legislation should mirror the ELVIS Act, which disallows unauthorized usage of one’s voice and likeness with clear, narrowly tailored definitions.<sup>12</sup>
- To preserve musical culture, policy supporters should utilize a bottom-up approach to encourage the labeling of music that uses artificial intelligence similar to that of the Parental Advisory Label.<sup>17</sup>

### Implementation

Given that streaming companies generate 84% of recorded music revenue, private companies must be legally compelled to enforce federal legislation proactively.<sup>19</sup> Given this market dominance and these companies’ technical capacity to detect and remove infringing content at scale, there should be a statutory duty to proactively prevent unauthorized material distribution. The current system of “notice and takedown” is failing to work under the DMCA, putting the impetus on the artists with scant resources to police streaming services.<sup>10</sup> While the U.S. Copyright Office will define these regulations, the Department of Justice will be responsible for enforcing the law and policing violations. This DMCA modification may necessitate a minimal Department of Justice funding increase to

accommodate an increased workload.

Past attempts to nationalize the ELVIS Act include the No AI FRAUD Act and NO FAKES Act, with both receiving bipartisan legislative support and music industry support.<sup>11,20,21</sup> However, vagueness in the regulations has hindered these bills’ passage.<sup>22</sup> Both bills lacked exceptions to any nonconsensual usage of one’s likeness, failing to take into account historical films depicting famous figures, documentaries, or satirical and comedic media that ought to be protected by the First Amendment.<sup>23</sup> While the NO AI FRAUD Act includes a stipulation that only “harmful” instances are illegal, the language still invites expensive litigation to determine what exactly is “harmful.”<sup>24</sup> These concerns have amassed opposition from the film industry and free speech advocates, especially when paired with the adjustments to the DMCA.<sup>25,26</sup> To avoid stymying innovation and trampling free speech rights, film and satirical exceptions should be inserted into any federal legislation on this issue, similar to those provided in the ELVIS Act. This framework provides a legal basis for artists to remove unauthorized content, while also being tailored to prevent negative consequences in the technology and entertainment sectors.

One might be concerned that the ELVIS Act and proposed federal legislation do not protect an artist who produces an original recording, has another artist’s vocals deepfaked onto theirs, and then publishes it without authorization. No new legislation is needed to address this issue, as it

falls under Title 17’s protections against “derivative works.”<sup>29</sup>

The proposal to properly label music that utilizes artificial intelligence is widely popular, with 80% of the general population and 97% of music professionals calling for labels.<sup>27,28</sup> Labeling comes at a low cost to streaming platforms, given that they already label explicit tracks, receive lyrics from artists, use artificial intelligence to create karaoke, and scan tracks to detect duplicates. Tools to detect such manipulations in music already exist, such as IRCAM Amplify, and can be utilized to automatically label such music if artists do not notify streaming services.<sup>29</sup>

A narrowly-tailored scope of legislation and the utilization of privately developed tools for artificial track labeling would both reduce resistance to this legislation and maximize its practicality once enacted. Such legislation should be drafted and introduced in the House and Senate Committees on the Judiciary promptly.

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# ECONOMIC POLICY

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# Combatting Chicago's Housing Crisis By Ending Single Family Zoning In the City

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*To combat rising housing costs and affordability concerns, the City of Chicago should eliminate single-family zoning in favor of zoning for mixed-use and multifamily developments and designate at least 20% units as "affordable."*

## Background

Chicago currently faces a housing crisis, with residents leaving the city in droves due to rising living costs. In 2025, Chicago's median home price increased by 8.6%, causing around 42.7% households in the city to be cost-burdened.<sup>1,2</sup> Cost-burdened residents are individuals who have to spend at least 30% of their income solely on housing costs.<sup>2</sup> Cost-burdened residents tend to be situated in the lower-density tracts of the city, situated in the southern and western neighborhoods of the city.<sup>3,4</sup> Chicago's current methods to encourage city-wide density and mixed-use development, like Tax-Increment Financing—taking a portion of a municipality's property taxes to subsidize developments within the municipality—and affordable housing subsidies have proven faulty and unable to combat affordability issues.<sup>5,6,7</sup>

The most direct way to lower housing costs would be to increase the supply of market-rate units in order to meet current demand.<sup>8</sup> In large cities like Chicago, this typically entails increasing density through multifamily and mixed-use developments. Mixed-use and multifamily developments are significantly cheaper to construct—about \$185,000 per unit for

multifamily developments and around \$400,000 per unit for single-family developments.<sup>9,10</sup> Additionally, they generate more revenue; the Ridgeland mixed-use development in Chicago generates around \$114,372 per acre compared to a single-family development in the St. Charles community, which only generates \$2,322 per acre.<sup>11,12</sup>

As of 2023, 41% of Chicago's land is zoned for single-family residential, creating barriers to increasing density.<sup>13</sup> Addressing Chicago's housing crisis, therefore, requires a fundamental shift in how the city allocates its land, moving away from single-family zoning and toward a framework that prioritizes denser, mixed-use growth.

## Policy Idea

Chicago's Department of Planning and Development (DPD) should encourage the Chicago City Council to pass legislation that changes the text of Title 17-2 of Chicago's municipal code. The legislation should reclassify Residential Single-unit (RS) designations to permit multifamily and mixed-use developments, effectively opening 41% of the city's land to higher-density construction.<sup>13</sup> The preexisting single-family homes in the city would largely be unaffected, with plans to upscale them into

multifamily units in the future. In the new mixed-use and multifamily developments, a minimum of 20% of units in each should be affordable—defined as units priced for those making at or below 60% of the area's median income, where rents do not exceed 30% of the renter's monthly income. The new mixed-use zoning would appear across different parts of the city to alleviate the housing cost burden for all residents. The higher per-acre revenue from property taxes in the new mixed-use developments would then be funneled back into further affordable mixed-use projects.

## Policy Analysis

Examples like Minneapolis provide a framework to analyze policies like city-wide rezoning with ordinances that encourage high-density and mixed-use development. Discouraging low-return, low-density housing is crucial to increasing the housing supply in Chicago—more available units result in lower prices for residents.<sup>14</sup> In 2020, Minneapolis became the first major American city to eliminate single-family housing and found that the reform slowed home price growth by 16-34% and rent growth by 17.5-34%.<sup>15,16, 17</sup>

The increased mixed-use developments generate significantly more revenue per acre than their single-family counterparts, which could then be invested back into cost-burdened communities in order to increase affordability across the city.<sup>11,12,18</sup> Studies conducted in Asheville’s Central Business District show that mixed-use development generates 800% more revenue per acre than its surrounding single-family developments do.<sup>19</sup> The National Association of Home Builders further supports this sentiment, finding that having higher density-per-acre generally results in higher tax revenues and lower per-unit and per-person maintenance costs.<sup>20</sup> Infrastructure costs follow a similar pattern, which shows that higher density has lower per-unit infrastructure development costs.<sup>3,20,21</sup> In order to succeed in increasing affordability for its residents, Chicago needs to cash in on the returns generated from increased density and mixed-use by reinvesting them into affordable mixed-use housing developments.

A key part of this policy is ensuring that at least 20% of all units in new mixed-use developments are affordable units. Currently, Chicago has mixed-use and other high-density developments concentrated in high-income neighborhoods, where rental units are typically expensive. Without having a guarantee that new multifamily developments will be affordable, the city’s housing and affordability crisis will only worsen.<sup>22,23</sup>

### Highlights

- Chicago’s current measures and incentives to increase housing developments have

proven fraught at reducing housing cost burden for residents, with median home prices increasing by 8.6% in 2025.<sup>1,5,6,7</sup>

- Chicago’s Department of Planning and Development (DPD) should rezone single family zones, approximately 41% of the city’s land, into mixed-use zoning.<sup>13,15,16,18</sup>
- Chicago should implement a policy similar to Minneapolis’ 2040 plan, which ends single family zoning within the city, instead pursuing mixed-use, multifamily zoning developments, which generate almost 50 times as much revenue per acre compared to their single-family counterparts.<sup>11,12,13,16,17,19</sup>
- The Chicago Housing Authority should then reinvest returns into propagating additional mixed-use developments with a minimum stock of 20% affordable units to lower the cost burden across the city.<sup>11,12,20,21,22,23</sup>

### Implementation

The DPD should encourage the Chicago City Council to pass legislation that changes the text of Title 17-2 of Chicago’s municipal code, building off support from the governor.<sup>24,25</sup> The legislation should reclassify Residential Single-unit (RS) designations to permit multifamily and mixed-use developments, effectively opening 41% of the city’s land to higher density construction.<sup>13</sup> In September 2025, the City Council voted unanimously to expand and make an Accessory Dwelling Unit

program permanent, signaling general support for incremental higher-density development.<sup>26</sup> Soon after, Chicago eliminated parking minimums for most new developments in transit-served areas, covering roughly 74% of the city and reducing a major cost barrier for developers.<sup>27</sup> The logical next step is eliminating single-family zoning in the city—taking principles already supported by the council and turning them into meaningful action towards increasing the supply of housing to improve affordability.

The rezoning should proceed in approximately three to five-year phases, with the first focused on reclassifying RS (residential single-unit) zones near transit-served areas with the highest returns on mixed-use development that can be invested into mixed-use developments in the next phase.<sup>12</sup> Following that, rezoning should expand primarily into RS zones in disproportionately cost-burdened south and westside communities.<sup>3</sup> Similarly to Minneapolis, longer-term, Chicago’s DPD and Housing Authority should upscale single family homes into duplexes or triplexes. Large-scale rezoning along major corridors to permit duplexes and triplexes resulted in over 1,000 new permitted units in two and a half years, offering a relative timeline for the first phase of Chicago’s rezoning.<sup>28</sup>

The greatest political barrier rests in Chicago’s concept of aldermanic prerogative—the idea that aldermen have final say over all zoning, land-use, and licensing decisions in their district.<sup>29</sup> Many aldermen from wealthier parts of the city may fight back against building affordable, higher-density developments in their district. The

Metropolitan Planning Council has argued that this practice contributes to higher costs and housing inequality. The Department of Housing and Urban Development filed a complaint in 2023, finding that aldermanic prerogative had been used to block an affordable housing development in the Northwest Side.<sup>29,30</sup> Having a city-wide ordinance would combat ward-by-ward gatekeeping and disparities in affordable mixed-use developments. Further, cases like Minneapolis show that large-scale change may be easier, as applying changes uniformly prevented any single neighborhood from feeling singled out or disproportionately affected.<sup>31</sup> To build the necessary coalition, DPD should engage organizations like the Chicago Housing Initiative and Housing Action Illinois early on in the planning process, structuring community input around how mixed-use development is implemented.<sup>32,33</sup>

To ensure that having a 20% affordable unit mandate does not deter developers, the city should pair it with density bonuses, which allow developers to build more units than base zoning permits to offset reduced potential revenue.<sup>34</sup> Density bonuses in Chicago can go up to 30% of the floor-area ratio of affordable housing in a development.<sup>35</sup> Research confirms that mandatory, jurisdiction-wide inclusionary policies produce significantly more affordable units than piecemeal policies.<sup>36</sup> Chicago Housing Authority should measure success by tracking cost-burdened household rates, median rent and home price growth, new affordable units created, and per-acre tax revenue from rezoned parcels, following the Federal Reserve Bank

of Minneapolis' public dashboard model.<sup>2,16,37</sup>

Increasing housing supply is the most effective way to lower housing costs, and in a city like Chicago, the only way to do so is to increase density by eliminating single family zoning.

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# The New Playbook: Collective Bargaining for College Athletes

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*Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) has fundamentally changed college athletics. To resolve whether athletes are employees, legal contract disputes, and other issues, policymakers should allow student-athletes to unionize and bargain collectively under a non-employee segmented Collective Bargaining Agreement.*

## Background

Fewer than 1 in 2,000 high school students will play their sport professionally.<sup>1</sup> Those individuals talented enough to make it to college face costs that are over half a million dollars, when taking into account tuition, interest on loans, and the opportunity cost of not working.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, over 60 athletic programs made over \$100 million in 2025. Even with scholarships, considering that less than 20% of student-athletes live above the national poverty line, the vast majority of athletes saw little of the financial return their labor helps create.<sup>2,3</sup>

In *NCAA v. Alston* (2021), the Supreme Court ruled that the NCAA can not limit how athletes get paid.<sup>4</sup> On July 1st, 2021, “Name, Image, and Likeness,” or NIL, was introduced, allowing players to control their own brand and make income by participating in endorsements, sponsorships, and licensing agreements.<sup>5</sup> Each school can also pay a maximum of \$20.5 million to students, as decided in *House v. NCAA* (2025).<sup>6</sup>

With these recent athletic compensation rulings comes the question of whether student-athletes are employees.<sup>7</sup> Notably, in 2024, the National Labor Relations Board declared that Dartmouth College’s men’s basketball players are employees and allowed to

unionize.<sup>8</sup> While private universities would have to follow the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), public schools face a complicated path as collective bargaining for public sector workers is restricted or banned in many states, mainly in the South.<sup>9</sup>

Also, classifying student-athletes as employees would mean they are subject to at-will termination and federal labor laws.<sup>10</sup> Workers’ compensation, unemployment, and healthcare benefits, retirement plans, among other laws, would have to be taken into consideration.<sup>9</sup> The costs of this new classification would burden schools, particularly those in Division III, and could lead to smaller rosters and axed programs.<sup>11</sup>

## Policy Idea

Congress should pass a law that would create a non-employee, segmented collective bargaining agreement framework for student-athletes. This model allows them to organize and negotiate collectively while officially preserving their status as independent contractors rather than employees. A recognized players’ association would negotiate a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) with the NCAA to implement a standardized athlete agreement. The CBA would be segmented by sport,

how much revenue the sports earn, and the school’s conference to accurately represent every athlete.

## Policy Analysis

To avoid the many problems that come with employee classification, Congress would have to grant bargaining rights to student-athletes as independent contractors. In January 2026, Assembly Bill 1340 went into effect in California, allowing ride-share workers to keep their designation as independent contractors while still being able to participate in collective bargaining and unionization.<sup>12</sup>

Collective bargaining rights increase wages by 13.6% compared to those not in unions.<sup>13</sup> CBAs would counterbalance the NCAA’s monopsony power, which would lead to more competitive compensation and mobility.<sup>14</sup> Standardized agreements also reduce uncertainty and limit costly litigation between athletes and institutions, helping prevent disputes like the January 2026 case in which Duke University sued quarterback Darian Mensah after he announced his intent to transfer midway through a two-year contract.<sup>15</sup>

To overcome the problem of managing a CBA for a myriad of collegiate institutions, sports, and student-athletes, Congress must

ensure it is segmented. This is exactly what SAG-AFTRA does for the 160,000 professionals, from film to radio, they represent; instead of a single agreement, SAG-AFTRA bargains by different areas such as commercials, journalism, etc.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Big Ten basketball players can negotiate their own CBA while Ivy League tennis has a different agreement.

Furthermore, collective bargaining benefits schools; coaches can achieve a stable roster through positive financial incentives rather than punitive transfer restrictions. For example, a “Veterans Performance Incentive Pool”, as proposed by Athletes.org (AO), would provide bonus compensation exclusively to athletes who remain at their institution for more than two consecutive years.<sup>16</sup>

The NCAA has been asking for a federal law to govern NIL, and implementing a non-employee segmented CBA would effectively eliminate restrictive transfer clauses, standardize market rules, and provide the antitrust protection schools desire while preserving athletes’ mobility.<sup>5</sup>

### Highlights

- Over 80% of collegiate student-athletes live at or below the national poverty line.<sup>3</sup> NIL, or “Name, Image, and Likeness,” introduced in 2021, allowed college athletes to make money from deals with third-party organizations for the first time.<sup>6</sup>
- However, NIL has created an unsustainable system due to non-standardized payment and representation for different schools.

Uncertainty about whether student-athletes should be considered employees could cause massive financial strain on universities as workers’ compensation, healthcare, and other issues would have to be considered.

- Congress should pass a law that would create a non-employee, segmented collective bargaining agreement (CBA) framework for student-athletes.
- A non-employee CBA allows for student-athletes to maintain their status as independent contractors, which avoids complications with a few state laws where collective bargaining is banned or restricted. The segmented portion of the CBA would account for the diversity of sports, conferences, and athletes in college athletics.

### Implementation

Because the NLRA does not govern public universities, and several states strictly prohibit public-sector employees from collectively bargaining, this policy cannot succeed through state-by-state reform.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the policy will have to go through the federal legislative process.

This legislation would originate in the Senate Commerce Committee, currently headed by Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), and the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, which recently conducted extensive hearings during which congressmen in both political parties generally agreed that athletes should not have

employment status.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the policy aligns with the purpose of President Trump’s “Saving College Sports” and “Urgent National Action to Save College Sports,” Executive Orders, particularly finding a national solution that protects women’s and Olympic sports.<sup>18,19</sup>

To mobilize support, a coalition of both labor unions and university administrators must come together. Players could also look to partner with AO, a players’ association for college athletes, which already represents over 5,000 college athletes and has drafted a model CBA framework.<sup>20</sup> In addition, student-athletes should lobby the newly formed College Sports Commission, which oversees and enforces compliance with new NCAA rules.<sup>21</sup> They should also contact the Power Four conference commissioners — SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey, Big Ten Commissioner Tony Petitti, Big 12 Commissioner Brett Yormark, and ACC Commissioner Jim Phillips — who have 65% of power in changing NCAA laws.<sup>22</sup> They have also publicly pleaded for Congressional intervention to establish uniform rules on NIL.<sup>23</sup>

A significant hurdle is ensuring the CBA complies with Title IX requirements of equal opportunity.<sup>10</sup> As schools disperse money to athletes because of the *House* case, there will be lawsuits funds go inequitably to men’s sports.<sup>24</sup> Just last year, the University of Utah’s women’s beach volleyball team was cut so the school could shuffle more money towards compensating athletes.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the CBA must provide proportionate benefits between men’s and women’s

programs with regular audits and reporting requirements.

Lastly, overcoming resistance from lawmakers in “Right-to-Work” states or states that ban public-sector bargaining, such as Texas, Georgia, and North Carolina, will require heavy persuasion that this non-employee model bypasses the traditional union definition.<sup>25</sup> As these are football-centered states, athletes from their flagship schools should mobilize boosters with public pressure campaigns led by athletes and alumni focused on the loss of conference revenue.

This policy does not require taxpayer funding. It is entirely self-funded by the billions of dollars already generated by the college sports system.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, the CBA will govern the distribution of revenue-sharing cap, allowing universities to turn these massive expenditures into a predictable, negotiated budget.<sup>6</sup>

The primary metric for success will be the drastic reduction or total elimination of antitrust and Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) lawsuits filed against the NCAA and its member institutions. The CSC will also measure success by tracking the total number of NIL opportunities available across women’s, Olympic, and non-revenue sports over time.

Overall, a non-employee, segmented CBA would help bring a standardized system and preserve opportunities.

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# Food Security After Prison: Ending the SNAP Drug Felony Ban in South Carolina

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*South Carolina is the only US state to enforce a lifetime ban on SNAP benefits for drug-related offenders, worsening food insecurity and recidivism. South Carolina should modify this ban to allow SNAP access upon enrollment in a drug treatment program.*

## Background

In 1996, Section 15 of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) permanently banned US citizens with felony drug convictions from receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia have since opted out of the Act, with 21 others modifying the timeline, severity, or conditions of limits to SNAP benefits.<sup>1</sup> South Carolina has not modified or opted out of the PRWORA, currently making it the only state to impose a lifetime ban on food assistance for those with drug-related felony convictions.<sup>2</sup>

Calls for reform to the SNAP drug felony ban follow reports from the American Journal of Sociology, which found that preventing ex-convicts from accessing food assistance led to food insecurity, which creates an obstacle to successful post-release transitions.<sup>3</sup> Food insecurity is one non-penal consequence many with felony convictions face, with 91% of sampled former inmates being identified as food insecure upon release.<sup>4</sup> SNAP exclusions disproportionately affect Black Americans, who are 600% more likely to be arrested for drug-related offenses than white Americans,

despite reporting drug use at much lower rates than other ethnicities.<sup>5</sup>

In 2023, Congressmembers Steve Cohen (D-TN) and Cory Booker (D-NJ) introduced the RESTORE Act within the 2023 Farm Bill, which attempted to repeal and replace the 1996 Act, essentially removing the SNAP ban at the federal level.<sup>6</sup> The 2023 Farm Bill did not gain the support needed to include the RESTORE Act, with few federal policy proposals making progress in the years since.<sup>1</sup> As national-level legislation has failed to gain widespread support and properly address the impacts of the PRWORA on economic and food security, state-level policy is needed to bring South Carolina's drug felony welfare policy in line with the national norm.

## Policy Idea

To address one factor of economic inequality and food insecurity, the state of South Carolina should pass a statute to modify its ban on SNAP benefits for drug-related offenders. Rather than immediately opting out of the ban, the state should pass a transitional law that allows conditional access to food-related welfare benefits, with eligibility granted within thirty days of enrollment in a post-release addiction treatment program.<sup>7</sup> Such a statute will not require completion

of a program before receiving assistance to prevent immediate relapse and criminal recidivism that may accompany food insecurity.<sup>4</sup> The statute will not differentiate treatment between individuals charged with trafficking or possession of illicit substances. Following California's model, South Carolina Department of Substance Abuse Services will verify enrollment in treatment programs, and the Department of Social Services will allocate SNAP benefits.<sup>8</sup>

## Policy Analysis

Permanent bans on SNAP benefits extend the criminal punishment past prison sentences without improving public safety.<sup>9</sup> These punishments often increase levels of recidivism within the five-year post-release period.<sup>3</sup> Gaps in data for individuals currently incarcerated make calculating recidivism rates difficult, but estimates indicate that SNAP bans increase recidivism by 10-105% among previous drug offenders.<sup>10</sup> Those convicted of drug trafficking often commit deviant acts out of financial necessity, making food assistance key to preventing rearrest.<sup>10</sup>

Similar studies, focusing on those charged with general drug-related convictions instead of only drug trafficking, publish more

modest findings. Under SNAP bans, arrests within five years of release were 3.2% higher than in states without the ban.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, access to SNAP benefits has been found to reduce recidivism by as much as 10%.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, expanded welfare access increases physical and economic health.<sup>12</sup> States that modified the Section 15 ban and implemented broad-based categorical eligibility programs saw substance use disorder rates 10% lower than the national average, suggesting that expanding SNAP was most effective when coupled with other programs.<sup>12</sup> Enrollment in drug treatment programs would expand social and medical support for successful reentry alongside the safety net offered by SNAP benefits.<sup>8</sup> Employment access predicts recidivism rates, and many individuals face disproportionately high rates of unemployment post-release.<sup>13</sup> South Carolina's ban blocks vulnerable communities from participating in the SNAP Employment and Training program, which creates further barriers to labor participation.<sup>13</sup> South Carolina's E&T program allows adults aged 18 to 52 to receive job search assistance, education, and vocational training, which addresses several barriers to employment that formerly incarcerated people may experience.<sup>14</sup> On top of expanding the labor market and reducing food insecurity, every dollar used on SNAP has a return on investment between 150-180%, bolstering local economies and extending benefits socially.<sup>15</sup>

These studies demonstrate that ending the drug felony SNAP ban in South Carolina would lower recidivism rates and promote a smooth reentry after incarceration.

## Highlights

- South Carolina is currently the only US state to fully enforce the lifetime federal SNAP ban on those with felony drug convictions, preventing released individuals from accessing food assistance.<sup>2</sup>
- SNAP bans based on drug-related convictions raise food insecurity among vulnerable ex-convicts, with African Americans being disproportionately affected.<sup>5</sup>
- The South Carolina State Legislature should pass a bill opting out of the federal assistance ban, allowing former inmates to receive SNAP benefits after enrolling in a drug treatment program.<sup>7</sup>
- States with partial SNAP bans have recidivism rates within five years post-conviction 3.2% higher than states without them.<sup>3</sup> SNAP access reduces food and economic stability, which makes reentry much smoother, reducing the risk of relapsing into risky behavior.<sup>11</sup>

## Implementation

To promote economic health and lower recidivism, the South Carolina state legislature should pass a law opting out of Section 115(a)(2) of Public Law 104-193, which enforces the federal lifetime ban on SNAP benefits for felons convicted of using, distributing, or possessing a controlled substance.<sup>16</sup> The state legislature should pass an independent modified ban, which enacts legislation at the state level to outline the procedures to modify

a federal law.<sup>8</sup> The second provision of this law would include a clause similar to California's 2023 Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code § 18901.3 Provision B, which describes eligibility for food assistance as complying with the mandates of one's parole/probation, including attending drug treatment facilities.<sup>8</sup>

South Carolina has high levels of penal punitiveness in its criminal justice system, characterized by a legislative focus on punishment over rehabilitation.<sup>17</sup> South Carolina's policies indicate a negative attitude towards individuals with felony convictions, which may lead to mixed responses to proposed policy.<sup>18</sup> To overcome potential pushback, advocates, such as the Drug Policy Alliance and Center for Law and Social Policy, should emphasize public safety outcomes to address resistance, such as a potential 10% decrease in recidivism rates.<sup>11</sup> The bipartisan Family and Veterans' Services Senate Committee should propose this bill, as it oversees most SNAP-related legislation.<sup>19</sup> Senate Bill S0221, which would've allowed exemptions to SNAP/TANF benefits on an individual basis, was proposed to this committee by state Senator Maymia McLeod (D-22) and received notable support.<sup>20</sup>

As this policy will expand SNAP and substance use services, increased funding is needed to accommodate the influx of new participants. Similar to how the system operates now, the majority of SNAP benefits will be covered by the federal government, with the SC general fund covering the excess.<sup>19</sup> Additional substance abuse service costs will operate out of the general fund, but services may be consolidated to lessen costs, such as group treatments.<sup>21</sup>

The policy will take effect at the beginning of the fiscal year following passage and should require reconsideration/renewal every five years. The SC Department of Corrections reports recidivism in one, three, and five-year intervals, so this clause allows for a full research cycle before reevaluation.<sup>21</sup> This renewal clause allows the South Carolina state congress to modify the conditions for benefits, allowing a transition into a less restrictive program if the proposed policy yields positive results. The state Department of Corrections will evaluate program effectiveness through changes in recidivism rates and work program enrollment.<sup>21</sup> Post-release surveys should be conducted to gauge food and economic security.

The Office of Substance Use Services at the South Carolina Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities should be the primary administrator of inpatient, outpatient, and intervention programs for formerly incarcerated individuals to promote uniform services.<sup>22</sup> The South Carolina Department of Social Services, which handles SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) distribution, will verify proof of enrollment for drug treatment programs and then allocate benefits accordingly.<sup>23</sup>

A state-level modified ban will use cross-sector approaches between local governments and service providers to expand SNAP benefits for prior offenders flexibly.

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# Gambling or Intelligent Investing? Managing the Risky Economics of Prediction Markets

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*Loss limits and advertising restrictions on prediction markets (PMs) would create a strong policy framework for managing consumer loss. PMs should be explored as an emerging technology in markets, with applications to policymaking and opinion forecasting.*

## Background

Prediction markets (PMs) pose new challenges for consumers. PMs are structured like a financial institution called a market maker, where they simultaneously act as a buyer and seller of “contracts” that promise payouts if specific events occur and collect revenue from the spread, or price difference, between opposite bets, as well as transaction fees.<sup>1</sup>

The contracts themselves are effectively binary options, a financial derivative where an investor places an all-or-nothing bet on the direction of an asset’s price movement.<sup>2</sup> In the US markets, options contracts, including binaries, must receive clearinghouse and Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) approval to be traded.<sup>3</sup> But little policy exists for PMs besides approval from the Commodities Futures Trading Commission (CFTC), which has demonstrated a loose attitude toward any additional regulation.<sup>4</sup>

The risk is reflected in data. On Polymarket, the largest PM platform, more than 70% of users netted a year-end loss, with less than 0.04% of users capturing 70% of the approximately \$3.7 billion in total user profit.<sup>5</sup> An analysis of Kalshi, the second largest platform, showed an average loss of 0.57 cents on the dollar across 72.1 million trades (\$18.26 billion in

volume).<sup>6</sup> PMs are marketed as a way for individuals to profit from their understanding of sports, politics, culture, or even financial markets. But statistics show even casino games can, on average, beat the odds of winning on PMs.<sup>7</sup>

PMs are also expanding. In January 2026, PM trading volume hit nearly \$11.5 billion,<sup>8</sup> a 9.5% increase from December 2025. Even traditional brokerage and market-making firms (e.g., Charles Schwab, Robinhood, Citadel Securities) are introducing PMs to clients, hoping to create another business.<sup>9</sup> Regulation must be introduced to mitigate consumer losses in the world’s newest markets.

## Policy Idea

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) should have PMs implement discretionary net loss caps for individual users. When making bets, users are prompted to enter a value indicating how much they are willing to lose over a time period. If an account exceeds that loss limit, then users are prompted with a reminder; if the account value falls by more than 15% of the indicated value, users are blocked from placing new bets. The FTC should create restrictions on PM marketing and growth strategy. PM marketing must emphasize that trading on their platforms comes

with gambling-like risks.

Furthermore, PMs should be banned from engaging in public advertising, such as billboards, as well as targeted digital advertising on social media platforms. Consumer policies slowing the growth of PMs create early protections as PMs emerge as a technology within economics and markets.

## Policy Analysis

Psychiatric studies on gambling have found voluntary loss caps, coupled with messaging and feedback, to be effective in reducing gambling losses.<sup>10</sup> For PMs, prompting limit selection replicates this behavioral effect. First, users are allowed to internalize an amount that they can rationally manage risk/losses around. Second, the reminder is a cognitive message that reminds users about their risk, while the 15% cap serves as a strict stop loss. In effect, this policy would reduce losses by enforcing an upper limit on how much can be lost with a voluntary component.

Research has also shown that advertising restrictions decrease the prevalence of risky behaviors such as smoking.<sup>11</sup> Similar to how tobacco advertising is forbidden from appearing on public billboards and on television, restrictions would prohibit PM advertising on public billboards and on social media.

Kalshi has particularly abused sensationalized mass advertising, such as in the 2026 New York City mayoral election, where Times Square billboards were flooded by Kalshi's logo and motto while Kalshi's implied probabilities of the election's outcome were constantly shown.<sup>12</sup> In Washington, DC, Kalshi has been conducting another similar mass campaign in response to attempts to regulate them.<sup>13</sup>

Policies that restrain PMs are preferable to outright bans. Firstly, PMs have potential externalities as polling tools for policy analysts, financial firms, and other parties interested in public sentiment. Second, PMs are easier to regulate than other forms of gambling. Many U.S. consumers voluntarily take. The U.S. casino industry had a gross revenue of \$71.92 billion in 2024, with illegal gambling generating about \$30 in 2025.<sup>14</sup> PMs are digital technologies in which policy controls can be directly implemented into the technical infrastructure as parts of both the economic and technological microstructure are better understood.<sup>15</sup>

### Highlights

- Prediction Markets (PMs) pose a new challenge in financial regulation and consumer protection. Data has already shown significant disparities, with the majority of users on platforms like Kalshi and Polymarket experiencing overall losses.<sup>5,6</sup>
- To address consumer concerns, the Federal Trade Commission should mandate PMs implement features where users self-input loss limits of their own

choice. Furthermore, PMs should be subject to advertising restrictions that limit their expansion.

- The aforementioned policies have shown success in the gambling and cigarettes markets, providing proof of concept that a similar effect can be expected when applied to PMs.<sup>10,11</sup>
- PMs may be useful for parties interested in understanding public sentiment. They can also be a preferable substitute for other risky economic behaviors (e.g., casino gaming) as their visibility as digital platforms can make policy controls easier to enforce.<sup>15</sup>

### Implementation

The FTC has the authority to implement industry-specific regulations and devise its own mandates for PMs to follow.<sup>16</sup> The FTC could create a rule requiring PM platforms to implement specific features. The FTC would address pure markets like Kalshi or Polymarket and non-PM companies interested in PMs like Coinbase or Robinhood.<sup>17,18</sup> PM marketing can be challenged via Section 5 of the FTC Act.<sup>19</sup> Similar to bans and warnings on cigarette advertising in the Federal Cigarette and Labeling Act, the FTC can utilize the same framing to restrict and ban PM marketing where it is most pervasive via digital media and public digital billboards.<sup>20</sup>

The efficacy of these policies can be monitored from PM datasets, analyzing the change in users over time, and the losses per trade. Obtaining this data is simple, as the FTC can just require Kalshi,

Polymarket, or any other companies to report their data, which is already the precedent in traditional securities markets with the SEC or CFTC.<sup>21,22</sup>

If the FTC requires legislative support for these initiatives, Senators Blumenthal (D-CT) and Kim (D-NJ) have introduced a similar consumer protection bill titled the Prediction Markets Security and Integrity Act.<sup>23</sup> The bill could easily incorporate its existing provisions with those in this proposal to form a strong regulatory foundation. The FTC typically takes one to three years to implement new rules and regulations.<sup>24</sup> However, this bill is only one of several on PMs sitting in Congress, with others focusing on sports betting or restricting markets related to controversial subjects (e.g., war or terrorism), possibly signaling a faster implementation timeline.<sup>25</sup>

One major obstacle to implementation is uncertainty in the regulatory environment, as stakeholders hold different views. In 2026, a federal judge in Ohio ruled that Kalshi was identical to gambling; Nevada banned Kalshi altogether; New York sued Coinbase for operating their PM platform; and the CFTC sued Illinois, Arizona, and Connecticut for imposing state-level regulations on PMs.<sup>26,27,28,29</sup> These inconsistencies arise from disagreements over the optimal rules process, if PMs should be regulated as a whole or just certain markets, if rules should apply industry-wide or only to specific companies, and if outright bans are preferable to restrictions. The CFTC's active opposition to regulation also poses a significant challenge, as it is the main agency

responsible for PM regulations. These developments present difficulties for our policy, as legislators may prioritize other provisions, and the CFTC may reject any attempts to establish rules.

However, PMs themselves have started to signal they may be willing to work with regulators. Kalshi is sending users emails about resources to trade “responsibly,” even tightening internal policy by cracking down on insider trading.<sup>30,31</sup> Political campaigns, policymakers’ staff, and agencies have also begun targeting insider trading.<sup>32,33,34</sup>

While the uncertainty means regulators will face obstacles, policymakers are interested in addressing PMs to protect consumers, and policies will adapt as the industry, technology, and cost and benefits are better understood.

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# EDUCATION POLICY

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# Supporting Virginia's Children After the Bell Through Subsidizing Local After-school Programming

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*With tax revenue potentially increasing, Virginia should allocate new state funds towards subsidizing after-school programs to promote public safety and social-emotional learning.*

## Background

One-sixth of students in Virginia are alone and unsupervised between the hours of two and six PM, which are also the state's peak hours for juvenile crime.<sup>1,2</sup> This gap in safe spaces for youth during the afternoons is associated with a lack of access to affordable after-school programs.

About three-fourths of children in the US who want to engage in after-school activities do not have access. This disparity is even more extreme in Virginia, with 80% of interested children missing out.<sup>3</sup> Virginia parents cite prohibitive costs, inconvenient locations, and lack of availability as the greatest barriers to children being able to partake in extracurricular activities.<sup>3</sup> By currently neglecting the provision of these enrichment opportunities, Virginia misses out on spaces for social-emotional learning outside of the classroom. After-school activities, whether they are focused on learning new content or engaging with their community, promote positive identity development and prosocial behavior in children.<sup>4</sup>

In the past, efforts to dissuade youth from engaging in delinquent behaviors have focused on punitive measures and incarceration, but such efforts have

not had any meaningful impact on recidivism.<sup>5</sup> Virginia has promoted community engagement and activities as a priority in its most recent 3-year plan for preventing juvenile delinquency.<sup>6</sup>

## Policy Idea

To increase funding for after-school programs, which are typically administered at the local level, Virginia's State House and Senate should pass a bill establishing a pilot fund that utilizes new tax revenue from inflation-related sales tax increases to incentivize local school districts to provide more after-school activities. Part of this fund should also subsidize fee payments for low-income families on a sliding-scale basis, measured by income. This policy should begin its piloting programming in areas with high concentrations of youth crime, as defined by the Virginia State Code § 22.1-199.5.<sup>7</sup>

## Policy Analysis

By subsidizing the expansion of programs across the state, this policy would mitigate three of the greatest barriers to accessing quality after-school care: availability (by launching more extracurricular activities), safe proximity (by focusing on creating new programs where they may not

exist), and cost (by subsidizing program fees for low-income families).

Youth who have access to after-school programs demonstrated significant improvements in test scores and task persistence. The same study found that programs correlate with healthier habits, decreased inclinations to commit crime, and increased social skills.<sup>8</sup>

An intervention study in Maryland found that after-school programs do demonstrate an impact on juvenile crime as a result of promoting positive peer relations and a fostering negative opinion towards drug use even within the span of one school year.<sup>9</sup> At large, studies have shown that increasing access to after-school programming reduces crime, even among youth who have a history of criminal offenses, and is a less expensive repeat-offense prevention intervention.<sup>2</sup>

With this evidence in mind, this bill may advise program designers to prioritize the development of skills such as perseverance and peer connection in order to impact students who are both at-risk of recommitting and those who are not, but may still benefit.

## Highlights

- Virginia exhibits a clear unmet demand for after-school programming, leaving working parents at a disadvantage and already underserved youth with less access to enrichment and more vulnerable to crime.<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- Increasing access to after-school activities through the General Assembly developing a select fund for after-school programming in high-need areas shows the potential to support increased test scores and improved social-emotional skill development, while subsequently decreasing youth crime.<sup>4,8</sup>
- A recent increase in Virginia's projected tax revenues by 2.9 percentage points (following inflation-related impacts) could pave the way for increased subsidization of after-school programming.<sup>7</sup>
- The political attitudes of Virginia residents are increasingly positive towards expanding social programs using tax revenues, demonstrating greater feasibility and for this policy.<sup>8,9,12</sup>

## Implementation

In the upcoming legislative session, Virginia's General Assembly should draft legislation proposing the creation of a select fund to expand the capacity of existing after-school programs and subsidize the development of new programs in counties where the number of school-age children outweighs the current supply of slots by a certain consistent

percentage. Furthermore, this bill should prioritize funding programming in low-income areas throughout the state, where the effects of limited access to after-school programming are more harmful for the surrounding community.

Virginia's tax revenues are expected to show a modest increase of 2.9 percentage points ahead of schedule this fiscal year, likely driven in part by inflation increasing the sales tax revenue.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Virginia legislators have demonstrated increasing interest in proposing legislation to increase income taxes on higher earners to fund investments.<sup>11,12</sup> While bills following this pattern, like HB378 and HB979, have faced mixed responses in the current legislative session, they mark a major shift in the state's fiscal policy agenda towards supporting social programs.<sup>11,12</sup>

A 2008 amendment to state law sanctions local usage of state educational funds on after-school programming, particularly for areas at "high risk" for juvenile crime, opening the door for more program funding avenues.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the Neighborhood and Community Services of Virginia's Fairfax County launched the Beyond the Bell pilot program, which provides precedent for public community funds financing the expansion of after-school programs. Virginia's current political climate makes it a particularly feasible time for Virginia to adopt this policy, with bipartisan support for after-school programming increasing.<sup>13,14</sup> Furthermore, Virginia's recent election of Democratic Governor Abigail Spanberger, whose platform includes increasing public school quality and decreasing costs for

working Virginia families, provides an amenable environment for expanding investment in after-school activities.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the campaign for this bill, legislators and their teams should organize public awareness initiatives to increase visibility and support for the bill. These movements should primarily focus on Virginia's rural Southside region, which experiences a significant disparity between its school-age population and available after-school activities and may therefore be more enthusiastic towards this initiative.<sup>16</sup> Potential partners that could help with advocacy could include national or statewide nonprofit organizations like the After School Alliance and the Virginia Partnership for Out-Of-School Time, as well as parent and educator volunteer networks associated with Virginia 4-H, one of the few federally sponsored youth programs in the US. The 4-H group might provide the most help in specifically reaching the state's rural population.

Following adoption, the Virginia General Assembly should form a task force to assess the legislation's effectiveness in expanding access to after-school programming and generating associated positive educational outcomes. This group should specifically focus on measuring the number of programs established by the new fund, alongside shifts in test scores and juvenile crime rates across the state over the next year. Using this data, policymakers should evaluate whether or not additional action should be taken to expand access to after-school activities for Virginia youth. This process will entail a great deal of public communication, community

engagement, and legislator cooperation, but will benefit youth across the state.

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# Beyond Abstinence: Implementing Comprehensive Sex Education Standards in Virginia Schools

By Jackson Hunley, [jwh333@cornell.edu](mailto:jwh333@cornell.edu)

*A mandatory statewide sex education framework would improve sexual and reproductive health outcomes in Virginia. To reduce unintended pregnancies, stop the spread of STIs, and foster sexual citizenship, Virginia should adopt universal K-12 comprehensive sex education standards.*

## Background

Sex education empowers young people to make responsible decisions that promote sexual health and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> However, Virginia is one of eight states that do not require K-12 sex education, creating discrepancies in sexual health instruction across the Commonwealth's 132 public school divisions.<sup>2,3,4</sup> An estimated 86% of Virginia school divisions provide family life education—a course of study on human development, relationships, and sexuality—but no universal sex education standards exist beyond the family life Standards of Learning (SOLs), which emphasize abstinence.<sup>3,5,6</sup> Furthermore, only 32.5% of Virginia schools teach all 23 topics recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as part of a comprehensive sex education curriculum, including contraception and HIV prevention.<sup>7</sup>

Although adolescent sexual activity has declined in Virginia and nationwide, a substantial proportion of Virginia high school students still engage in sexual behaviors.<sup>8,9</sup> According to the CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 16.3% of Virginia high school students are currently sexually active, while 22.5% have had sex at least once.<sup>9</sup> Among those who have had sex, 9.4% did not use any contraceptive method the last time they had sexual intercourse

with an opposite-sex partner.<sup>9</sup> Condom use among Virginia youth also declined by 2.4% from 2019 to 2023.<sup>9</sup>

The absence of mandatory statewide sex education standards slows progress toward reducing unintended pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, sex education courses that emphasize abstinence until marriage—such as Virginia's—do not prevent young people from having sex and may even be associated with higher teenage pregnancy rates.<sup>11,12</sup> Comprehensive sex education, which includes instruction on contraception, STI prevention, and consent, is the most effective approach for improving youth sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

## Policy Idea

To reduce unintended pregnancies, stop the spread of STIs, and promote sexual autonomy, the Virginia General Assembly should amend the Code of Virginia § 22.1-207.1 to require public schools to provide family life instruction, including comprehensive sex education, in the 2027 session. Additionally, it should require the SOLs for Family Life Courses to focus on scientifically-proven sexual-health-promoting practices, as defined by

the National Sex Education Standards. The SOLs should include learning benchmarks on sexual orientation, gender identity, and consent, while remaining medically accurate. In accordance with the law, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) should revise its family life SOLs from 2027 through 2029 for implementation in the 2029-2030 academic year. Finally, the General Assembly should maintain family life courses' "opt-out" model, which allows parents to remove their children from instruction.

## Policy Analysis

Medically accurate sex education courses that broaden instruction beyond abstinence produce positive student outcomes.<sup>1</sup> A study using data on formal sex education from the National Survey of Family and Health observed a 50% lower risk of pregnancy among adolescents who received comprehensive sex education (CSE) than those who received abstinence-only education.<sup>13</sup> The authors further noted that CSE likely reduces teenage pregnancy risk by increasing condom and other birth control use, suggesting that CSE encourages students to practice safer sex.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, data from the National Survey of Family Growth demonstrate a link between improvements in contraceptive use

and the recent decline in teenage pregnancy.<sup>14</sup>

In a meta-analysis of sex education studies, researchers found that CSE improves students' knowledge of contraceptive methods, STI testing, and STI prevention, as well as attitudes toward condom use and LGBTQ+ individuals.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, a similar systematic review of sex education programs concluded that CSE, especially when inclusive of LGBTQ+ students, can lower homophobic-related bullying, develop skills that foster healthy relationships, and reduce dating and intimate partner violence.<sup>1</sup> Overall, CSE addresses both the biological and social components of sex to create responsible sexual citizens who value consent and protect their sexual health.<sup>1,13,15</sup>

While educational approaches to teaching sexual topics remain a contentious political issue, an overwhelming majority of parents support CSE in schools.<sup>16</sup> 89.3% of parents of school-aged children supported CSE, with consistently high levels of support across each demographic group surveyed, in a 2008 survey on the subject.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, each specific sex education topic assessed for parental approval received majority support between 63.4% and 93.8%.<sup>16</sup>

### Highlights

- Virginia is one of eight states that do not require K-12 sex education, creating inconsistencies in instruction across school divisions that provide it.<sup>2,3,4,7</sup> State law requires local sex education programs to emphasize abstinence, an approach that does not

effectively prevent young people from engaging in risky sexual behaviors.<sup>3,6,11,12</sup>

- Many Virginia high school students report sexual activity, while condom use has declined, and some students do not use birth control. The lack of mandatory statewide sex education standards stalls progress toward reducing unintended pregnancies and STI transmission.<sup>1,9,11,12</sup>
- The Virginia General Assembly should amend the Code of Virginia to require public schools to provide family life instruction that includes comprehensive sex education (CSE).
- CSE reduces students' risk of teenage pregnancy and improves knowledge of safer sex practices while garnering broad parental support, demonstrating the policy's effectiveness and feasibility.<sup>13,15,16</sup>

### Implementation

In the 2027 session, the Virginia General Assembly should amend the Code of Virginia § 22.1-207.1 to require each public elementary, middle, and high school to provide family life instruction, including comprehensive sex education (CSE), in grades four through ten.<sup>17</sup> It should also require the Standards of Learning (SOLs) for Family Life Courses to conform to the National Sex Education Standards published by the Future of Sex Education initiative.<sup>18</sup> The National Sex Education Standards define CSE as a research-based course of study that “focuses on clear health goals and specific

behavioral outcomes” by providing students with “functional knowledge.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the law should continue to require family life courses to adhere to SOLs and maintain the existing opt-out policy, which allows parents to remove their children from instruction.

To garner support, the House of Delegates Education Committee and the Virginia Senate Education and Health Committee should invite leaders from the Future of Sex Education initiative to testify at policy hearings. These representatives can present evidence demonstrating CSE's effectiveness, helping to address arguments from conservative advocates promoting abstinence-only education.<sup>18,19</sup>

The VDOE should convene a committee of teachers, administrators, parents, and students for a period of two years from 2027 through 2029 to review current family life SOLs and identify strategies for bringing them into conformity with the National Sex Education Standards. Under Virginia law, SOLs should require age-appropriate instruction on STI prevention, dating and intimate partner violence, and sexual assault.<sup>17</sup> However, they should also include topics such as safe and effective contraceptive use, reproductive healthcare, consent, sexual orientation, and gender identity.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the revised SOLs should provide a professional development framework to train teachers on instructional content and assessment methods annually. The committee should standardize these assessment methods and make them clearly measurable to enable comparisons of the SOLs' effectiveness across school divisions. In 2029, the committee should present its final proposed

SOLs to the Virginia Board of Education, which should vote to approve them.

Under the new SOLs, all Virginia public schools should begin to offer updated family life courses during the 2029-2030 academic year. To facilitate implementation, the General Assembly should fund additional teaching positions in the 14% of school divisions that do not currently offer family life courses, which would cost approximately \$73,710,924 per year, for 1,210 teachers making \$60,900.<sup>5,21,22</sup> This cost estimate is based on the approximately 181,554 students who do not currently receive family life education and assumes a teacher-to-pupil ratio of 1:150.<sup>5,21</sup>

In accordance with current SOL revision practices, the VDOE should reconvene a review committee every seven years to evaluate the standards and propose changes to the Board of Education.<sup>20</sup> This committee should consider teacher and student feedback, as well as standardized test scores, in its deliberations.

If implemented effectively, these standards will equip Virginia students with the skills they need to achieve sexual wellness and autonomy.

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# Fixing America’s Reading Crisis: Improving National Youth Literacy Through Evidence-Based Reading Reform

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*Many American students struggle to read proficiently due to inconsistent and outdated reading instruction. Federal lawmakers should develop a policy incentivizing states to implement evidence-based reforms in youth literacy education, improving reading proficiency nationwide.*

## Background

In 2022, only 33% of US fourth graders and 37% of US twelfth graders achieved reading proficiency.<sup>1</sup> Between 2019 and 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a three-point decrease in average reading scores among fourth and eighth graders, and scores have dropped an additional two points from 2022 to 2024 across both age groups.<sup>2</sup> These statistics reveal a prevalent crisis in the US education system, with a majority of students unable to read at their grade level.

Poor American literacy levels date back to the 1800s, when Horace Mann recommended the “whole language” approach. This process taught children to memorize words instead of phonetically sounding them out, which became the norm in schools nationwide.<sup>3</sup> However, in 1955, a book titled *Why Johnny Can’t Read* outlined a lack of explicit phonics instruction in the US and sparked national debate about the best literary approach for children.<sup>3</sup> In 1967, a study demonstrating that a child must learn phonics before they are expected to understand words kick-started widespread research on the benefits of phonics learning, known as the science of reading.<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, as a response to the criticism

of Mann’s approach, schools began to implement balanced literacy, which combined both approaches.<sup>3</sup> However, this system still minimized phonics and relied heavily on “three-cueing,” which is guessing words using context, pictures, or grammar.<sup>4</sup>

Modern cognitive science teaches that reading is not a natural skill; it requires explicit phonics instruction.<sup>5</sup> Thus, between 2013 and 2026, over 40 states have passed legislation implementing more balanced frameworks in their schools.<sup>6</sup> However, these policies primarily focused on testing weak recommendations for curriculum change, and they fail to ensure that schools consistently implement evidence-based reading instruction. Due to these limitations, a federal incentive program is necessary to ensure evidence-based literacy instruction is implemented nationwide.

## Policy Idea

The United States Congress should create a literacy grant that incentivizes states to implement high-quality science-of-reading instructional standards. These standards refer to reading instruction grounded in cognitive science, including explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics,

fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These grade-specific requirements would reflect different stages of literacy development. To receive this literacy grant, states would have to:

[1] Develop a strong evidence-based K-3 reading curriculum.

[2] Ensure all K-5 teachers responsible for literacy instruction are trained in the science of reading, and

[3] Conduct literacy screenings for those at risk of reading difficulties in K–2 three times per year.

States would publish approved frameworks for K-3 reading curricula that include systematic phonics instruction, phonemic awareness development, fluency practice, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension instruction. Additionally, K-5 teacher trainings would include both teacher retraining programs and updated certification standards for new educators to ensure that science-based literacy education is used in classrooms.

## Policy Analysis

Reading, unlike speaking, is not a natural process, and it requires systematic instruction to rewire

brain cells.<sup>7</sup> After decades of research, the National Reading Panel (NRP) has established five key components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.<sup>8</sup> These steps outline a student's journey from the ability to differentiate and manipulate sounds, to the ability to connect sounds to letters, to the development of fluent reading that supports vocabulary growth, and finally to comprehension of texts.<sup>8</sup> A 2000 NRP study, which evaluated reading instruction based on these five key components, compared reading instruction with phonics to instruction without it and found that phonics instruction improved reading outcomes and led to a 15% increase in test scores.<sup>9</sup> Phonics had an even larger impact on younger students in K-1, increasing their reading outcomes by 0.55 standard deviations.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, outcomes increased even further by 0.98 standard deviations for struggling K-2 readers.<sup>9</sup>

In 2013, the Mississippi state legislature passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, which required phonics instruction and included in-depth teacher training, targeted interventions for K-3 students, and clear communication regarding expectations and enforcement.<sup>10</sup> The state's success was driven by the strict implementation of structured literacy practices, including mandated phonics instruction, teacher training, and accountability measures. In the ensuing decade, Mississippi rose from the forty-ninth to the ninth best state for fourth-grade reading proficiency, demonstrating the effectiveness of a

well-implemented reform in improving reading proficiency.<sup>11</sup>

This policy focuses on K-3 curricula because early elementary school is the time when students are still learning to read.<sup>12</sup> Teacher training must be mandatory for all K-5 instructors because struggling fourth and fifth-graders still need remedial support. Schools should conduct literacy screenings on grades K-2, during the fall, winter, and spring, to track literacy progress among students and identify those with reading disabilities, as early detection is the key to effective intervention.<sup>13</sup> Overall, the evidence from cognitive science research and Mississippi's literacy reforms demonstrates that structured, phonics-based instruction significantly improves reading outcomes, underscoring the need for a federal policy to scale these practices nationally.

### Highlights

- American literacy rates are alarmingly low, with approximately only one-third of students reading proficiently.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Research shows that traditional literacy instruction methods, including the "whole language" approach and the method of blending in phonics instruction, often underemphasize phonics, even though systematic phonics instruction is essential for reading development.<sup>3,4,5,8,9</sup>
- To improve literacy rates and instruction, Congress should create a federal grant program incentivizing states to implement science-of-

reading standards, including phonics-based curricula, aligned teacher trainings, and early literacy screenings.

- Evidence from reforms in states like Mississippi demonstrates that structured phonics instruction, early intervention, and teacher preparation can significantly improve student reading outcomes.<sup>10,11</sup>

### Implementation

The House Committee on Education and the Workforce should introduce this bill and allow the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions to implement edits, so both chambers can influence its creation.<sup>14,15</sup> As literacy instruction is generally an apolitical issue, it should receive bipartisan sponsorship from lawmakers.<sup>16</sup> To build public support and political momentum, top US literacy nonprofits, including Reading is Fundamental and the Barbara Bush Foundation, alongside teachers unions like the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, should advocate for the bill's passage.<sup>17,18,19,20</sup> A public relations campaign to demonstrate effectiveness should highlight the success of Mississippi's literacy reform as a successful precedent.

Under the proposal, states should receive grants, scaled by the number of schools in each state and individual school size, to cover the costs of implementing federally-approved literacy standards. These grants would fund curriculum adjustments and teacher retraining, averaging \$3,000 per elementary school. Most schools can integrate teacher training into existing

professional development days, which minimizes costs, meaning funding could focus on training materials. After initial implementation, schools should continue to receive \$3,000 annually to conduct three literacy screenings per year, as screenings cost roughly \$10 per student, and elementary schools have approximately 300 students in grades K-2 on average.<sup>21</sup> Schools would remain eligible for this annual grant as long as they maintain the literacy curriculum. Policymakers should evaluate changes in early literacy outcomes related to the proposal for five years after implementation, and make a subsequent decision on the grant program's effectiveness and continuation.

By leveraging existing professional development structures and using current staff, this policy can minimize costs. Following the guidelines discussed above, the proposal would cost \$3,000 per school to implement initially and \$3,000 per school annually for screenings, making it cost-effective. Funding the US's approximately 67,400 public elementary schools would cost \$202.2 million every year. This cost is a minuscule proportion of the \$180 billion discretionary spending of the US Department of Education (ED).<sup>22,23</sup>

Potential hurdles include teacher resistance and a lack of qualified professional development staff. School administrators and advocacy groups can overcome these hurdles by emphasizing the importance of teacher retraining for improving literacy rates, a shared goal among teachers and administrators. Additionally, they could bring in outside literacy experts to deliver training when schools lack adequate personnel.

The ED would monitor implementation through independent federal audits that check curriculum, lesson plans, certificates of teacher retraining, and screening records. Schools that fail to comply with regulations or continue to teach with outdated methods would lose their funding until correction. Implementation would begin in the first year with grant allocation, curriculum adoption, and teacher training, followed by five years of literacy screenings, ongoing evaluation, and federal oversight. Additionally, struggling schools may receive extra funding during the initial policy rollout if literacy rates are extremely low.

An effective implementation would result in better literacy outcomes for American children, improving long-term academic and economic outcomes.

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# Teaching the Workforce: Using Federal Financial Incentives to Address the CTE Teacher Shortage

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*Congress should amend Perkins V to address the national shortage of CTE teachers. By funding signing bonuses for part-time industry professionals and salary supplements for full-time teachers, the policy would reduce opportunity costs, improve teacher retention, and strengthen workforce readiness.*

## Background

As of February 2026, 6.9 million unfilled positions linger in the labor market because employers struggle to find employees with the necessary skills.<sup>1,2</sup> As higher education becomes unattainable due to rising costs and student debt, the government is obligated to prepare individuals to fill these vacancies.<sup>3</sup> Career and technical education (CTE) helps bridge the gap between ready-to-work Americans and open positions by equipping high school and postsecondary students with the problem-solving, critical thinking, and employability skills to succeed in technical fields.<sup>4</sup>

The 2018 Strengthening CTE for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) allocated \$1.4 billion in formula grants to launch new CTE programs and improve existing programs.<sup>5</sup> The investment has helped appease the surge in interest over the past five years; however, a national shortage of CTE teachers leaves high demand unsatisfied.<sup>6</sup> Data show that administrators struggle to fill CTE teaching positions 57% of the time, compared to 39% for other subjects.<sup>7</sup> These shortages persist most strongly in high-demand fields like manufacturing and information technology, where salary differences increase the opportunity cost of choosing teaching over industry work.<sup>4</sup>

The scarcity of CTE teachers creates a cycle in which employer demand remains unmet due to the challenge of preparing the next generation of workers. In a 2025 survey, 84% of hiring managers agreed that most high school students are not prepared to enter the workforce.<sup>8</sup> In the manufacturing sector, the projected 2.1 million unfilled jobs by 2030 could total a cost of \$1 trillion.<sup>9</sup> Studies also show that CTE improves graduation rates, earnings, and employment outcomes, especially for low-income students and lower-performing students, so less access may widen opportunity gaps by restricting access to workforce pathways.<sup>7,10</sup> Preparing the workforce begins with CTE teacher recruitment and retention.

## Policy Idea

To incentivize part-time teaching and retain full-time CTE teachers, Congress should pass legislation to amend Perkins V. The amendment would enable the United States Department of Education (ED) to distribute signing bonuses for part-time industry professionals and utilize the current formula grant to distribute CTE teacher salary supplements.

A federally subsidized one-time signing bonus of \$3,000 would quickly address the teacher shortage by immediately bringing more high-

demand industry professionals into the field. In response to CTE teacher retention in the long term, the ED should implement a targeted salary supplement program for CTE teachers in high-growth industries. The ED should distribute \$3.6 billion annually specifically for teacher funding through the existing funding mechanism, which features grants based on state population and per-capita income.

## Policy Analysis

Studies show that teachers in high-demand CTE areas leave teaching early in their careers and are the most difficult to replace.<sup>7</sup> Most CTE teachers hold occupational licenses, which substitute traditional teacher credentials for industry employment experience.<sup>11</sup> However, these teachers exit at rates 25% higher than traditionally licensed teachers.<sup>11</sup> They also earn the highest salaries after leaving teaching: about 20% more income within two years.<sup>7</sup> These data reveal that occupationally licensed teachers in high-growth fields leave or avoid teaching because they face the greatest economic opportunity costs to teach.

CTE teachers who remain active in their industry bring valuable direct industry connections.<sup>11</sup> Bonuses for teachers in high-need areas must reach at

least 7.5% above base salary to influence career choice.<sup>12</sup> Offering \$2,500 signing bonuses for part-time teaching could incentivize occupationally licensed professionals to enter the classroom, helping alleviate the CTE teacher shortage in the short term. By earning supplemental income while maintaining industry employment, professionals would have less reason to avoid teaching entirely.<sup>7</sup> Incentivizing part-time teaching may also create pathways to full-time roles, helping address teacher shortages long term.<sup>7</sup>

Increasing the overall salary of CTE teaching would make full-time teaching more competitive with industry jobs and attract more industry professionals to the classroom. States often avoid raising teacher pay due to budget constraints, making this a key area for federal intervention.<sup>13</sup> CTE teachers earn 24% less than similarly educated professionals, with a median salary of \$63,000.<sup>14</sup> Minimizing this gap would require around \$15,000 for each of the 239,600 CTE teachers nationwide, totaling approximately \$3.6 billion annually.<sup>14</sup> By reducing the pay gap and addressing the economic opportunity cost that drives professionals to avoid teaching, salary supplements would improve teacher recruitment and retention.

### Highlights

- Despite growing demand and the need for career and technical education (CTE), administrators cannot fill CTE teaching positions 57% of the time, leading to unmet employer demand in technical fields and disproportionate effects on

communities that rely on CTE pathways for access to the workforce.<sup>7,9,10</sup>

- The shortage of CTE teachers, especially in high-demand fields, results largely from the high opportunity cost of choosing teaching over industry work, as industry careers typically offer substantially higher wages.<sup>7</sup> Providing \$3,000 signing bonuses for part-time industry professionals would help alleviate the CTE teacher shortage by encouraging professionals to teach part-time while maintaining their industry positions.
- By amending the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act to enable the ED to allocate more funding specifically for CTE teacher salaries, Congress would close the wage gap over time, making teaching an overall more competitive and attractive career option for industry professionals.

### Implementation

Implementing the proposal requires a coordinated effort among governments that leverage bipartisan support. Co-chairs of the bipartisan Congressional Career and Technical Education Caucus, Representative Glenn Thompson (R-PA) and Representative Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR), should introduce the amendment to Perkins V in the House, where it would be referred to the Committee on Education and the Workforce. Representative Thompson, the primary sponsor of Perkins V, and Representative Bonamici have called for increased

federal investment in CTE for fiscal year 2026.<sup>16</sup> Their positions as caucus co-chairs equip them to advocate for increased federal funding for CTE teacher salaries.

Pushback will likely come from fiscal conservatives who oppose increased federal spending, as well as lawmakers who prioritize reducing the federal budget deficit. To address these concerns, proponents should frame the proposal as a workforce-focused investment rather than an expansion of federal bureaucracy. Because Perkins V passed unanimously with bipartisan support, the proposal has the potential to gain support across party lines.

To mobilize support, organizations such as Advance CTE, the Association for Career and Technical Education, industry associations, and CTE teachers should contribute to advocacy efforts. They should provide testimony on the projected economic, social, and personal impacts of the CTE teacher shortage and insufficient wages. Proponents should also emphasize that amendments to Perkins V allow for integration of salary supplements into existing funding structures. The formula directs federal support to states with higher demand and fewer resources to raise teacher salaries independently. As a result, the policy can function through increased funding without complicated bureaucratic hurdles or the need to create new administrative systems.

The policy would mitigate disincentives for CTE teachers in high-need areas through strategic, targeted funding and a structured application process. Following passage, the ED should administer funding distribution using the

formula to determine appropriate funding levels. At the beginning of each academic year, state departments of education should open the application window and notify local school districts and community colleges of the opportunity. District applications should include information such as vacancy rates by subject and projected teacher demand. State reviewers should evaluate applications based on the severity of shortages using the provided data. They should communicate grant amounts before March, when hiring efforts typically begin, so schools can post positions and recruit industry professionals before the new school year.<sup>17</sup>

After one academic year, schools that receive funding should collect and report data on the number of part-time and full-time industry professionals they hire, teacher retention rates, and vacancy rates in high-demand subjects to maintain eligibility. State departments of education should aggregate district data and submit reports to the ED, enabling the department to adjust and improve the program during the summer recess in time for funding distribution before the next academic year.

By addressing the lack of financial incentive for CTE teachers through equitable implementation, the policy would strengthen the national workforce, expand educational opportunities for students, and support long-term economic success.

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# Addressing Childhood Food Insecurity Through Community Eligibility Provisions

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*Congress should amend and pass the No Kid Hungry Act to more effectively address food insecurity in children by requiring state-wide Community Eligibility Provisions in states with high rates of food insecurity.*

## Background

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) currently provides food assistance to 22 million students daily, comprising 21.2 million free lunches and 800,000 reduced-price, \$0.40 lunches, through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).<sup>1</sup> Children are considered eligible for NSLP if they have categorical eligibility by qualifying for other public assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), if they are homeless, if they reside in the foster care system, or if they belong to households whose members earn incomes between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, students from families who are at or below 130% of the federal poverty level qualify for free meals.<sup>2</sup> These two modes of eligibility, however, overlook students in need. One in five children across the US lives in a food-insecure household, and nearly 14 million children are unsure of where or when they will get their next meal.<sup>3</sup>

Children facing food insecurity often deal with increased health problems and developmental differences, as well as poor academic performance due to difficulty focusing and learning.<sup>3</sup> Food insecurity can have lifelong ramifications by stunting growth and hindering proper development.

Additionally, current programs such as NSLP inadvertently create stigma that can lead to bullying and further social challenges for low-income children. It is vital that this food access disparity and resulting stigma be addressed more effectively than the USDA's current federal policy allows.

## Policy Idea

The No Hungry Kids in Schools Act should be amended to require all states with food insecurity rates above the national average to create a statewide Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). The current legislation only requires the USDA to create an option for states to implement and use a statewide CEP for subsidized school meals, rather than a binding regulation. Under a CEP, all students, regardless of income, enrolled in eligible schools and school districts would immediately qualify for free breakfast and lunch, without requiring individual household applications. As a result of this communal eligibility, groups that USDA food assistance programs often neglect—students who do not qualify for NSLP but cannot afford school meals, and those unable to properly navigate the administrative channels and challenges of NSLP application—would have their nutrition needs met.

## Policy Analysis

The No Hungry Kids in Schools Act, as written, is insufficient to usher in change because it directs the USDA to create an option for statewide CEPs. Currently, the burden lies on individual schools to apply for a CEP to serve free meals, and only schools whose student body identifies as at least 25% low-income are eligible.<sup>4</sup> Creation of statewide CEPs removes this threshold, empowering all schools in participating states to serve free meals to all students, regardless of income.<sup>4,5</sup>

CEPs currently help feed children who are overlooked or disadvantaged by the NSLP system, increasing access to nutritious food while eliminating administrative compliance burdens for parents and schools. CEPs also work to eliminate the stigma associated with meal assistance because when all students receive free meals, no child is singled out. Additionally, proper nutrition further improves learning outcomes for students.<sup>6</sup> Students who eat school breakfast score 17.5% higher on standardized math tests, and attend 1.5 more days of school annually, on average.<sup>6</sup> Nationwide, 75% of school districts have students struggling with lunch debt, which statewide CEPs would eliminate.<sup>7</sup> CEPs often increase revenue generation for schools by increasing federal reimbursements

and eliminating administrative costs, and they boost local economies by removing the financial burden lunches create, often helping to reduce inflation.<sup>8</sup>

The benefits created by CEPs are so great, and the issue of food insecurity is too important to require only the option of statewide CEPs. The optionality of this legislation fails to demand concrete change, and many states will likely keep their current nutritional support systems. By mandating implementation in all states that surpass the national average for food insecurity, this amendment will augment the bill's power, as well as create an incentive for states to address hunger more effectively.

### Highlights

- The majority of government nutrition assistance provided to children is delivered through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Student eligibility is determined by family income and requires extensive paperwork.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Not all students in need of nutrition assistance have access to NSLP due to income requirements or administrative hurdles. Community Eligibility Programs (CEP) include these children because they provide free meals to all students in CEP districts, regardless of income, and do not require an individual application.<sup>1,2,6</sup>
- The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) should mandate states to better meet the needs of their students by requiring the creation of a statewide CEP

in states with food insecurity rates higher than the national average. Under a statewide CEP, all students within that state would be eligible for and receive free school meals.<sup>2,6,8</sup>

- Amending the No Hungry Kids in Schools Act will actualize the bill's capacity to effect change by requiring implementation on the state level.<sup>4,5</sup>

### Implementation

Representative Pete Aguilar (D-CA-33) introduced the No Hungry Kids in Schools Act (HR 2402) in the House of Representatives on March 3, 2025.<sup>4,5</sup> It currently has twenty-four cosponsors and is under the purview of the House Committee on Education and Workforce, where it has yet to advance to the House floor for a final vote.<sup>4</sup> This current attempt is not the first time representatives have introduced the No Hungry Kids in Schools Act, with similar legislation failing in the 117th and 118th Congresses.<sup>4</sup>

HR 2402, like many welfare bills, will likely face resistance from conservatives.<sup>9</sup> Unlike other expansions of existing social services, though, the bill and its introduction of statewide CEPs will likely generate more economic benefits and would therefore gain more Republican support. In eliminating lunch costs, family budgets would be extended, creating more spending money and stimulating local economies in communities where CEPs are implemented.<sup>8</sup> These economic benefits can appeal to moderate Republicans and those in purple districts, widening support to a more actionable coalition.

However, the current political landscape offers a unique window for bipartisan support among voters as a result of the government shutdown last fall and the ongoing partial shutdown.<sup>9</sup> Partisan fighting has exposed the vulnerability of traditional avenues to accessing affordable and available federal assistance, like SNAP, which is necessary for millions of Americans.<sup>3,10</sup> Simultaneously, voters have become increasingly concerned with affordability, making them more sympathetic and thus more willing to mobilize in support of this bill.<sup>10</sup> Through social media campaigns encouraging voters to contact their representatives, proponents of the No Hungry Kids in Schools Act can seize upon the current political momentum to gain congressional approval and ratify the legislation. CEPs will not face the same funding risks from government shutdowns that SNAP faces. Since the USDA administers SNAP, it can and is interrupted when the federal government shuts down. Statewide CEPs, however, would be administered at the state level, circumventing the federal funding issues that SNAP encounters.

Children are the future, and it is imperative that we provide the resources needed for them to thrive.

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# Reshaping Sexual Geographies to Reduce Sexual Assault on College Campuses

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*State legislatures should require public universities to implement Campus Social Space Safety Standards to address campus sexual assault by regulating high-risk party environments, reducing power imbalances, and ensuring safer conditions in alcohol-centered social spaces.*

## Background

Sexual violence is a persistent problem across college campuses nationwide, and remains a significant health and human rights concern.<sup>1</sup> Sexual assault represented the largest share of campus crimes in the United States in 2021, accounting for 44% of incidents and occurring at a rate of approximately eight assaults per 10,000 students.<sup>2</sup> Despite growing attention to the issue over the past several decades, research suggests that sexual violence remains significantly underreported and continues to affect a substantial portion of college students. A 2019 Association of American Universities Campus Climate Survey found that 26.4% of undergraduate women and 6.9% of undergraduate men reported experiencing nonconsensual sexual contact during college, an increase from rates reported in a prior 2015 survey, with even higher rates observed among LGBTQ+ students.<sup>3</sup> These experiences can have severe consequences for survivors, including increased risks of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and academic disruption.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars increasingly analyze sexual violence through the concept of “sexual geographies,” which examines how physical and social environments shape sexual interactions and power dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

On college campuses, they have specifically explored how fraternity houses often control key social resources, including access to parties and alcohol distribution. These Greek life environments concentrate large numbers of students in spaces where hosts maintain control over entry, alcohol availability, and transportation to events.<sup>4</sup> Universities may also unintentionally reinforce this arrangement by mandating strict alcohol rules in residence halls, which pushes partying into fraternity houses where regulation is weaker.<sup>4</sup> As a result, these social spaces can create unequal power dynamics that shape student interactions and increase the potential for harmful or coercive situations.

## Policy Idea

To address the environmental factors that contribute to problematic sexual geographies on college campuses, state higher education systems, through legislative guidance, should require public universities to implement Campus Social Space Safety Standards (CSSSS) governing high-risk social events. These regulations would require universities receiving state funding to implement these standards within defined timelines (e.g., one to two academic years), including

registering large student-hosted social gatherings and enforcing standardized safety protocols in environments where alcohol is present. These protocols include trained sober monitors, designated transportation, and limits on alcohol distribution for student organizations hosting these social events. Because fraternities and similar organizations frequently control access to social spaces and alcohol, regulating these environments would reduce power inequalities that elevate risk. By establishing statewide safety standards, this policy shifts prevention efforts from individual education programs toward addressing the structural foundations that shape student interactions. Focusing on high-risk social spaces allows the policy to directly address environments where campus sexual assaults most often occur.

## Policy Analysis

The first environmental factor researchers identify as associated with campus sexual violence is alcohol consumption.<sup>5</sup> Alcohol is frequently present in sexual assault incidents, and studies show intoxication impairs judgment, reduces the ability to give or recognize consent, and increases vulnerability in social settings.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, universities

should regulate alcohol to acknowledge student behavior, as overly strict policies may push consumption into less-regulated environments. Universities such as Stanford University, Dartmouth, and the University of Virginia implemented bans on liquor following high-profile sexual assault incidents, but evidence suggests these measures had limited success, as students continue high-risk drinking behaviors or shift consumption into less-regulated settings.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that addressing alcohol-related risks requires targeted environmental strategies that improve oversight of high-risk social spaces rather than relying on ineffective blanket restrictions.

Alcohol can impair bystanders' ability to recognize and respond to danger, limiting the effectiveness of peer-based intervention.<sup>8</sup> In response, evidence supports environmental strategies that introduce structured oversight in high-risk settings. For example, requiring sober monitors ensures individuals remain capable of identifying risk, intervening in unsafe interactions, and assisting intoxicated students. The provision of planned transportation offers students a reliable way to return home safely after events. Safe-ride transportation programs mitigate alcohol-related risks by decreasing reliance on impaired driving and providing a safe exit from potentially dangerous social situations.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, these programs can lessen alcohol-related harms without increasing associated risks such as crime or public intoxication.<sup>10</sup> More broadly, environmental prevention approaches that regulate social contexts, like event oversight and

alcohol management, have been implemented across college campuses and have shown effectiveness in reducing high-risk drinking behaviors without relying solely on individual compliance.<sup>11</sup> Together, these findings suggest that policies incorporating sober monitoring, transportation access, and event regulation can effectively address risk by addressing the environments where harm occurs.

### Highlights

- Sexual assault is the most reported campus crime in the United States, accounting for 44% of incidents and occurring at a rate of approximately eight cases per 10,000 students.<sup>2</sup>
- Many prevention efforts focus on individual behavior, but campus sexual assault is often shaped by party environments where alcohol access and control over social spaces create unequal power dynamics.<sup>4</sup>
- To address these environments, states should require public universities to implement Campus Social Space Safety Standards (CSSSS) mandating event registration, sober monitors, transportation access, and limits on alcohol distribution.
- By regulating high-risk social environments through structured oversight, such as requiring sober monitors to identify and intervene in unsafe interactions, mandating event registration to increase accountability, and ensuring transportation access so students can leave risky settings, rather than

relying on ineffective blanket restrictions, this policy directly targets the conditions that enable harm and has the potential to shift safety norms across higher education.<sup>11</sup>

### Implementation

State legislatures nationwide should implement CSSSS through existing higher education regulatory frameworks tied to public university funding. State education departments would be responsible for issuing guidelines defining what qualifies as a "high-risk social event," such as large student-hosted gatherings where alcohol is present, and attendance exceeds a particular threshold. The policy would require public universities to incorporate these standards into their existing student organization and campus event policies.

The policy would require student organizations hosting qualifying events to register gatherings in advance and submit risk management plans that demonstrate compliance with CSSSS protocols, such as identifying designated sober monitors, specifying how alcohol would be distributed and limited, and detailing transportation options available for attendees. Enforcement would occur through existing campus conduct systems, where failure to comply could result in sanctions such as loss of event privileges, suspension of organizational recognition, or escalated disciplinary action for repeat violations. At Cornell University, for example, student organizations are subject to the Student Code of Conduct.<sup>12</sup>

Equally important is the presence of trained sober monitors

at high-risk social events. Because alcohol consumption can impair bystanders' ability to recognize and respond to dangerous situations, sober monitors provide a critical layer of oversight.<sup>8</sup> Universities would train these individuals to identify signs of intoxication and vulnerability (such as slurred speech, loss of balance, or impaired awareness), recognize potential coercive or unsafe interactions (e.g., persistent unwanted advances or isolation from peers), intervene when necessary, and connect students to appropriate resources or transportation. By ensuring that at least some individuals remain sober and capable of responding effectively, these measures help address the limitations of relying on intoxicated peers for intervention.

With states enacting this policy, it would initially apply only to public universities and thus require a phased approach to broader adoption. State legislatures would introduce the policy through established higher education governing bodies, working with state university systems, to coordinate implementation and develop consistent guidelines across institutions. Building support for the policy and ensuring compliance would require collaboration with campus safety offices, Title IX coordinators, and student organizations, which would play a role in adapting requirements to different campus contexts and promoting awareness among students. Universities would also be responsible for reviewing submitted risk management plans and monitoring compliance through existing conduct and event approval systems.

A key challenge could be resistance from student groups that

are concerned about autonomy in social spaces, especially those located on private property off-campus. Furthermore, because universities retain authority over their own property and governance structures, some institutions may be slow to implement or enforce these standards fully. Additional feasibility challenges include how universities verify compliance in practice, such as ensuring that transportation options are reliably provided, monitoring whether alcohol distribution aligns with stated limits, and confirming that sober monitors are able to operate without interference or restricted access at events. Finally, as these standards are adopted across public universities, private institutions may gradually implement similar practices to align with evolving safety expectations and peer norms.

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# Saving Lives in the Classroom: Mandating Mental Health Training for School Staff

By Francesca Wehner, [fmw38@cornell.edu](mailto:fmw38@cornell.edu)

*To decrease rising youth suicide rates, the Department of Education (ED) should establish mandatory mental health training programs for teachers in high-suicide communities, providing teachers with the tools to recognize and support struggling students properly.*

## Background

In 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) labeled suicide as the third leading cause of death for individuals aged 14 to 18.<sup>1</sup> Studies find that 20% of high school students in the US have considered suicide, while nearly half of the student population has been treated for depression.<sup>2</sup> Student suicides have steadily increased for several years, rising 67% between 2007 and 2025.<sup>3</sup> The National Library of Medicine has linked many factors to this sharp rise, including increased social media usage, heightened academic pressure, and discrimination against vulnerable populations.<sup>4</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic also led to an alarming 11% increase in suicide attempts by youth.<sup>5</sup> The student groups showing the highest risk of suicide consist of many vulnerable populations, such as LGBTQ+ students, female students, and racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>5</sup> Researchers have identified a key risk factor contributing to this increase in suicide rates: the lack of student support systems in US schools.<sup>6</sup> The CDC has officially declared student suicide as a major public health crisis.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, teacher training approaches to mitigate student suicide have been uniform, strict, and largely ineffective. Patterns in

these trainings displayed an emphasis on punishment, such as policies from the early 2000s labeled “zero tolerance,” which used the punitive measure of student suspension for students who attempted suicide.<sup>7</sup> Other policies have taken a “one-size-fits-all” approach to labeling student mental health, which is now known to be a misunderstanding of the diverse ways youth brains develop and process adverse mental health and suicidal thoughts.<sup>8</sup> These failures point towards the need for evidence-based teacher training programs.

## Policy Idea

To mitigate student suicide rates, Congress should introduce a bill establishing mandatory mental health training programs for teachers in high-suicide communities identified by the CDC. This bill would authorize grants to the Department of Education (ED) to provide schools in high-risk areas with scientifically researched, evidence-based student mental health teacher training programs. These programs would help educators recognize and prevent student suicide. Rather than utilizing a singular approach, these training programs would equip teachers with the tools to effectively support students experiencing suicidal thoughts across a wide

range of behaviors, as students experiencing suicidal ideation often exhibit different behavioral and emotional warning signs.

## Policy Analysis

By implementing ongoing mental health training programs for teachers in high-suicide communities, teachers will be able to better recognize signs of suicidal students, students with declining mental health, and students who have experienced traumatic events. The use of evidence-based suicide prevention training programs, such as QPR-Trained Gatekeepers, has found that participants are 22% more likely to recognize at-risk individuals, with some programs reaching rates as high as 70%.<sup>9,10</sup> Through this recognition, training programs will also equip teachers with the tools to properly respond to and decrease the chances of suicide among high-risk students. The suicide prevention program geared at teachers called *Sources of Strength* decreased suicide rates by 29%.<sup>11</sup> By equipping educators to notice the subtle signs of suicidal individuals before a major crisis occurs, teachers can effectively intervene.

Increased discussion surrounding mental health boosts awareness and reduces stigma around suicide. In many cases, this makes students more comfortable

coming forward regarding such sentiments. In multiple school settings, increased conversations made students 58% more likely to discuss their thoughts of suicide.<sup>1</sup> Establishing mandatory mental health training programs for teachers in high-suicide communities has several positive effects. These training programs give teachers the skills to grow safer environments where students are more comfortable discussing their suicidal thoughts.

### Highlights

- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has identified student suicide as the third leading cause of death for individuals aged 14 to 18, labeling suicide as a major public health crisis.<sup>1</sup>
- Existing public policy approaches to reduce student suicide have had limited success as they are often uniform and punitive.<sup>8</sup>
- Congress should introduce a bill establishing mandatory mental health training programs for teachers in high-suicide communities identified by the CDC, authorizing the ED to provide schools with grants for scientifically researched, evidence-based student mental health teacher training programs.
- Mandatory mental health training programs for teachers in high-suicide communities would equip teachers with the tools to effectively support students experiencing suicidal thoughts.<sup>9,10</sup>

- Evidence from multiple programs demonstrates that teacher-based mental health training reduces suicide risk, as training can improve early intervention.<sup>1,9,11</sup>

### Implementation

This policy aims to foster school environments where teachers can recognize and support students experiencing suicidal thoughts. This intervention prioritizes mental health support over punitive measures that may be associated with feelings of shame and guilt. The proposed required mental health training programs for school staff should be comprehensive, evidence-based, and tested through a pilot program.

Key stakeholder organizations would need to mobilize to pass this bill, including the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and the American Federation of Teachers.<sup>12,13,14</sup> These organizations should launch advocacy campaigns to garner support to highlight the current severity of student suicide.<sup>1</sup> The bill should expand upon existing programs under the Every Student Succeeds Act, which already focus on student mental health legislation.<sup>15</sup> The bill would move through the House Committee on Education and the Workforce and the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. Fiscal conservatives may oppose the bill, but bipartisanship is possible as suicide affects communities all across the nation. Once passed, the ED would oversee implementation.

In the first phase of rollout, the ED should conduct a one-year pilot program in a few high-risk

areas through the CDC, with the number determined by the allotted budget. This phase would include established training programs such as QPR-Trained Gatekeepers and Sources of Strength, to identify the most effective strategies in preventing student suicide.<sup>9,11</sup> In the second phase of the policy implementation in the second year, the ED should allocate funding to high-risk communities based on need and program costs. Using CDC data, the ED will give grants to high-risk communities. Grants will be allotted based on funding appropriated by Congress.<sup>16</sup> After the second phase is completed, the ED should initiate a larger-scale nationwide rollout of programs by increasing grant availability to additional schools.

Implementing mandated mental health trainings for school staff offers an evidence-based, effective combat to the expansive public health crisis of youth suicide.

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# ENVIRONMENTAL & TECHNOLOGY POLICY

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# Dams in Disrepair: The Federal Case for Abandoned Dam Remediation

By William Dignam, [wed45@cornell.edu](mailto:wed45@cornell.edu)

*The US is now facing the consequences of decades of neglected dam infrastructure. Without a federal remediation program, aging and abandoned dams will continue to threaten lives, destroy river ecosystems, and harm communities.*

## Background

Thousands of the United States' 92,000 dams carry a "high-hazard" status, meaning their failure would cost lives; yet, they remain unmaintained, crumbling, and in many cases entirely forgotten.<sup>1</sup> The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave the US's dams a grade of "D" in its 2021 Infrastructure Report Card, quoting poor structural integrity and underfunding of safety programs.<sup>1</sup>

Dam failures are not just theoretical risks. The Association of State Dam Safety Officials (ASDSO) has reported 173 failures and nearly 587 near-failures in the US between 2005 and 2013.<sup>2</sup> For example, the 2017 near-failure of the Oroville Dam in California, the tallest dam in the country, forced the evacuation of nearly 190,000 residents and cost over \$1 billion to repair.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most alarming is the growing number of unowned dams, with approximately 8% of high-hazard dams in the US having no identified owner or regulation, according to the US Army Corps of Engineers' National Inventory of Dams (NID), leaving no funding source, no maintenance plan, and no one legally responsible when they fail.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of this issue is growing as climate change increases the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, straining

dams that were designed for watersheds decades, and in some cases, centuries ago. Rising temperatures melt snow and increase rainfall events that send large volumes of water into dam spillways. Regions more prone to drought from climate change face the opposite effect, causing reservoir sediment to compact and embankment materials to crack and shift.<sup>3</sup> Without a large federal response, the US faces a crisis that threatens public safety, the environment, and economic security.

## Policy Idea

Congress should enact a National Abandoned Dam Remediation Act (NADRA) to identify, assess, and remediate abandoned and high-risk dams nationwide. This legislation would establish a registry of abandoned dams within two years of enactment, fund safety and environmental assessments for each dam, and create a grant and loan program—capped at \$5 million per structure for repairs and \$2 million for controlled removal—based on average remediation costs reported in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) project data.

FEMA, USACE, and the Environmental Protection Agency

(EPA) would administer the act. FEMA's National Dam Safety Program already coordinates dam safety training and state assistance. The USACE maintains the National Inventory of Dams, and the EPA's Water Infrastructure Finance programs would provide resources for grants and loans. State dam safety offices, engineers, and affected Native American nations would coordinate action at the local level, with states required to meet minimum dam safety program standards to receive federal funding.

## Policy Analysis

The environmental consequences of aging and abandoned dams are well-documented. Dams damage river ecosystems by blocking fish passage, raising water temperatures that affect oxygen levels, and trapping sediment that would otherwise help downstream habitats. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has identified dam habitat alteration as one of the leading causes of salmon and steelhead population decline across the Pacific Northwest.<sup>6</sup>

The Elwha River Restoration Project in Washington State, the largest dam removal project in US history, shows what coordinated federal investment can achieve. Funded largely through the Elwha River Ecosystem and

Fisheries Restoration Act of 1992, the removal of two dams between 2011 and 2014 led to rapid ecological recovery, with salmon populations returning within months and sediment flows rebuilding coastal habitats altered for nearly a century.<sup>7,8</sup> The project's success relied on a structured model of federal cost-sharing that NADRA would institutionalize nationwide.

Legal ownership for abandoned structures will require extensive title searches and cooperation, and some dams may not receive a clean resolution entirely. Nevertheless, NADRA's structure will prioritize inspection and classification before committing to remediation spending. This provides a financial entry point that mirrors the approach behind successful state-level efforts like North Carolina's Dam Safety Program, which improved its benchmark alignment score from 65% to 81% between 1998 and 2016 following increased legislative investment.<sup>9</sup> Placing federal intervention as risk reduction rather than environmental spending will be essential to building the bipartisan support the act requires.

### Highlights

- Dam failures are a proven, recurring threat in the US. Between 2005 and 2013, the US recorded 173 failures and nearly 587 near-failures, with individual disasters costing over \$1 billion in repairs alone.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Aging dams also harm river ecosystems by blocking fish passage, trapping sediment, and raising water temperatures. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration has identified dam habitat alteration as a leading cause of salmon and steelhead population decline in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>6</sup>

- The Elwha River Restoration Project in Washington State, the largest dam removal project in US history, shows that federal investment works: salmon populations returned within months of dam removal, and coastal habitats began recovering after nearly a century of alteration.<sup>7,8</sup>
- Congress should pass the National Abandoned Dam Remediation Act (NADRA), which would create a federal registry of abandoned dams and a grant-and-loan program to fund repairs or controlled removals before the next catastrophic failure occurs.

### Implementation

Congress should introduce the NADRA through the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, whose jurisdiction includes the National Dam Safety Program, public works, and dams, and the House of Representatives Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, which holds jurisdiction over public works that affect navigation, like dams and bridges.<sup>10,11</sup> Both committees hold established jurisdiction over water infrastructure and dam safety. The legislative push should be timed to coincide with the next reauthorization of FEMA's National Dam Safety Program in 2028, providing a convenient time to insert NADRA's core provisions

into the next edition. NADRA's emphasis on public safety and infrastructure investment creates a foundation for bipartisan support, as dam safety has historically attracted cross-party backing; rural Republican districts and urban Democratic constituencies alike host aging, high-hazard dams

The act's rollout would occur in three phases across five years. The first two years would focus on establishing a federal registry of abandoned dams and completing baseline safety and environmental assessments through the USACE and contracted surveying companies. Stage two, which would occur during years three and four, would pilot the grant-and-loan program, administered by FEMA's National Dam Safety Program and funded through the EPA's Water Infrastructure Finance programs, with states that already meet minimum dam safety program standards. Remediation funding would be available to all qualifying states nationwide by year five, during the third and final stage, at which point FEMA, the USACE, and the EPA would coordinate full-scale repairs and controlled removals.

18 months before introducing NADRA, enough time to build credibility through outreach and sustained development, advocates of the act should form a coalition of technical and political experts to support its credibility, including the ASCE, the ASDSO, and American Rivers to support its credibility. Additionally, municipal water utilities downstream of high-hazard dams, along with their lawmakers, have direct financial exposure to dam failures and can speak to the financial rationale for

promoting the act.

A coordinated public awareness campaign, launching six months before introduction, would focus on local case studies, such as a specific abandoned dam or a named river where salmon recovery followed correct measures for a dam. Town halls, which state dam safety offices and county emergency management systems would host, would help residents understand the risk of aging dams in their area, building the public pressure needed to push the legislation forward. Partnering with American Rivers and the Association of State Dam Safety Officials would give the campaign the organizational support needed to run these events effectively.

The primary political hurdle will be cost. The ASDSO's \$165 billion rehabilitation estimate will be used by objectors as evidence of overreach, even though NADRA funds only abandoned and old structures rather than the full national inventory.<sup>12</sup> Policymakers should preempt this by creating a cost-benefit analysis comparing remediation costs against the predicted cost of projected failures, like the Oroville Dam repair case, which exceeded \$1 billion for a single structure.<sup>3</sup> Framing the grant caps as ceilings and federal funding for states meeting minimum safety program standards can create moderate support across the aisle.

With the right coalition and timing, NADRA can move from proposal to law before the next dam

failure forces the response that proactive investment could have prevented.

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# Funding Adaptive Technologies for Small Vineyards Facing Climate Challenges in the Finger Lakes Region

By Sage Geubtner, [seg258@cornell.edu](mailto:seg258@cornell.edu)

*The Finger Lakes Wine Region is facing challenges due to the warming climate. Large-scale vineyards can adopt new technologies, while small vineyards struggle. The New York State legislature should subsidize small-scale vineyards to maintain regional wine variety and minimize further environmental damage.*

## Background

The Finger Lakes region of New York State is known for its vine and grape-growing conditions. Cold-hardy grapes and hybrids that thrive in the Finger Lakes Region, such as the Riesling grape.<sup>1</sup> They shape winery identities, bringing tourism, which contributes 39.6% of New York State's total economic activity in the wine industry.<sup>17</sup> Grapes are the highest-value US crop, at over \$5.93 billion. Of the US's total winegrape area, New York State accounts for 1.9%, and is the only state representing the East Coast.<sup>2</sup>

Viticulture is a climate-sensitive agricultural practice due to variable grapevine phenology.<sup>3</sup> With warming temperatures, the Finger Lakes wine region is facing uncharted challenges. Changing growing conditions threaten the development of grapes crucial to the region, that are best suited to cooler climates.<sup>4</sup>

Established vineyards with the means to adopt new viticultural practices and technologies can adapt to climate and soil pressures. Hunt Country Vineyards, for example, is using geothermal heating and cooling, hybrid development and crop diversity, organic fertilizers, and cover-crop technology to mitigate the effects of

climate change.<sup>5</sup> These practices, however, are not accessible to all vineyards.

For small wineries, the cultivation process is responsible for 46% of carbon emissions.<sup>6</sup> Other environmental impacts include runoff into the lakes. Small vineyards that cannot afford adaptive technologies or new sustainable methods have comparatively low production while having the greatest carbon impact, thereby harming the surrounding environment. Cayuga Lake experienced a 1.59 percent increase in harmful blooms in 2024.<sup>7</sup> Phosphorus from agricultural runoff is a major contributor.<sup>8</sup> Small vineyards that cannot afford adaptive technologies or new sustainable methods have comparatively low production while having the greatest carbon impact, thereby harming the surrounding environment.

## Policy Idea

The New York State legislature should develop a program that the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYSDAM) would administer to financially support developing vineyards that cannot afford climate-resistant technologies. Administered cost-

share grants would aid vineyard expenses for establishing sustainable technologies and viticulture methods. Examples include frost protection, irrigation, and cooling technologies. Local experts in agricultural technologies from nonprofits and universities will support the program to ensure that funded vineyards adequately adapt. The program would provide non-competitive support and set a size eligibility limit of 30 acres, so the funds do not allocate to large vineyards that outcompete small vineyards. Eventually, vineyards involved in the program can expand and apply for competitive grants after gaining support from the state's Department of Agriculture and Markets.

## Policy Analysis

The policy supports the continuation of the Finger Lakes vineyards' regional wine-making identity while preventing environmental damage. The New York State wine industry has an economic impact of \$6.65 billion.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, it welcomes tourism through wine trails and a unique environment.<sup>10</sup> The New York Sustainable Winegrowing certification, introduced in 2023, reinforces this identity by allowing vineyards meeting soil and water

standards to market themselves as sustainability certified, thereby increasing their influence.<sup>11</sup> Growing demand for sustainable products indicates that environmental responsibility is becoming a key factor in market success, as an IBM survey found that 73% of executives announced net-zero carbon emissions goals.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, residents in the Finger Lakes region are environmentally conscious, as Ithaca, for example, implemented the Green New Deal for carbon neutrality in 2019.<sup>13</sup> Vineyards lacking sustainable practices risk environmental harm and economic decline, reducing variability in the region, and therefore, regional identity.<sup>14,15</sup>

Grants in productive grape-growing regions of the US, like California, support regenerative viticultural efforts to improve soil health.<sup>16</sup> The US Department of Agriculture funds research efforts at the University of California, Davis, to educate farmers on these practices. Researchers were successful in their efforts, with farmers emphasizing new practices they are implementing, such as field trials and vegetation strips.

Applying these techniques to vineyard support in the Finger Lakes region will facilitate environmental protection and efficiency in vineyard management.

### Highlights

- The Finger Lakes region has unique climatic conditions, with cold winters and lake-effect heating, perfect for growing specific grape varieties like Riesling.<sup>1</sup> These characteristics create a regional identity, drawing

tourism and economic activity.<sup>17</sup>

- Small vineyards in the Finger Lakes cannot invest in climate-adaptive technologies, which reduces market variety as consumers value environmentally conscious producers.<sup>12,13</sup>
- The New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets should fund a grant program that allows small vineyards to afford and use climate-adaptive technologies. This program includes purchasing the resources and training viticulturalists in the practices.
- Federal aid for regenerative viticulture helps regions like California produce sustainably grown grapes while maintaining regional identity.<sup>16</sup>

### Implementation

The NYSDAM should administer a program prioritizing vineyards without access to sustainable practices. An acreage capacity of 25 acres, the maximum commercial vineyard entry point, which ranges from 10 to 25 acres, limits program eligibility.<sup>18</sup> Vineyards would receive a maximum of \$1,000 per acre, reflecting the specialized nature of viticulture. The NYSDAM would conduct a five-year pilot program to ensure the funding is effective, with limitations adjusted as needed after this period.

A model of the program is the Federal Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which provides technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers.<sup>19</sup> The EQIP provides

technical assistance at no cost, helping farmers implement efficient systems. However, vineyard technology and labor needs are disproportionate to what the EQIP can offer without specialization in viticulture, as it also focuses on other agricultural sectors with lower risks and management intensity.<sup>20</sup>

The program would first focus on methods for drought and erosion resistance, including cover crops, crop rotation, and drip irrigation.<sup>21</sup> To address cooling concerns for temperature instability, the program should fund and explain geothermal technologies and lake-source cooling.<sup>22</sup> These technologies require more time and funding than irrigation and cover crops, forcing the program to emphasize them later on.

The New York Assembly and Senate Agriculture Committee would review the bill and deliver funding through the state budget process with New York State Division approval. Senators with a history in environmental policy, like Senator Rachel May (D), could endorse the bill. Non-profits and organizations such as Sustainable Finger Lakes would advocate.<sup>23</sup> Once enacted, vineyards show eligibility through an application. The NYSDAM will review applications in January, following set guidelines, and administer grants by March of the same year to allow an adaptation period before new growth.<sup>24</sup>

Eligible vineyards must track technology investments, soil health, carbon emissions, and profits, reported on a monthly schedule, to monitor improvements. These surveys will give insight into the technologies' efficiency and highlight necessary adjustments for the pilot program. Participants will

input results into the NYSDAM Database.<sup>25</sup> Vineyard size and income are necessary statistics for maintaining integrity in the program's desired outcomes.

Some drawbacks include New York residents' hesitations about funding directed toward wine grape production. The US alcohol consumption rate is declining due to health concerns, yet New York State remains the fourth-largest wine consumer in the country.<sup>26,27</sup> Also, small vineyards lack the labor or experience to meet funding management expectations. Even when the process is non-competitive, the application requirements can still be strenuous to discourage participation.<sup>28,29</sup> Beyond experts aiding the transition, the program would collaborate with local outreach organizations like the New York Wine and Grape Foundation. This organization would make prospective vineyards aware of the opportunity and assist with a seamless application process.

Overall, the program ensures that small vineyards can equitably adopt climate-resilient practices, strengthening sustainability and the long-term success of New York's wine industry.

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# Regulate Data Center Growth: An Adaptive Approach to Increasing Energy Efficiency

By Alix Kerebel, [ak2755@cornell.edu](mailto:ak2755@cornell.edu)

*As data centers become more popular, they place a notable strain on US wallets and the environment. Although standards exist, they are not enforced by law. To protect Americans and the planet, the US Congress should enforce energy efficiency standards for data centers.*

## Background

Data centers have existed in the United States for decades, supporting internet use and other technological projects. However, with the recent artificial intelligence (AI) boom, the US is seeing a rapid increase in investment in and construction of data centers to support its data needs, due to the technology's intense computational power.<sup>1</sup> Today, the US hosts 4,000 data centers, each consuming considerable amounts of energy as AI models rely on them to train and operate.<sup>1</sup>

In 2024, US data centers consumed 183 terawatt-hours of electricity, accounting for 4% of national energy use and 45% of global data center energy consumption, driven by the large AI market.<sup>2</sup> However, this number is projected to increase considerably over the coming years as AI use increases. By 2030, data center energy consumption is set to double, amounting to notably more than what is needed for the production of all energy-intensive goods combined.<sup>2</sup> This increased energy usage has, and will increasingly have, dangerous consequences for our environment. Researchers have estimated that the growth of AI will release 24 to 44 million metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere by 2030.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the rapid growth of AI, President Donald Trump issued the "Accelerating Federal Permitting of Data Center Infrastructure" executive order to streamline the processing of new data center projects and invest funds and resources into their construction.<sup>4</sup> The act does not include restrictions on energy efficiency.<sup>4</sup> Continuing to fund AI acceleration without energy efficiency regulations may lead to dangerous environmental consequences.

Private regulations and guidelines exist, although the US government does not enforce them. Namely, the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) have published energy efficiency in data centers.<sup>5</sup> These standards are comprehensive and can be critical in reducing energy use.<sup>5</sup>

## Policy Idea

To urge energy efficiency in data centers, the US Congress should implement restrictions on data centers receiving any federal funding and support (such as loans, tax incentives, and loan guarantees). Any data center constructed using federal funding of any sort must abide by the latest ANSI and ASHRAE energy efficiency

standards within three years or lose all federal financial support for development and maintenance of facilities. Data centers that have already been constructed must adapt to the regulations within four years of this legislation or risk being fined. This increased timeline accounts for the complexity of making technological changes within existing infrastructure

The Department of Energy should verify compliance with these standards. Simultaneously, the Department of Energy should evaluate these energy standards every six months to evaluate feasibility and, as Artificial Intelligence development changes, adjust these standards or requirements as needed to ensure equity amongst data centers and plausibility for those with fewer resources.

## Policy Analysis

By regulating access to government support, this policy would urge energy efficiency in data centers, an important step as artificial intelligence becomes more prevalent. In the past, tying government funding for technologies, namely AI (through regulations surrounding the DoD AI Ethical Principles or the EU Horizon Europe Program), to regulations has increased accountability and helped

standardize practices.<sup>6</sup> Increasing the energy efficiency of data centers would reduce centers' environmental footprint by requiring less energy to deliver the same outputs and support the ever-evolving technology.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, promoting energy efficiency would help shield Americans from rising energy costs.<sup>8</sup> In 2025 alone, energy bills have increased by 11.5%, but are expected to rise by 40% by 2030.<sup>8</sup> These residential price increases are especially prevalent in vulnerable communities and are largely driven by data center energy use.<sup>7</sup> Increasing energy efficiency would help reduce these prices.<sup>8</sup>

Other countries and governments have implemented regulations on energy efficiency. For example, in 2023, Germany passed the "German Energy Efficiency Act," which set new regulations and standards for energy efficiency.<sup>10</sup> This policy gave data centers a two-year compliance timeline, which this policy is modeled after (allocating slightly more time to account for the relatively larger AI market in the US, and additionally, as such, the possible additional pushback on regulations).<sup>10</sup> Some US states, such as Illinois and Florida, have proposed or have preexisting regulations governing data center energy use.<sup>11,12</sup> These regulations are relatively new.<sup>10,11,12</sup> Their evolving impacts should be studied and used to inform and guide the Department of Energy in adjusting this policy's guidelines. The Department of Energy should learn from similar energy efficiency standards implemented in other locations to drive effective national policy.

## Highlights

- Given artificial intelligence's (AI) rapid development, data centers are being constructed at an increasing pace, partly driven by strong federal investments in their development.<sup>1,2,4</sup>
- The increase in the number of data centers raises concerns about environmental impacts and energy bill implications.<sup>3,8</sup>
- The US Congress should tie federal investment to energy efficiency standards, requiring new and existing data centers that rely on federal funds to abide by American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) energy efficiency standards.<sup>5</sup>
- This policy would help reduce data centers' emissions, and thus their environmental footprint.<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, by decreasing reliance on energy grids, this policy would help drive down energy costs.<sup>8</sup>
- To ensure adaptation to the evolving AI development landscape, the Department of Energy should closely monitor said policy's economic impacts and draw inspiration from similar policies in other places.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

## Implementation

The ASHRAE energy standards specifically fit this policy, because their regulations allow for

variety between "climate zones." Each data center, under this proposed policy, would abide by restrictions specifically tailored to its environment, making this legislation more feasible across a variety of locations.<sup>9</sup>

Policymakers should introduce this policy through the Energy and Commerce Committee in the House of Representatives. To help move this policy through Congress, policymakers should rely on support from environmental organizations and interest groups that have already voiced concerns about US data center expansion, such as Food & Water Watch and PowerLines.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, policymakers could seek support from congresspeople who have recently criticized data center energy efficiency, such as members of Representative Kevin Mullin's (D-CA) recent investigative working group, a group of legislators set out to understand the impact of data centers on energy costs.<sup>14</sup> This group of representatives, serving a multitude of states, could help support this legislation through Congress and bring diverse perspectives from their respective states. Additionally, ASHRAE and ANSI will likely help support this legislation through lobbying, as the use of their standards would increase attention to their organizations.

In Congress, this legislation may face pushback, with critics potentially arguing that this policy would slow data center development and place the US at a competitive disadvantage. However, ASHREA standards are specifically designed to increase efficiency without overburdening data centers with regulations. By increasing efficiency through

technological changes, they ensure that hardware lasts longer and data center technology does not overheat, therefore increasing longevity.<sup>15</sup> In the long run, these changes are necessary to ensure stable development. This legislation also would not halt investment in data centers. The current administration could continue to fund innovation and construction, therefore maintaining US competitiveness on the global stage.

Additionally, under this legislation, the Department of Energy would be tasked with reviewing and, if needed, editing standards. If the regulations proposed in this legislation have a significant negative impact on economic growth, the Department of Energy would have the authority to propose amendments to the legislation. Emphasizing these points in Congress can help support its success.

This policy should take effect immediately upon passage to adapt to artificial intelligence's rapid development. To assist companies in adjusting their facilities, the Department of Energy should rely on preexisting technical assistance programs, such as the Utility and Grid Operator Technical Assistance, which companies can resort to as needed.

By implementing this adaptive approach to energy-efficiency regulation, the US Congress could ensure that future growth in artificial intelligence continues to prioritize the planet and constituents.

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# Clarifying Grey Areas in Regulating Data Centers: Implementing Grey Wastewater and Air Treatments

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*Data centers across the country are haphazardly offloading their waste into surrounding communities and wreaking havoc on the health of American citizens and the environment. Regulatory bodies should standardize regulations on data centers to mitigate public health and environmental concerns.*

## Background

Data center regulation remains murky as demand for artificial intelligence (AI) increases. Several regions have high concentrations of data centers, including Virginia with 643 centers, Texas with 395, and California with 319.<sup>1</sup> When tackling maximum demand for energy, data centers use backup generators, which emit high amounts of air pollutants linked to asthma and cardiovascular disease, adversely affecting the health of surrounding residential communities.<sup>2</sup> In addition to air pollution, data centers consume daily around 5 million gallons of water, which is the equivalent water consumption of a town of 50,000 people.<sup>3</sup>

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has permitted backup generators during anticipated or unanticipated grid shortages when continued operations from data centers strain a community's electricity availability.<sup>4</sup> Existing regulations encourage backup generator usage despite this process's production of a hazardous chemical called "black smoke."<sup>3,4</sup> Data centers are already costing the US \$300 million in yearly public health costs.<sup>3</sup> Data centers' generators in Northern Virginia increased carbon monoxide

emissions by 196%, nitrous oxide emissions by 111%, and other harmful toxic matter by 139%.<sup>4</sup> These emission levels will continue to rise as the EPA continues to permit high air pollution levels from data centers, alongside the absence of wastewater treatment. In addition to these costs, scientists at the University of California, Irvine found that specific air pollutants emitted by data centers, such as fine particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxide, have caused hospitalizations and missed school or work days, contributing to productivity deficits and losses of approximately \$20 billion per year.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

A lack of federal oversight on data centers creates an unregulated domain, placing millions of Americans at risk.<sup>4</sup> The EPA must enact standards for data centers for a digital future that supports innovation while considering environmental and public health.

## Policy Idea

The EPA should pass regulations requiring a standardized process for the service processes and maintenance of data centers. This process would mandate the submission of quarterly disclosure reports to the EPA detailing a data

center's emission levels of noise pollution, air emissions, particularly during grid capacity shortages, and an effective grey wastewater filtration treatment process.<sup>2,3</sup> This policy inhibits high emission rates from data centers and their respective generators, contributing to public health concerns through the implementation of air purification and a water treatment system.<sup>3</sup> Legislation mandating the direct implementation of environmental cleanup measures prior to their infiltration into surrounding cities and towns is a proactive measure that begins at the beginning of the process. Over five years, the regulation will deploy such mandated emission level disclosures and the implementation of air and wastewater output treatments enforced by the EPA to increase transparency and standardization for data centers across the U.S.

## Policy Analysis

This policy proposal can prevent thousands of premature deaths caused by toxic waste from data centers by 2030 through the implementation of air purification and water filtration treatments.<sup>2,3</sup> Federal agencies allow technology companies to surpass emission limits, worsening air quality.<sup>1,2</sup> A

cap restriction on total permit allowances that causes black smoke would be effective by reducing the total generator emissions that cause 14,000 asthma cases and an annual number of 19 deaths.<sup>2,3</sup> Moreover, continued generator use permitted by the EPA imposes externalities like growing annual costs onto local governments, projected to reach \$2.6 billion.<sup>2,4</sup> In summary, stricter regulation on backup generator use would mitigate these costs and improve oversight.

Data center pollution affects both local and faraway regions, since air pollution drifts over state lines. For example, air pollution from Northern Virginia can impact areas as far as New York due to cross-state air pollution.<sup>5,6</sup> Thus, it is necessary to implement a federal standard for regulating data centers, since the scale and nature of air pollution from one state actor can affect millions in other states. Implementing air purification systems within each data center would effectively curb the adverse health effects of air pollution on communities.<sup>6</sup> In conjunction with limits on air emissions, a water treatment system using screens widely utilized in the tech sector, sand biofiltration alongside an anaerobic sludge bioreactor, aeration, and ozone disinfection would result in an effective removal of 99% in turbidity, 66% nitrate, and 73% phosphorus from wastewater.<sup>7</sup> Based on the evidence above, this policy would be effective in standardizing EPA's regulatory guidelines and maintenance protocols for data centers across the country.

### Highlights

- The US is experiencing a significant shift in industrial

manufacturing and infrastructure as it adapts to the rapidly increasing energy demands of AI.<sup>1</sup>

- The exponential growth of energy demand requires the construction of data centers that are closely connected to high emissions of air and water pollutants.<sup>1,3,&4</sup>
- The EPA should standardize the service and maintenance processes of data centers and mandate the implementation of air purification and wastewater treatments to prevent the exposure of harmful pollutants to nearby communities.
- The waste output of these data centers has led to adverse economic and health effects on nearby regions, such as 1,300 premature deaths, 14,000 asthma cases, and implementation costs of over \$2.6 billion per year on local, small governments.<sup>2,3,&4</sup>
- Due to cross-state pollution, data centers should implement effective air and water purification technology, such as screens and ozone disinfections, into their waste output systems.

### Implementation

The proposed policy's implementation will have four phases and span five years. The EPA can issue a code or introduce a new regulatory model enforcing a stricter level of permitted air and water pollution levels from data centers.<sup>9</sup>

The second stage should focus on refuting backlash by emphasizing how data centers'

corporate models are dependent on the cheap disposal of their waste, oftentimes without regard to their public and environmental health effects. Counterarguments from private tech actors would state that increasing air pollution standards and wastewater treatments on the output of data centers would threaten the profit flows of data center facilities and major tech companies.

This policy maximizes efficacy through a federal standardized plan under executive agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency. However, due to the proposed policy's dependency on an online trajectory to promote the bill, it could face interference from major tech stakeholders. Policy stakeholders with a background in environmental regulation at the Environmental Protection Agency can undertake a role in the implementation of this regulation.<sup>8</sup> Two proposed candidates within the field of environmental protection can undertake a role in this regulation's implementation. As a Director of the EPA's Division of Standards and Health Protection, Sara Hisel McCoy would be an effective proponent of the regulation in conjunction with the efforts of Stacey M. Jensen, the incumbent Director of the EPA's Division of Oceans, Wetlands, and Communities.<sup>8,10</sup>

This policy may face feasibility challenges, since there is no incentive for industrial reform. However, environmental lobbyists can mitigate corporate interests through countering the lobbying efforts of Big Tech such as Amazon, Microsoft, Google, and Meta.<sup>11</sup> Major technological actors could turn toward the Data Center

Coalition or Blackrock, which have lobbying expenditures upwards of \$27 billion.<sup>11</sup> Policymakers should refute these claims by emphasizing how revising EPA emission standards benefits the public health of all inhabitants near a polluting facility.

The third stage of this implementation process can incorporate constituent and private tech actors' feedback over a year, where policymakers can amend the regulation. The EPA enacting the proposed regulation marks the end of the third stage.<sup>9</sup>

The final stage of this implementation process will utilize preexisting EPA enforcement frameworks, such as civil penalties or settlements with entities that violate the regulations.<sup>9</sup> However, this regulation can also enforce injunctive relief on violating entities to encourage these entities to continue their regular operations, meet community energy demands, while being compliant with waste output levels that will protect the public and the environmental health of this country.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is imperative that data center facilities acknowledge and resolve concerns as the demand for AI increases in the digital age, so that the US can continue operations while protecting the nation's economic and health prosperity.

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# Innovation Depends on Dark Skies: Regulating Satellite Megaconstellations Through NEPA and FCC Reform

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*A surge in satellite megaconstellations over the past decade has generated significant light pollution, blocking our night sky and future scientific breakthroughs. Implementing a required Light Pollution Environmental Review for Federal Communications Commission licensing can help mitigate this growing threat.*

## Background

The night sky is rapidly changing due to the exponential increase of satellite megaconstellations. Although general light pollution has generated significant environmental concern since the mid-nineteenth century, large tech companies like Starlink's first satellites launched in 2019 demonstrate a new threat to our skies.<sup>1,2</sup> As of 2024, the brightness of our skies has increased by 10% due to light pollution.<sup>3</sup> Satellites have contributed greatly, as they reflect sunlight to Earth, hindering astronomical observations, disorienting wildlife, and concealing our view of the stars.<sup>3</sup> However, many companies, including SpaceX, One Web, and Amazon are turning to satellite megaconstellations as the future for global internet and technological innovation.<sup>4</sup>

Megaconstellations are large groups of individual satellites that work collectively for a specific purpose, such as providing global internet access. Currently, over 13,000 satellites reside in low Earth orbit, and the European Southern Observatory predicts an increase to 100,000 satellites by 2030.<sup>4,5</sup> Furthermore, both professional and amateur astronomers are suffering

from satellite streaks during photometric images. For example, the newly opened Vera C. Rubin telescope will experience at least one satellite streak in 30% of its observations each night.<sup>4</sup> These interferences dramatically reduce the quality of astronomy research, hindering future progress and innovation. Furthermore, satellites do not undergo any environmental review due to the 1986 categorical exemption in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).<sup>6</sup> NEPA requires agencies to analyze the environmental impacts of their actions; however, the exclusion prevents the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) from considering satellites under NEPA.<sup>6,7</sup> Therefore, satellites are subject to no required environmental assessments before licensing, which could have dangerous repercussions.

## Policy Idea

First, Congress should update NEPA to overturn the 1986 categorical exclusion through statutory amendment, as the exclusion wrongfully exempts satellites from review based on the outdated assumption that they have minimal impacts on Earth. Second, the FCC should implement a Light Pollution Environmental Review

(LPER) through agency reform as part of its licensing process, requiring operators to mitigate their impacts on the night sky.

This review would require mandatory consultations between the FCC and environmental experts, like the International Dark Sky Association, to clearly understand various technologies' impact on light pollution. Upon collaboration with these groups, the LPER would establish guidelines regarding the amounts of pollution allowed for different instruments. These two modifications will work in tandem to protect night skies and encourage the sustainable usage of outer space as technology advances.

## Policy Analysis

Many stakeholders, including SpaceX, have started developing light pollution mitigation tactics with limited levels of success, highlighting how the private sector recognizes and is willing to address the environmental risks.<sup>8</sup>

Similar environmental reviews include the European Union (EU) Space Act, which requires operators to evaluate and reduce the environmental impacts of their technology.<sup>9</sup> This legislation demonstrates how other nations have already started taking

actions to prioritize environmental sustainability, showcasing how LPER would only help the US build upon these shared goals. Additionally, the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (UN-COPUS) has discussed in multiple subcommittee meetings the importance of encouraging long-term outer space sustainability solutions among nation-states.<sup>10</sup> Overturning the categorical exemption and implementing the LPER would help the US take the first steps in becoming a leader in long-term outer space sustainability, highlighting the necessity of these reforms.

Furthermore, strict environmental reviews have proven highly effective in the past at reducing pollution. For example, in 2015, the FCC established new regulations on tower and antenna lighting to protect migratory birds. Steady, red lighting often attracts birds, and the switch to flashing lights is predicted to reduce migratory bird collisions by 70%.<sup>11</sup>

Although some may argue that greater regulations absorb resources and slow innovation, mitigating these concerns protects future innovation in space, as astronomy discoveries rely on clear skies. Furthermore, while the FCC may continue to argue that satellites remain outside of NEPA's jurisdiction, their environmental impacts are highly relevant on Earth, which fall directly within NEPA's scope.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Congress's implementation of the Light Pollution Environmental Review by the FCC and the overturning of the 1986 categorical exemption in NEPA will help cultivate a clear, sustainable, and innovative future.

## Highlights

- Satellites are not subject to any environmental regulations in the US, and their ability to reflect light causes countless scientific research and sustainability concerns.<sup>3,4,6</sup>
- The increase in satellite megaconstellation-based technologies destroys the quality of ground-based astronomical work and our views of the night sky, inhibiting innovation.<sup>5</sup>
- Congress should overturn the categorical exemption that prevents satellites from undergoing environmental review and should implement a Light Pollution Environmental Review as part of the Federal Communications Commission's licensing to enforce the mitigation of satellite-based pollution.
- Large corporations, including Starlink, have already expressed interest in developing more sustainable satellites. Previous congressional support for the proposed Dark and Quiet Skies Act greatly increases the feasibility of enacting this policy.<sup>8,13</sup>

## Implementation

This policy will be implemented in two stages, requiring at least three years: first, with the overturning of the NEPA categorical exemption through a congressional bill, and second, the FCC's addition of the LPER. The Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation should propose a bill to require satellites to

undergo a NEPA review, given they have direct oversight over the FCC's technology policies.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Senator Mike Crapo (R-ID) and Senator John Hickenlooper (D-CO) would be ideal candidates to lead the introduction of the bill, as they have previously introduced the Dark and Quiet Skies Act.<sup>13,14</sup> Although this act did not pass, the senators' bipartisan support would demonstrate the issue's collective importance, providing greater credibility to help the bill pass through Congress.<sup>15</sup> The bill will likely take one to two years to pass through Congress, considering time for hearings and discussion.

Next, the FCC rulemaking process for the removal of the categorical exemption and the addition of the LPER would begin. The FCC rulemaking process will likely take about one year, starting with the notice of proposed rulemaking, followed by the public comment period, and revision.<sup>16</sup> Public commentary will likely be from scientific organizations, such as the International Dark Organization, or stakeholders like Starlink or Blue Origin. This commentary period permits greater collaboration with scientists and companies to ensure that the review is both environmentally sustainable and economically plausible. Following the law's publication, the policy will require at least an additional year for company adoption. Compliance would be evaluated through the FCC's licensing authority, as no incorporation of the policy would mean no license for the company. Therefore, the entire process will take at least three years for implementation. Establishing the LPER as a requirement for FCC

licensing will also ensure the policy is properly enforced after passage.

Furthermore, the staffing and time required for the FCC rulemaking process will likely require around \$5 to \$20 million, while the research and development (R&D) costs for companies can be much more, exceeding \$50 million per major operator to abide by the new regulations. These cost ranges correspond with the median costs for completing NEPA analyses, while the R&D costs are relatively standard for satellite technology.

Some potential hurdles during this process include significant industry pushback, as requiring companies to develop less reflective satellites will be costly in the short-term due to the extensive iteration process needed to develop effective solutions.<sup>18</sup> However, SpaceX has already expressed interest in developing dimmer satellites, demonstrating a shared interest in improving satellite sustainability.<sup>17</sup> The company has published updates on its brightness mitigation practices, discussing the recent testing on different materials and coatings.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, many actions can be taken to mobilize greater public support for the bill. For example, non-profit organizations and the astronomy community can spearhead initiatives to raise awareness through events, such as advocacy campaigns. Garnering greater support for the bill places more pressure on tech companies, encouraging action for a more sustainable future.<sup>18</sup>

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# Clear and Present Danger: EHR Environmental Feeds for Chronic Disease Protection

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*Americans with chronic conditions face preventable hospitalizations from environmental hazards, yet federal policy does not require electronic health records (EHR) to issue alerts. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) should require real-time environmental data integration and condition-specific warnings.*

## Background

Environmental hazards hospitalize millions of Americans with chronic illnesses every year; absent a health-alert system connecting medical care to outdoor conditions, air quality deterioration, heat waves, and wildfires catch patients off guard. Climate change has intensified this threat, with heat waves now more than four times as frequent as in the 1960s and wildfire smoke reversing air quality gains in 30 states since 2016.<sup>1,2</sup> Roughly 51.8% of adults carry diagnoses of one or more chronic diseases such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart failure, or diabetes, and 27.2% have multiple such conditions.<sup>3</sup> Medicare covers 79.4% of the approximately 11.7 million insured Americans with COPD, and Medicaid covers 9.3%; these patients account for 1.8 million hospitalizations annually.<sup>4</sup>

These four conditions are among the most environmentally sensitive in the Medicare and Medicaid population, as air pollution and extreme heat trigger respiratory and cardiovascular exacerbations and increase risk for patients with diabetes.

The infrastructure that addresses this gap resides within electronic health records (EHR) systems. The Health Information Technology for Economic and

Clinical Health Act of 2009 and the 21st Century Cures Act of 2016 established the EHR infrastructure, requiring application programming interfaces (APIs) and external data feeds, yet none collect or display environmental data.<sup>5,6</sup> The CDC National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program piloted EHR-based surveillance from 2012 but targeted retrospective research rather than real-time alerts.<sup>7</sup> Federal law still requires no EHR to notify a care team when a high-risk patient's home zip code falls under a wildfire smoke advisory, a severe heat warning, or an "unhealthy" Air Quality Index.

## Policy Idea

The CMS should amend the Promoting Interoperability Program, which replaced Meaningful Use in 2018, to require certified EHRs for patients with asthma, COPD, heart failure, and diabetes covered by Medicare and Medicaid to obtain and display real-time outdoor air quality data for each patient's zip code on record. Covered data must include AQI readings, wildfire smoke concentrations, and National Weather Service extreme heat warnings; when any threshold is exceeded, the EHR must issue notifications to the patient's care team. The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information

Technology (ONC) should set standards for exchanging environmental data sourced from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Although EPA and NOAA feeds are publicly accessible, EHR vendors bear responsibility for API integration costs and must achieve compliance within two years of policy adoption.

## Policy Analysis

Studies have demonstrated that integrating EHR-environmental data is both technically and clinically feasible. Imperial College London's COPE study linked EHR data for patients with ambient environmental sensor data and demonstrated that healthcare systems can react to individual patient environmental exposures.<sup>8</sup> A Canadian feasibility study demonstrated high accuracy using an automated Air Quality Health Index text alert system for patients with COPD, asthma, and heart failure, achieving forecast accuracy rates of 80.7 to 81.7%.<sup>9</sup> Although both studies occurred outside the United States, their findings transfer; EPA AirNow and NOAA feeds mirror the environmental data infrastructure used in those trials.

These studies show effects at larger scales as well. The Integrated Clinical and

Environmental Exposures Service, a regulatory-grade, open-access EHR platform at the University of North Carolina, integrated EPA exposure data with EHRs to observe exposure patterns associated with increased risk of asthma and COPD symptoms for thousands of patients.<sup>10</sup> A 24-month precision health study at the Taiwan National Health Research Institutes found that models combining EHRs with wearable and environmental data achieved an 88.46% accuracy rate for acute COPD exacerbations, five percentage points above an EHR-only model and fifteen above a model without exposure measurements.<sup>11</sup>

Critics frequently raise alert fatigue from EHR-based clinical decision support (CDS) alerts as a concern, and the policy directly addresses it.<sup>12</sup> The policy limits CDS alerts to cases where the EHR has calculated a condition-specific risk score exceeding the environmental threshold for that patient's condition. In a review of CDS applications, psychiatrist Dr. Joel Shoolin confirms that condition-specific alerts improve clinician response rates compared to generic warnings.<sup>12</sup> Together, these studies establish that EHR-environmental integration is both technically ready and clinically meaningful, providing a strong evidentiary basis for federal deployment.

### Highlights

- Climate change has worsened environmental hazards, with heat waves now four times as frequent as in the 1960s and wildfire smoke reversing air quality gains in 30 states. These conditions increase

hospitalization risk for the 51.8% of American adults with at least one chronic disease.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

- Asthma, COPD, heart failure, and diabetes are the most environmentally sensitive Medicare and Medicaid diagnoses, yet no electronic health records (EHR) currently alerts a care team when a high-risk patient's zip code falls under a wildfire advisory or extreme heat warning.<sup>13,14,15,16</sup>
- The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services should amend the Promoting Interoperability Program to require certified EHRs to display real-time air quality data by patient zip code and issue condition-specific alerts when the Environmental Protection Agency or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration exceeds environmental thresholds.
- Studies show EHR-environmental data integration achieves forecast accuracy rates above 80%, and condition-specific clinical decision support alerts improve clinical response rates compared to generic warnings.<sup>8,9,12</sup>

### Implementation

CMS should implement this policy through a formal rulemaking process amending the Promoting Interoperability Program, which already carries legal authority under the Social Security Act to set EHR certification conditions. This approach is faster than new legislation and avoids the political

uncertainty of passing a standalone bill.<sup>17</sup> The rulemaking process requires CMS to publish a proposed rule, accept public comment, and issue a final rule, typically taking 18 to 24 months.<sup>18</sup> ONC would simultaneously develop data standards for environmental data exchange under the Health Data, Technology, and Interoperability framework, adding approximately six to 12 months. Requiring EHR vendor compliance within two years of the final rule provides adequate time to build API connections, configure threshold logic, and test alert workflows. Total time from rulemaking initiation to full deployment would be approximately four years.

Once CMS finalizes the rule, companion legislation through the House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee and the Senate HELP Committee would codify the requirements in statute, shielding the policy from future administrative reversal; Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) and Representative Doris Matsui (D-CA), co-introducers of the Climate Change Health Protection and Promotion Act in 2025, are natural champions.<sup>19</sup> Bipartisan framing around cost reduction is essential.

Key organizational stakeholders include the American Lung Association, the American Heart Association, and the American Diabetes Association, each of which has existing policy positions supporting climate-health integration.<sup>20,21,22</sup> The National Association of Chronic Disease Directors can mobilize state health departments, and Health Care Without Harm, which already engages health systems on climate resilience, is a natural institutional ally. The ONC should engage the

EPA and NOAA early as data partners in the standards-development process.

Two obstacles stand out. First, EHR vendors would likely raise concerns regarding implementation costs, particularly for smaller practices and rural hospitals. Given that a single read-only Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources (FHIR) API connection typically costs \$15,000 to \$70,000 per vendor, the policy should phase in requirements beginning with the largest certified EHR platforms, fund ONC-published reference implementations to lower per-vendor costs, and make technical guidance freely available to smaller and rural providers.<sup>23</sup> Compliance would be verified through ONC's Health IT Certification Program, which would add environmental alert capability as a new required criterion, the same mechanism used to enforce prior interoperability mandates.<sup>5,6</sup> Second, the Trump administration eliminated the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Climate Change and Health Equity in January 2025, signaling hostility to climate-framed health initiatives.<sup>24</sup> Advocates should frame communications around reducing avoidable hospitalizations and Medicare and Medicaid costs. Collecting pilot data from early-adopter health systems in high-wildfire states such as California and Oregon will provide US-based evidence to strengthen the policy case and drive adoption nationally.<sup>25</sup> The EPA AirNow API is a free public government service, eliminating data-acquisition costs entirely.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, COPD hospitalizations cost Medicare over \$19,000 per admission; even

modest reductions in environmentally triggered exacerbations would generate returns well above vendor integration costs.<sup>27</sup>

Implemented correctly, EHR-based environmental alerts represent a low-cost intervention protecting vulnerable Medicare and Medicaid patients from preventable, climate-driven hospitalizations.

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# The Food Waste Reduction Act: A Policy to Do Good by Our Markets and Consumers

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*The US is one of the largest wasters of food worldwide amidst a global environment of advanced climate change and food insecurity. Dynamic stocking and revenue solutions can help reduce food waste, aiding businesses and food-insecure individuals alike.*

## Background

The United States is one of the largest consumers of food worldwide and one of the largest agricultural production hotspots globally. America ranks third behind China and India in agricultural value, as Americans have some of the easiest access to food.<sup>1</sup> Yet, they are chronically wasteful in their food consumption.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, one in seven households face food insecurity as of 2023, while food waste continues to grow each year.<sup>2</sup> Thus, addressing the issue of food waste is one of our paramount environmental concerns.<sup>3</sup>

A United Nations Climate Change report found that food waste contributes to 8-10% of total greenhouse gas emissions through rotting and the requisite land use change for landfills.<sup>4</sup> All told, waste creates upwards of \$1 trillion in economic damage.<sup>4</sup> The US has acutely high levels of food waste, with upwards of 110 billion pounds of food wasted per year.<sup>5</sup> This waste alone accounts for at least 113 million metric tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions annually.<sup>5</sup>

Large chains dominate the American supermarket, including Walmart Supercenter, Kroger, and Safeway.<sup>6</sup> These markets, among many others, are responsible for feeding hundreds of millions of Americans, and often see the

greatest raw volume of food waste compared to small retailers and farms. Conversely, small grocers are equally liable, owing to their reduced ability to use logistics infrastructure to match fluctuating consumer demand and consequent increase in waste proportion to sales.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, policies targeting the supply of food stand the greatest chance of having the potential for food waste reduction.

## Policy Idea

The US Congress should pass the “Food Waste Reduction Act”, enforced through the Department of Agriculture (USDA), to do the following:

1. Require retailers to devote at least 15% of total shelf space to the retailing of disposable “imperfect” produce. In this context, imperfect produce refers to safe produce that fails to meet normalized retail cosmetic standards regarding shape, color, or size. 15% is roughly in line with waste reduction targets among grocery stores.
2. Implement mandatory dynamic pricing requirements for near-expiry food by discounting food with near-expiry dates compared to longer-lasting

products, to help reduce the quantity of spoiled food at grocery markets.

3. Require markets to donate all expiring items to a local charity or food bank, or face a fine of \$100 per pound of waste.

Given both large and smaller grocers’ contributions to food waste, the USDA would impose these requirements with a 6-month adoption grace period.

## Policy Analysis

Reports estimate that grocery markets throw away up to 20% of produce simply for cosmetic reasons—this discardment translates to roughly 20 billion pounds of food wasted annually and \$17 billion in lost value.<sup>8,9</sup> A shift towards additional stocking creates revenue potential for businesses. The financial impacts of selling ugly produce are mixed. Grocery stores with consistent supplies of ugly produce can earn up to 5-10% more profit, while those with limited direct suppliers face both financial penalties and potential customer loss due to inconsistent supply.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, a 2009 study found that product assortment and variety changes have a greater impact on store choice than price changes.<sup>11</sup> That is, consumers were more likely to choose a store based on having a desired product in stock

rather than the price changes of items.

Fewer than 25% of American grocery retailers offer any type of dynamic pricing.<sup>12</sup> A 2025 study by Dutch researchers found that profits increased by 3.85% and waste was reduced by 35% in markets that implemented dynamic pricing compared to those that did not.<sup>13</sup> American studies found a similar increase in profits by increasing sales volume, and a still significant 21% reduction in waste.<sup>15</sup> Given food waste's 10% contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, the reduction in this waste has tremendous climate impact reduction potential.<sup>5</sup>

In France, where a model bill mandating food donations of edible, near-expiry foods has been in place for 10 years, some food manufacturers are seeing 30,000 products being donated per day.<sup>14</sup> Wasting of imperfect produce by all grocers imposes a pre-existing economic burden that this policy corrects by creating purchase opportunities and thus revenue opportunities. It follows, too, that while all three components of the policy would regulate business behavior, the profit potential is positive with proper implementation. This is important in the sense that while this policy is built around regulation, the regulations are designed to improve both business and social outcomes.

### Highlights

- The US has acutely high levels of food waste, with upwards of 110 billion pounds of food wasted per year.<sup>5</sup>
- The USDA should implement a three-tiered food waste solution to

mandate dynamic pricing for near-expiry food, mandate 15% shelf space devoted to imperfect produce, and mandate the donation of safe, expired food to food security organizations.

- Dynamic expiry-date pricing can increase profits by up to 4% for markets while reducing waste by 25%.<sup>12</sup>
- Mandatory selling of “imperfect” produce can reduce upwards of 20 billion pounds of food waste from discarded produce.<sup>9</sup>

### Implementation

The USDA should implement the Food Waste Reduction Act through congressional legislation and subsequent appropriations. Sponsorship is not chamber-dependent, though the economic benefits of the policy, even amidst additional regulations, are likely to appeal to both liberals and conservatives alike. In particular, Tea Party conservatives like Senators Rand Paul (R-KY) and Ted Cruz (R-TX) might be persuaded of the economic benefits to businesses. In 2018, Representative Charlie Pingree (D-ME) successfully courted Republicans to create a liaison position for food loss and waste reduction within the USDA.<sup>15</sup> Appropriations are primarily needed for enforcement, likely between \$100 million and \$500 million, using the USDA's \$137 million in food waste spending (since 2017) as a bare minimum threshold.<sup>16</sup>

This policy could face potential pushback from business groups and conservatives who view the regulations as additional red tape. These concerns are often acute

for small businesses that may not have the infrastructure to donate or price dynamically in the short-term. The inclusion of the dynamic pricing implementation grace period would be designed to allow businesses to adopt the policies in a timeframe conducive to their needs. Business-oriented think tanks would emphasize that there are no financial incentives included, given the returns businesses stand to make with the policies. This latter part is likely to please conservatives who would appreciate a reduction in government spending.

The USDA would enforce the regulations through strict financial penalties and delegate responsibilities to additional and subsidiary agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food Safety and Inspection Services. To enforce the imperfect produce requirement, large retailers will submit quarterly reports detailing total produce shelf space and the proportion allocated to cosmetically imperfect goods, with random in-store audits conducted by state agencies to verify compliance and deter misclassification. The USDA will enforce dynamic pricing requirements by integrating expiration-date tracking with existing point-of-sale systems, allowing regulators to identify, in real-time, the discounting compliance among grocery retailers. The Food Waste Reduction Act will also require retailers to submit monthly data on food flows—categorizing inventory as sold, donated, or discarded—creating a transparent chain of custody for perishable goods. Financial penalties should be scaled to the severity of noncompliance, including fines for failing to meet

shelf-space thresholds, neglecting to apply required discounts, and, most significantly, discarding edible food, with penalties reaching up to \$100 per pound of waste.

Oversight will be a complicated task given the wide geographic scale of implementation, and would leverage local state partners to oversee grocers and markets within smaller regions. In sum, while implementation would require coordinated efforts between state and federal USDA partners, a bipartisan coalition of legislators and public support would ease the implementation logistics.

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efforts-prevent-and-reduce-food-  
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# FOREIGN POLICY

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# Establishing a Strategic Minerals Investment Partnership Between the US and Argentina

By Quinton Baldis, [gab4@cornell.edu](mailto:gab4@cornell.edu)

*To counter China's dominance in the global lithium supply chain, the United States should establish a Strategic Minerals Investment Partnership with Argentina to finance lithium refining capacity in Argentina.*

## Background

Lithium-ion batteries power the core technologies in the modern economy: transportation, consumer electronics, and renewable energy systems, making lithium a critical resource. Over 78% of the world's currently deployed battery energy storage systems are lithium-ion batteries.<sup>1</sup>

Argentina currently sits on roughly 20% of the world's available lithium deposits, making it one of the most lithium-rich countries in the world.<sup>2</sup> Despite these large reserves and Argentina's political ties to the United States, the majority of mined lithium flows directly to China.<sup>3</sup> In 2024, Argentina exported \$721 million worth of lithium, with 10.9% of these exports flowing to the United States and 64.4% sent directly to China, making China the single largest destination for Argentina's lithium exports.<sup>4</sup>

As of 2022, China controlled over 65% of global lithium refining capabilities, compared to Argentina's 5% and the US's 1%.<sup>5</sup> Since refining lithium is an essential step in turning raw lithium into battery-grade chemicals, China's dominance over this stage in refinement delegates it significant control over the global lithium battery supply chain.<sup>6</sup> In 2024, 70% of the US's lithium-ion battery

storage systems were imported from China.<sup>7</sup> The Department of Defense identified lithium-ion batteries as a key technology, powering military communications, drones, and vehicles. The US's dependence on China, a strategic rival, leaves US supply chains vulnerable to geopolitical coercion and places national security at risk.<sup>8</sup> China's control allows it the ability to shape global supply and limit exports during geopolitical tensions, giving it direct leverage over U.S. supply chains.

## Policy Idea

The President should issue an Executive Order establishing a Strategic Minerals Investment Partnership (SMIP) with Argentina, focused specifically on lithium refining. The Executive Order should direct the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and the Export-Import Bank's (EXIM) Supply Chain Resiliency Initiative to support the construction and expansion of lithium refining facilities in Argentina with funding, loan guarantees, and political risk insurance. This funding should be conditional on two requirements: first, projects include long-term offtake agreements with US lithium-ion battery manufacturers; and second, a fixed share of refined

lithium is exported directly to the US rather than Chinese buyers.

## Policy Analysis

Raw lithium has limited strategic value without the ability to process it into battery-grade chemicals. The International Energy Agency (IEA) determined that a lack of control over the refining process causes lithium supply chain vulnerabilities.<sup>9</sup> Due to these findings, the SMIP should target the main vulnerability in the lithium-ion battery supply chain: refining capabilities.

The 2010 Japan Lynas partnership demonstrates the dangers of depending on Chinese lithium refining and establishes a clear precedent of strategic mineral partnerships working. Japan sourced roughly 90% of its rare earth minerals from China for years.<sup>10</sup> During a trade dispute in 2010, China cut off all rare earth exports to Japan, exposing Japan's dependence on Chinese rare earths as an economic vulnerability.<sup>10</sup> The Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security secured a \$250 million deal with Australia's Lynas Corporation, exchanging loans for long-term mineral offtake agreements.<sup>11</sup> The World Economic Forum reported that since 2010, Japan has reduced its reliance on Chinese rare earths from 90% to 60%.<sup>12</sup> Japan's partnership with the

Lynas Corporation parallels the proposed US-Argentina SMIP partnership, and provides precedent of government-backed overseas funding agreements reliably decreasing dependency on Chinese rare earth imports.

The SMIP should be implemented now because building refining capacity takes years, and the global lithium demand is quickly increasing. The IEA projects global lithium demand will grow fivefold by 2040, and their analysis shows global supply falling 40% short of demand by 2035 without new investment.<sup>9,13</sup> Lithium prices have crashed by over 80% since 2023, causing private American investors to postpone and cancel projects throughout 2024, even as global lithium consumption grew 29% that same year.<sup>14</sup> A government-backed SMIP is needed now more than ever to ensure lithium refining capacity is built before the projected shortage hits the US.

### Highlights

- Argentina has roughly 20% of the world's available lithium deposits and exports 64.4% of its mined lithium directly to China.<sup>2,4</sup>
- China supplies 70% of US lithium-ion battery storage systems and has previously weaponized rare earth exports, leaving US supply chains vulnerable to disruption from a strategic rival.<sup>7,8,10</sup>
- The US should establish a Strategic Mineral Investment Partnership with Argentina, financing lithium refining facilities through the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and

Export-Import Bank (EXIM), with contractually guaranteed export shares sent to American manufacturers.<sup>1,4</sup>

- Japan successfully implemented a similar strategic mineral partnership to reduce dependency on Chinese imports, providing precedent that government-backed funding agreements can decrease foreign mineral dependency.<sup>3,10</sup> Global lithium demand is projected to outpace supply by 2035, making immediate investment in refining capacity essential to prevent future shortages.<sup>9,13</sup>

### Implementation

This initiative would be implemented through an executive order directing the EXIM Supply Chain Resiliency Initiative and the DFC to finance the refining facilities and create the proposed SMIP. The EXIM would provide loans to Argentine refining facilities, based on the share of the exports promised to US buyers. The more refined lithium an Argentine facility commits to selling to American manufacturers, the more financing it unlocks. When in partnership, the DFC would conditionally provide political risk insurance, protecting Argentine facilities against currency crises or government interventions, given that the facility would export at least 20% of its refined lithium to the US. Compliance would be enforced through contractually binding offtake agreements with US buyers, paired with EXIM and DFC reporting requirements that track export volumes and destinations. Failure to meet export commitments

would trigger financial penalties such as reduced access to financing or withdrawal of political risk insurance. Based on comparable US projects: \$565 million for rare earth extraction in Brazil, \$350 million for cobalt and nickel in Australia, and \$1.3 billion for a copper project in Pakistan, a realistic SMIP investment in one to two Argentine refining facilities would fall between \$400 million and \$800 million.<sup>16</sup> While similar US critical minerals partnerships have produced returns after 6 months, the process of financing and enforcement under the proposed SMIP would realistically take two to three years to produce results for American manufacturers.<sup>17</sup>

The political groundwork has already been partially laid: in October 2025, the Trump administration deployed the Exchange Stabilization Fund to provide Argentina with a \$20 billion currency support package. The Trump administration has made it a goal to deepen economic and strategic ties in the Western Hemisphere, which directly supports a SMIP with Argentina.<sup>18</sup> This partnership is made viable because Argentina has already built the legal infrastructure to protect these investments. Argentina's 2024 Incentive Regime for Large Investments (RIGI) guarantees tax, customs, and foreign exchange stability for 30 years, meaning future Argentine governments cannot undercut US-backed refining facilities through new taxes or regulatory changes.<sup>15</sup>

Chinese influence in Argentina poses a potential risk to this plan. Between 2020 and 2023, Chinese companies invested roughly \$3.2 billion in Argentine lithium mining and now hold stakes

in six of Argentina's sixteen active lithium projects.<sup>19</sup> This level of investment gives China not only economic leverage but also political influence over provincial governments, particularly because Argentine provinces control natural resources.<sup>20</sup> Using the 2024 Memorandum of Understanding that strengthened cooperation on critical minerals between Argentina and the US, the US can establish a foothold in the refining process of the lithium supply chain.

Overall, this policy would strengthen US supply chains because long-term offtake agreements ensure that, over a sustained period of time, Argentine refining outputs flow to the US, not China.

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# Citizenship Reform in Myanmar as a Solution to Rohingya Muslim Displacement

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*To address the systemic persecution and displacement of the Rohingya people, the Myanmar government should repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law that denies Rohingya citizenship and implement legal and humanitarian reforms that restore civil rights.*

## Background

The ongoing persecution of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar has rendered the population stateless.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 2017, Myanmar's campaign of widespread killings and sexual violence against the Rohingya escalated into ethnic cleansing that has forced more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.<sup>1,2</sup> The United Nations' (UN) investigations have concluded that the Myanmar government's attacks likely constituted crimes against humanity and acts of genocide.<sup>3</sup>

Even before 2017, Rohingya communities faced strict limitations on travel and property ownership due to Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law.<sup>4</sup> By restricting citizenship eligibility to state-recognized ethnic groups whose ancestors lived in Myanmar before 1823, the government created a legal basis to exclude the Rohingya as a national ethnic group, leaving them without basic civil and political rights.<sup>4</sup> Today, nearly one million Rohingya refugees remain in overcrowded camps in Bangladesh. While the Bangladeshi government has upheld the principle of nonrefoulement by allowing Rohingya refugees to remain within its borders, the country faces significant overpopulation pressures from its own citizens.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the refugee camps may provide a

temporary haven, but are not a long-term solution for a population displaced by genocide.<sup>2</sup>

Despite documentation of Myanmar's atrocities against the Rohingya, accountability is still elusive. In 2019, The Gambia filed a case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), alleging violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>6</sup> The court ordered Myanmar to prevent further genocidal acts, but no perpetrators were prosecuted.<sup>6</sup> Despite the UN's and ICJ's condemnations of Myanmar's human rights abuses, the Rohingya people continue to suffer. However, given Myanmar's ongoing proceedings with the ICJ, a legal course of action may soon address the urgent needs of Rohingya refugees who remain displaced across camps in South Asia.<sup>7</sup>

## Policy Idea

The State Administration Council should repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law that denies the Rohingya citizenship and implement reforms that restore their civil and political rights.<sup>4,8</sup> First, legislative reform should remove the ancestry-based citizenship criteria that exclude the Rohingya and establish a clear legal pathway for the population to obtain

citizenship and equal protection under the law.<sup>8,9</sup> Simultaneously, coordinated efforts between the Myanmar government, the Bangladesh government, and international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) should expand education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities for Rohingya refugees living in camps.<sup>1</sup>

## Policy Analysis

Regional precedent suggests that exclusionary citizenship laws targeting minority groups can change due to sustained legal advocacy and international pressure. Stateless since Bangladesh's independence in 1971 due to discriminatory interpretations of citizenship law, the Urdu-speaking Bihari community spent decades confined to overcrowded camps without access to education, employment, or political participation.<sup>10</sup> Legal organizing produced a landmark High Court ruling in 2003, which led to government approval to extend citizenship to the broader community in 2007, and eventually, full Supreme Court recognition with directives for identity card issuance was achieved in 2008.<sup>11</sup> Although the Bihari case was resolved through judicial reinterpretation

rather than legislative repeal, it demonstrates how citizenship systems built on ethnic hierarchy can be restructured when governments face sustained domestic unrest and international scrutiny.<sup>10</sup>

Myanmar's current political climate may create conditions that make reform more plausible than in previous years. Since the 2021 military coup, the junta has lost significant territorial control to resistance groups and ethnic armed organizations.<sup>2</sup> More significantly, in 2019, The Gambia initiated proceedings against Myanmar, alleging violations of the 1948 Genocide Convention against the Rohingya.<sup>7</sup> The Gambia further emphasized that the violence carried out during 2016-2017 occurred within a broader pattern of discrimination supported by laws, including the 1982 Citizenship Law, that deny the Rohingya citizenship.<sup>12</sup> As the ICJ has recently deliberated on this issue, a finding that Myanmar is liable for genocide could create increased legal and diplomatic pressure on the State Administration Council to repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law as a step towards addressing the structural conditions that enabled the persecution of the Rohingya population.<sup>7,12</sup>

### Highlights

- Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law has rendered the Rohingya stateless, enabling decades of discrimination and the displacement of more than 700,000 people following the 2017 military campaign.<sup>1,2</sup>
- The State Administration Council should repeal the

1982 Citizenship Law and establish a legal pathway to Rohingya citizenship while coordinating with Bangladesh and UNHCR to expand education, healthcare, and livelihood access for refugees in Chittagong.<sup>2</sup>

- Regional precedent in Bangladesh shows discriminatory citizenship practices can change through continuous legal activism and international influence.<sup>10,11</sup>
- The case of *The Gambia v. Myanmar* before the International Court of Justice creates an opportunity to address the discriminatory laws that perpetuate Rohingya persecution.<sup>12</sup>

### Implementation

Repealing the 1982 Citizenship Law should take five years, as citizenship reform requires both legislative revision and coordinated humanitarian planning before repatriation becomes feasible. This timeline is comparable to the Bihari community case in Bangladesh, where civil society organizing beginning in 2001 led to an initial High Court ruling in 2003, government approval in 2007, and full Supreme Court recognition in 2008.<sup>10,11</sup>

However, the Myanmar government has shown no incentive to enact such a reform.<sup>2,9</sup> For decades, the government has defended the law by claiming that the Rohingya are not indigenous to Myanmar, and therefore do not qualify for citizenship, making citizenship reform politically

contentious.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the ongoing ICJ proceedings increase pressure on Myanmar's leadership to demonstrate compliance with international legal obligations and to regain diplomatic legitimacy.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond diplomatic pressure, Myanmar also faces mounting economic incentives to pursue reform.<sup>14</sup> Following the 2021 coup, Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) have exited the country, depriving the junta of foreign investment.<sup>14</sup> As a Least Developed Country, Myanmar's economy lacks the resilience to absorb sustained capital flight.<sup>15</sup> Repealing the 1982 Citizenship Law could reduce political violence and encourage MNEs to reconsider Myanmar as a viable option for manufacturing and investment.<sup>14</sup>

The first two years should be dedicated to amending the ancestry-based eligibility criteria within the 1982 Citizenship Law, consistent with regional precedent.<sup>10,11</sup> The Ministry of Immigration and Population should introduce amendments replacing the ancestry-based criteria with residency-based eligibility standards.<sup>16</sup> Rohingya applicants would qualify for citizenship by demonstrating physical presence in Myanmar for a minimum of five of the ten years preceding the 2017 displacement, verified through community records, NGO registries, camp records, and sworn testimonies.<sup>16</sup> Children born to qualifying Rohingya parents, whether inside Myanmar or in refugee camps in Bangladesh, would derive citizenship automatically, limiting intergenerational statelessness.<sup>17</sup>

In the third and fourth years, the State Administration Council should establish a national

citizenship verification process administered jointly by the Ministry of Immigration and Population and the General Administration Department, with UNHCR field support. These agencies should set up verification centers to process citizenship applications and issue National Registration Cards, thereby enabling Rohingya Muslim citizens to vote.<sup>16</sup>

Simultaneously, throughout the five-year implementation period, Myanmar's Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, in coordination with Bangladesh and UNHCR, should expand services for Rohingya refugees.<sup>18</sup> UNHCR should fund learning centers, mobile health clinics operated through Doctors Without Borders, and vocational training in tailoring, carpentry, and solar installation delivered through the World Food Program's cash-based assistance infrastructure.<sup>19,20</sup> Funding would draw from existing UNHCR emergency budgets and EU bilateral development aid already committed to the Cox's Bazar response.<sup>22</sup>

Urgency is key for this proposal. Because a final ICJ judgement would be legally binding under the Genocide Convention, the proceedings create a rare window in which Myanmar may face stronger incentives to adopt policy changes.<sup>7</sup> Repealing the 1982 Citizenship Law would represent a step toward addressing the discrimination underlying Rohingya persecution.

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# Legal Invisibility in the AI Supply Chain: Worker Reclassification for Data Laborers in Kenya

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*Kenya should enact the AI Data Labor Protection Act to reclassify data annotators as dependent contractors, mandate mental health protections, and establish joint liability across the AI supply chain—closing the legal gaps that leave millions of workers economically unprotected and without recourse.*

## Background

Kenya has become a primary hub for data annotators, labelers, and content moderators for artificial intelligence (AI) industry leaders such as Meta and OpenAI.<sup>1</sup> These roles consist of labeling images, text, and video to train AI models and reviewing user-generated content to filter harmful material—foundational tasks that make the current state of artificial intelligence possible.<sup>1,2</sup> Kenya’s digital gig workforce grew from 638,400 workers in 2019 to over 2.4 million in 2023, and in 2024, the gig economy was valued at \$556.7 billion and projected to triple by 2030.<sup>1,2</sup> Despite this scale, workers earn around \$2 per hour compared to \$15 to \$60 per hour for comparable work in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Even with this wage being on par or above Kenya’s national averages, a 2025 survey of 226 Kenyan data workers found that 69% could not cover housing costs, 47% could not afford food, and 53% of platform workers reported not being paid for completed work.<sup>4</sup> The psychological harms of these jobs are also severe. In 2021 and 2022, Kenyan moderators reviewed sexual violence, child abuse, and murder for ChatGPT.<sup>5</sup> A 2025 survey of Global South workers documented 60 incidents of mental harm, while another found that 80%

of workers exposed to violent content reported negative psychological effects.<sup>4,6</sup>

These forms of exploitation persist because major tech companies subcontract through layered business process outsourcing (BPO) platforms that route data work to lower-wage countries and deliberately prevent accountability.<sup>7</sup> 93% of BPO workers must sign non-disclosure agreements as a condition of employment, preventing workers from publicly reporting labor violations.<sup>4</sup> Kenya’s Employment Act restricts its definition of employee to those under a contract of service, excluding data annotators—classified as independent contractors—from minimum wage, leave, and collective bargaining protections.<sup>1</sup> Without intervention, the structural conditions enabling this exploitation will only deepen as demand for AI data labor continues to grow.

## Policy Idea

To address underpayment, mental health harm, and corporate impunity, Kenya’s Ministry of Labor should enact the AI Data Labor Protection Act (ADLPA). The ADLPA would operate through three pillars. First, ADLPA would reclassify AI data workers as dependent contractors, entitling them to a minimum living wage,

plain-language contracts with mandatory termination notice, and the right to collective bargaining. Additionally, all platforms and BPOs must register with an established national Digital Labor Authority before operating in Kenya. Second, ADLPA would require companies to fund independent mental health counseling, task-rotation rights, daily exposure caps, and medical insurance. Third and most critical to enforcement, ADLPA would establish joint liability across the AI supply chain: any company whose products are built with Kenyan labor would be legally co-responsible for labor violations, giving workers direct standing to sue end clients—not just intermediaries—in Kenyan courts.

## Policy Analysis

Evidence from comparable labor reforms suggests that the ADLPA could meaningfully improve labor protections and accountability within the AI data supply chain.

Reclassification policies targeting digital platform labor have demonstrated measurable enforcement outcomes in other jurisdictions, supporting ADLPA’s first pillar. Spain’s 2021 “Rider Law,” which established a presumption that gig workers are employees, resulted in regulators

imposing over €250 million in fines on the delivery platform Glovo for misclassifying workers and failing to comply with employment protections.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in 2023, French authorities fined Uber €17 million for misclassification violations.<sup>1</sup> These enforcement actions illustrate that statutory reclassification can compel digital labor platforms to extend labor protections, adjust compensation structures, and register with national regulatory authorities.

The reclassification and registration mechanisms in the first pillar directly enable enforcement of the second pillar: once workers are recognized as dependent contractors and platforms are registered with the Digital Labor Authority, mental health and task regulation requirements become legally enforceable and subject to audit. While empirical data linking reclassification to measurable reductions in mental health harm remains limited, precedents in Spain and France demonstrate that statutory employment recognition is a necessary precondition for regulators to enforce the full range of protections.<sup>1</sup>

Supply-chain transparency and joint liability provisions have proven effective in addressing labor abuses within subcontracting networks, directly supporting the Act's third pillar. In 2022, the Colombian Ministry of Labor launched an investigation into a TikTok subcontractor operating content moderation services for malpractices, confirming that domestic regulators can pursue multinational technology firms when labor violations occur within outsourced operations.<sup>6</sup> Kenyan courts have already established similar jurisdictional authority. In

*Meta Platforms Inc. v. Motaung & 186 Others (2024)*, the Court of Appeal ruled that foreign technology companies may be subject to Kenyan labor claims when the work is performed domestically, even when employment relationships are mediated through subcontractors.<sup>1</sup>

### Highlights

- Kenya's digital gig workforce has grown to over 2.4 million workers—predominantly youth—performing foundational AI data labor for corporations,
- This data workforce earns as little as \$2 per hour while excluded from minimum wage, leave, and collective bargaining protections under Kenya's Employment Act.<sup>1,3</sup>
- AI data labor is psychologically taxing, with documented incidents of mental health harm among Global South data workers—80% of those exposed to violent content reported negative psychological effects.<sup>4,6</sup>
- AI Data Labor Protection Act (ADLPA) would reclassify data workers as dependent contractors, require company-funded mental health protections, and establish joint liability across the AI supply chain, giving workers direct standing to sue end clients in Kenyan courts.
- Spain's Rider Law supports the efficacy legislation because it produced over €250 million in enforcement fines and compelled platform reclassification.<sup>1</sup>

### Implementation

Kenya's National Assembly Committee on Labour and Social Welfare should introduce the ADLPA as a government bill, with the Cabinet Secretary for Labour and Social Protection as the primary sponsor. Because the ADLPA targets gaps in the existing Employment Act, it should be framed as an amendment rather than new legislation, increasing its likelihood of passage.<sup>1</sup>

Political support can be built by aligning the ADLPA with President Ruto's Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA).<sup>8</sup> The National Youth Opportunities Towards Advancement (NYOTA) project, a flagship BETA initiative, strengthens youth employment, savings, job access, and entrepreneurship. NYOTA targets Kenyans aged 18 to 29—the same demographic that forms the core of the data annotation workforce—making the ADLPA a direct extension of an existing priority.<sup>1,8</sup> The 2023 European Union (EU)-Kenya Economic Partnership Agreement includes binding labor standards and prohibits lowering them to attract investment, while the proposed US-Kenya Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership requires maintaining internationally recognized labor rights, with potential trade sanctions for non-compliance.<sup>9,10</sup> The EU is Kenya's largest export destination, accounting for 13.6% of exports and €3 billion in 2023, and the United States is its third-largest export market, so compliance carries direct economic consequences.<sup>9</sup>

The proposal is well-timed given Kenya's regulatory momentum. The Artificial

Intelligence Bill, 2026, sponsored by Senator Karen Nyamu, establishes a national AI regulator and risk-based governance framework.<sup>11</sup> While that legislation governs technology, the ADLPA governs the workforce. Positioning them as complementary strengthens the case for both and fills a key gap in Kenya's emerging AI governance framework.<sup>11</sup>

Key domestic stakeholders include the Data Labelers Association of Kenya and the Kenya Union of Gig Workers, active in consultations convened by KICTANet, a Kenyan digital policy network, and GIZ, a German development agency supporting labor governance.<sup>1</sup> Advocacy groups have elevated issues of pay transparency and contract abuse through policy roundtables and conventions, and both GIZ and KICTANet have led prior digital economy convenings.<sup>1</sup> The International Labor Organization's partnership with the Kenyan government provides a channel for technical assistance.<sup>1</sup>

The primary resistance will come from BPO industry associations and, within government, the ICT Board, whose mandate emphasizes attracting foreign investment and positioning Kenya as a leading AI and outsourcing hub.<sup>12,13</sup> This creates inter-ministerial tension with the Labour Ministry. However, trade agreements may partially resolve this, as both the EU and US partnerships condition market access on labor standards compliance. Industry actors reliant on these exports face real costs for non-compliance, reframing the ADLPA as necessary for sustaining investment.

The ADLPA should include phased implementation with transition support. In year one, the National Assembly should introduce the legislation and establish the Digital Labor Authority, building regulatory capacity before obligations take effect. In year two, reclassification and platform registration requirements would begin, allowing firms to adjust contracts and compensation. In year three, joint liability provisions should activate. This three-year structure follows ILO labor reform models that build enforcement capacity progressively rather than imposing obligations faster than institutions can administer them.<sup>14</sup>

Overall, the ADLPA targets a workforce whose labor powers a global industry but remains legally invisible and economically unprotected.

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# Closing the Whistleblower Defense Gap: Amending the Official Secrets Act 1989

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*To prevent the Official Secrets Act 1989 from exposing whistleblowers, the United Kingdom Parliament should amend the act to introduce a qualified statutory public-interest defense modeled on frameworks adopted in Australia and South Africa.*

## Background

The United Kingdom's (UK) Official Secrets Act 1989 (OSA) governs the unauthorized disclosure of sensitive government information by Crown servants, contractors, and other individuals.<sup>1</sup> Critically, the Act contains no statutory public interest defense, leaving whistleblowers in the UK with no legal protection when facing prosecution for acting in the public interest, regardless of whether any harm to national security has been demonstrated.<sup>2</sup> This gap deliberately remained in the Act, as amendments to include such a defense were defeated when the Bill was passed.<sup>3</sup> The lack of a public interest defense under the Act has been upheld by the UK's judicial authorities, as established in the House of Lords' ruling in *R v Shayler* (2002).<sup>4</sup>

The practical consequences of this gap are severe. For example, Katharine Gun, a Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) translator who leaked evidence of an alleged joint National Security Agency-GCHQ operation to spy on United Nations Security Council members ahead of the 2003 Iraq War, faced prosecution under the Act.<sup>5,6</sup> However, unable to use a public interest argument, Gun had no viable defense and only avoided jail time because the government

declined to present evidence to avoid certain public disclosures.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of a public interest defense has significant consequences for democratic scrutiny of foreign and security policy, chilling public discourse and journalistic reporting of leaked material through its ambiguous enforcement.<sup>8,9</sup> As recently as 2022, CPS guidance on cases involving the media explicitly told prosecutors that there is no public interest defense in the UK, impacting decisions to prosecute journalists and their sources.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the Law Commission's 2020 report recommending a qualified statutory public interest defense, the government subsequently rejected this proposal.<sup>11,12</sup> As of now, there is still no public interest defense encoded in the Act.

## Policy Idea

To address this issue, Parliament should amend the Official Secrets Act 1989 to introduce a qualified statutory public interest defense for Crown servants, contractors, and civilians charged with unauthorized disclosure offenses. First, defendants should establish a good-faith belief that the disclosure exposed serious wrongdoing, such as unlawful conduct, abuse of authority, or a significant threat to

public safety. Second, the defendant should establish that the information disclosed was limited to what was necessary to establish wrongdoing. Third, the defendant should establish that they either reported concerns through official channels before disclosing information publicly or had reasonable grounds to believe that doing so would be futile or expose them to retaliation. Parliament should also establish a closed-material procedure to allow courts to properly weigh the public interest against national security interests.

## Policy Analysis

Critics argue that in its current form, the Act may damage the UK's democratic credibility and is among the most restrictive official secrecy laws of any leading democracy.<sup>13,14,15,16</sup> Despite the Law Commission's 2020 recommendation to adopt a public interest defense, the government rejected the proposed remedy on the grounds that individual officials are poorly positioned to weigh national security risks against disclosure benefits.<sup>12</sup> However, implementing a closed-material procedure in the amendment mitigates this issue. Rather than leaving the assessment of national security risk to the individual whistleblower, which the government is understandably concerned about, that judgment

would be transferred to the judiciary.<sup>17</sup> Under this procedure, a security-cleared advocate would be appointed to represent the defendant's interest in a closed hearing from which the defendant and their own legal representatives are excluded. The special advocate would examine classified government material and make arguments to the judge on the defendant's behalf, enabling the court to independently assess whether the disclosure served the public interest and whether any harm to national security was real and demonstrable.<sup>18</sup>

Comparative evidence from Australia and South Africa demonstrates that the proposed reforms will successfully improve democratic accountability in the UK. Australia's Public Interest Disclosure Act 2013 establishes a tiered disclosure framework that requires internal reporting before external disclosure and limits protection to disclosures of public interest information.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, South Africa's Protected Disclosures Act 2000, which was amended in 2017, weighs whistleblower protection against good faith and proportionality to determine whether a public interest defense applies.<sup>20</sup> These examples both suggest that the key proposed variables, such as a high threshold of seriousness and mandatory prior use of internal channels, can effectively constrain the scope of the defense while preserving its effectiveness for genuine public interest cases.

### Highlights

- The United Kingdom's (UK) Official Secrets Act 1989 (OSA) contains no statutory public interest

defense, depriving whistleblowers of any legal protection when disclosing evidence of serious government wrongdoing and chilling democratic scrutiny of government conduct.<sup>2,4,7,8,9</sup>

- To protect whistleblowers, Parliament should amend the Act to introduce a public interest defense requiring defendants to establish good faith, proportionality, and prior use of internal reporting channels, and establish a closed-material procedure allowing courts to appropriately balance the competing considerations of public interest and national security.
- Adopting a closed material procedure mitigates the government's core concern that a public interest defense would validate disclosures made by individual whistleblowers who are poorly positioned to weigh national security risks against the public interest.<sup>17,18</sup>
- Comparative evidence from Australia and South Africa indicates that a public interest defense can effectively limit its scope while preserving democratic accountability.<sup>19,20</sup>

### Implementation

Standalone whistleblowing bills have repeatedly failed to pass through Parliament, with five bills failing to do so between 2019 and 2022 due to a lack of parliamentary time or political backing.<sup>21</sup> To overcome this, Parliament should introduce the OSA amendment at

the report stage of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill, a government-sponsored bill designed to ensure transparency and ethical conduct in public authorities.<sup>22</sup> The Bill originated in the House of Commons and is currently stalled at report stage, where the House considers amendments proposed by a committee of Members of Parliament.<sup>22,23</sup> Attaching the OSA amendment to a scheduled government bill avoids competing for scarce parliamentary time, and targeting committees can build the bipartisan support needed for passage. The bipartisan Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) is crucial because its statutory oversight of the UK intelligence community would credibly endorse the amendment's compatibility with secrecy interests.<sup>24</sup> ISC Chair Lord Beamish (Kevan Jones) previously presented a public interest clause during the National Security Bill's 2022 committee stage and will likely support a similar amendment.<sup>25</sup> Organizations that have advocated for reform, such as English PEN and Protect, should lobby for the amendment.<sup>14,26</sup> The Bill is deadlocked over concerns that intelligence services could arbitrarily withhold information, presenting an opportunity to negotiate a public interest defense and break the impasse by addressing long-standing transparency demands around the UK intelligence community.<sup>26,27</sup>

The government's central objection to a public interest defense is that courts are poorly positioned to weigh disclosure benefits against classified national security interests.<sup>12</sup> To address this issue, the amendment should incorporate a closed material procedure based on the Special

Immigration Appeals Commission Act 1997, in which a security-cleared special advocate represents the defendant's interests before a judge where classified evidence is examined and tested.<sup>28</sup> The Justice and Security Act 2013 has already established closed material procedures for civil proceedings, providing direct precedent for extending them to whistleblowing prosecutions.<sup>29</sup> The Law Commission and legal scholars have found that an adequately designed public interest defense and closed material procedure will not undermine the government's legitimate interests.<sup>11,15</sup>

Implementation would require no new infrastructure, as special advocates are already appointed through the Special Advocates' Support Office, which comprises around 110 security-cleared lawyers, with representation costs borne by the government.<sup>30</sup> There is no credible fiscal objection because prosecutions under the Act average fewer than one per year, making any additional costs negligible.<sup>31</sup>

To evaluate success, Parliament should track whether the defense is invoked and improvements in press freedom indicators, such as the World Press Freedom Index.<sup>32</sup> Parliament should follow Australia's model of a five-year review period for whistleblower legislation to allow for proper consideration of effectiveness.<sup>33</sup> Within that window, at least one successful invocation of the defense's viability, while the absence of any whistleblowing-related security breach would counter the government's concern. Combining a sufficiently tailored public interest defense and closed material

procedure with a careful review process will ensure the amendment's effectiveness.

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# Reforming Assurances on Private Water Rights to Reclaim Water Security for Chilean Communities

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*To secure the human right to water access and sanitation while ensuring environmental sustainability in Chilean river basins, the Chilean National Congress should further amend the previous 2005 Water Code Reforms to remove the limit placed on ecological flow.*

## Background

As part of former Chilean President Augusto Pinochet's economic liberalization reforms, the Chilean National Congress passed the 1981 Water Code, which established water rights as private and market-based, with access distributed with minimal government oversight.<sup>1,2</sup> These policies incentivized private investment and encouraged an export-oriented model. In this model, Chilean corporations in water-intensive industries—agriculture, forestry, mining, and energy production—took advantage of the diminished protections to accumulate permits and drive rapid growth.<sup>3,4</sup> The avocado and mining industries generated substantial revenue, with the avocado market valued at \$700 million annually, and mining accounting for 12% of Chile's GDP.<sup>5,6</sup> However, granting corporations near-total control over water rights with minimal regulation accelerated environmental degradation and limited water security for rural communities by forcing them to compete with large corporations for water rights.

To offer some public protections, the Chilean National Congress passed a set of reforms in 2005, which permitted the government—the General Directorate of Water (DGA)—to

supersede commercial water rights when necessary to protect the public interest.<sup>7</sup> However, the reforms also institutionalized a cap in the ecological flow the state may allocate to public interest: 20% of the river basin's average annual flow, obligating the state to allocate at least 80% to private interests regardless of public needs.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, due to being based on average annual flow, during droughts and dry seasons, private access is maintained while public allocations are reduced, ensuring that industrial and agricultural sectors consume the majority of remaining water.<sup>8</sup> This flaw has been tested by a megadrought since 2010, which reduced surface water availability by 20%, causing crop failures, reservoir depletion, and led to the government placing water rationing laws in Santiago.<sup>9,10</sup> As it stands, 1.4 million people lack consistent access to drinking water and rely on cistern trucks—meanwhile, 96% of the river basin flow is diverted to industrial production.<sup>11,12</sup>

## Policy Idea

To address water scarcity in rural communities and the accelerating environmental degradation of Chile's river basins and aquifers, the Chilean National Congress should amend the 2005 Water Code to invert the current

allocation order by removing the ecological flow cap. The reform would establish a three-tiered priority system for allocation: first, a guaranteed minimum volume of 100 liters per day per household for consumption; second, guaranteed basin-specific ecological flow minimums, determined by the DGA, to sustain river basins and aquifers and neutralize biodiversity loss; third, allocation of the residual flow to the respective water rights owners.

## Policy Analysis

Furthermore, this framework gives justifications for why and to what extent such water can be allocated. By dedicating water to public consumption needs before private access, rural communities would reach the 100-liter-per-day water consumption threshold. This threshold is representative of a Chilean Supreme Court case ruling from 2021, which set a 100-liter-per-day minimum limit—encompassing sanitation, drinking, and hygiene purposes—in line with recommendations from the World Health Organization.<sup>7,13</sup> Guaranteeing this threshold would solidify the human right to water and sanitation in Chile, an initiative that was recognized in the 2022 reforms to the Water Code.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, determining environmental flow requirements

through seasonal scientific means rather than average annual needs allows the code to account for the river basin flow’s inconsistencies throughout seasonal changes. Calculating ecological flow minimums on a basin-specific basis through hydrological assessment by the DGA—assessments that the DGA is already responsible for—would ensure a scientific basis for water allocation towards environmental concerns and ensure a steady allocation to basin flow.<sup>13</sup> This process would mirror Colorado’s appropriation system, which requires water rights allocations to be measured against streamflow data on a basin-specific basis, and reflects the scientific approach that the proposed policy would have the DGA conduct to determine ecological needs.

California’s response to its droughts from 2012 to 2017 demonstrates the viability of such a framework. In California, the State Water Resources Control Board may negate the rights of some water rights holders during droughts to protect ecological flow and domestic needs.<sup>15</sup> During the drought, the Board issued a directive demanding that over 8,700 private rights holders stop diverting water, which protected public water access for millions of Californian residents.<sup>16</sup>

### Highlights

- Chile’s 1981 Water Code designated water as a private commodity, enabling industrial sectors to accumulate the majority of water rights permits. Yet, the code priced out common Chileans, which displaced water access for 1.4 million rural residents.<sup>1,2,11</sup>

- To reform the water code, the Chilean National Congress should remove the ecological flow cap, allowing water allocation to prioritize public consumption and environmental needs over private rights.
- This policy would guarantee 100 liters per day for household consumption and ecological flow minimums determined by the General Directorate of Water—calculated by basin-specific and season-specific ecological needs—and allow Chile to commit to the human right to water and sanitation.<sup>7,13</sup>
- An active framework that suspends private access in droughts and dry periods has been demonstrated to succeed in efficiently maintaining public consumption, such as in California during the megadroughts from 2012 to 2017.<sup>15,16</sup>

### Implementation

The Senate Water Resources Committee should introduce the legislative amendment in the Chilean National Congress, then be reviewed by the Finance Committee—per agency standard—before general voting in the Chamber of Deputies.<sup>17</sup> The amendment would specifically target the provisions of Law 20,017 that established the 20% ecological flow cap, by repealing the cap and replacing it with the outlined priority system.<sup>18</sup> To preempt claims that the proposal is too radical, the proposal should be framed as a continuation of Chile’s

already-established legal commitments: the 2022 reforms to the water code formally recognized the human right to water and sanitation.<sup>14</sup>

The 2022 reforms were carried out under former socialist President Gabriel Boric, whose campaign focused on environmental protection, indicating that this proposal would probably favor left-center congressmen.<sup>19,20</sup> However, as of March 2026, these representatives currently represent the opposition following the election of ultraconservative President José Antonio Kast.<sup>21</sup> Almost immediately, Kast followed through on his campaign slogan “fewer permits, more investment” by suspending 43 legacy environmental protections of Boric’s administration.<sup>20,22,23</sup> These efforts by Kast are emblematic of the historical partnership between the Chilean political right and large agrarian corporations, as well as private guilds—such as the National Agriculture Society—that lobby for legislative features that weaken or dilute environmental reforms that threaten agribusiness interests.<sup>24,25</sup> Due to these converging interests, right-wing coalitions holding executive power and majorities in either legislative chamber mean the success of any environmental legislation is unlikely in the near future.<sup>26</sup>

Despite this hostile environment, meaningful public pressure for environmental protection is strong—demonstrating that pressure for reform remains active. For example, in March 2026, thousands marked World Water Day by marching in cities across Chile to protest the Kast administration’s repeal of environmental protections, facing

intense intimidation by agribusiness interests.<sup>1,20,22</sup> This sustained mobilization can translate into legislative reform by pressuring moderate legislators. Still, supporters must also begin sustained campaigning to introduce the legislation, given that the legislative pathway for such reform has historically faced large delays before passage. For instance, the 2005 and 2022 reforms faced strong resistance from pro-market interests, and both took over a decade of discussion before passage.<sup>7,27,28,29</sup>

Upon passage, the success of the legislation should be determined by its ability to maintain near constant industrial and agricultural output while securing household access and environmental sustainability. Enforcement would largely fall to the DGA, which would be responsible for setting basin-specific ecological flow thresholds, issuing allocation adjustments during dry periods, and auditing compliance among private rights holders.<sup>13</sup> The policy's environmental performance can be tracked by river flow stability during dry periods and differences in long-term biodiversity levels; the policy's public consumption performance can be tracked by per capita household water access and the number of communities relying on emergency water delivery (for example, cistern trucks). Together, these enforcement and evaluation metrics can combat structural inequality in Chile's water regime and ensure that water allocation is socially and environmentally equitable.

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# Nature-Based and AI Solutions to Flooding in Mozambique

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*Flooding in Mozambique has led to widespread displacement and destruction, making improvements to the warning system and nature-based solutions to flooding investments with long-term, life-saving benefits.*

## Background

On January 16, 2026, National Red Alert motor brigades, texts, and audio messages spread throughout Mozambique to warn communities of an imminent flood.<sup>1</sup> In the subsequent days, the storm harmed over 600,000 people, with 73,600 people displaced, 30,000 homes damaged, 150,000 head of livestock lost, and 440,000 acres of crops flooded.<sup>2</sup> To combat these storms, Mozambique has attempted to install warning systems. However, the warning systems have failed to alert the people of Mozambique due to faulty infrastructure and ineffective notification systems.<sup>3</sup> Mozambique currently has coded steel bars serving as river gauges that monitor water levels.<sup>3</sup> These gauges have sensors that connect to sirens, which alert communities when water levels hit a critical threshold. However, these gauges often fail to detect rising water and alert the community, delaying evacuation and magnifying the destruction caused by the storms.<sup>3</sup> Smaller, high-frequency cyclones and floods occur around five times a year, perpetuating this cycle of disaster followed by restoration.<sup>4</sup>

In the long run, these floods stunt Mozambique's economic development; economic growth rates declined from 12% before the flood to 7% following a flood in 2000.<sup>5</sup> Beyond economic

consequences, flooding creates an elevated risk of water-borne diseases, resulting in higher rates of cholera and diarrhea.<sup>2</sup> To prevent further devastation, the Mozambique government should implement nature-based solutions to the flooding.

## Policy Idea

To reduce flood damage, Mozambique's National Institute of Meteorology in Disaster Risk Management should upgrade its National Red Alert System through expanding the siren and notification systems, upgrading river gauges, and integrating AI, as well as introducing nature-based solutions (NBS). To upgrade the National Red Alert System, the institute should modernize river gauges to improve their accuracy and warn Mozambicans of flood threats before the flood. NBS, infrastructure projects grounded in pre-existing systems within the natural environment, like mangrove restoration and expansion, dune rehabilitation along the coastlines, and expansion of infrastructure for flood-resistant drainage systems, should be implemented in Mozambique to mitigate flood-related damage.

## Policy Analysis

The meteorological and hydrological sectors in Mozambique should be upgraded

with modern weather-forecasting technologies. In addition to implementing a network of forecasting, data analysis, and monitoring centers, AI should be utilized to improve weather prediction.<sup>6</sup> In the Ganges-Brahmaputra basin in India, Google Research tested its AI forecasting technology. The technology predicts floods up to seven days in advance, increasing evacuation time.<sup>7</sup> In Malawi and Niger, farmers who received early warnings were able to adapt their water harvesting to crop varieties with higher drought-resistance, resulting in a 22% increase in yield stability and 15% reduction in food insecurity.<sup>8</sup>

Significant evidence suggests that restoring mangroves and expanding mangrove belts along the coastline reduces storm surges, coastal flooding, and erosion by 66%.<sup>9</sup> This investment would also support the local economy because mangroves can yield up to \$37,500 per hectare per year, acting as nurseries for fisheries.<sup>10</sup> With 20% of Mozambique's population relying on fishing as their primary source of income and fish protein accounting for 50% of all animal protein consumed nationwide, this untapped resource has the potential to improve the economic and physical health of the nation.<sup>11</sup>

Researchers have concluded that coastal dune rehabilitation can reduce maximum flood water volume by 42% by replanting dune vegetation and installing dune fencing.<sup>12</sup> This infrastructure will create a sustainable solution with the local relocation of dredged sand and protect communities against devastating floods.<sup>13</sup>

Evidence supports that flood-resistant drainage systems can reduce storm management costs by up to 30% and slow runoff by retrofitting existing drainage networks with green infrastructure components.<sup>13</sup> These include retention ponds that hold excess water during storms before safely releasing the collected water.<sup>13</sup> Retention ponds reduce erosion, help stabilize infrastructure like homes, and prevent the spread of disease through water decontamination.<sup>13</sup>

### Highlights

- An average of five high-frequency floods and cyclones hit Mozambique each year, the most recent occurring on January 16, 2026, which resulted in the displacement or property destruction of 600,000 people.<sup>2</sup>
- To reduce future flood damage, Mozambique's National Institute of Meteorology in Disaster Risk Management should update the country's faulty Red Alert System and implement nature-based solutions (NBS).
- This policy should include mangrove restoration, which reduces storm surges, coastal flooding, and erosion by 66%, dune rehabilitation

and expansion, which reduce maximum flood water volume by 42%, and flood-resistant drainage systems, which reduce storm management costs by up to 30%.<sup>9,12,13</sup>

- The Red Alert System should be upgraded with AI technology to improve weather forecasting accuracy and provide residents with greater evacuation time.<sup>6</sup>

### Implementation

Mozambique's National Institute of Meteorology in Disaster Risk Management would spearhead the implementation of these nature-based solutions and alert system upgrades, estimated to cost \$27 million.<sup>14</sup> This agency's purpose is to coordinate natural disaster prevention and response.<sup>15</sup> In conjunction with state funding, Mozambique can secure additional funding from the Climate Risk and Early Warning Systems Initiative (CREWS). CREWS, funded by the United Nations (UN), World Bank, and World Meteorological Organization, offers \$3-5 million over the course of three to five years to implement and execute flood mitigation projects that expand warning systems and water capacity.<sup>16</sup>

Another source of funding for these projects would come from the Systematic Observations Financing Facility, which is partnered with the UN.<sup>17</sup> This fund directly aids implementation of flood-prevention infrastructure as well as maintenance, ensuring that these nature-based solutions continue to reduce flood risks in the future. Mozambique has already been approved for \$8,051,348,

reducing one hurdle to accessing funds and expediting construction.<sup>18</sup>

The largest challenge facing successful infrastructure reform is public trust. Due to prolonged lack of government intervention, Mozambicans are less likely to respond to flood warnings and evacuation orders.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the outdated system is made further ineffective by river gauge vandalism, a consequence of Mozambicans' disillusionment with the status quo.<sup>19</sup> To mitigate future harm, Mozambicans should be contracted to rebuild the infrastructure, enhancing the local economy and engaging the community to regain their faith in technologically innovative NBS. Upgrading the flood notification system will also create jobs and facilitate domestic development. Community members should monitor the system, utilize infrastructure like radio networks to transmit warnings, and travel door-to-door with evacuation information.<sup>20</sup> CREWS would train workers to measure daily rainfall at targeted locations along the river, helping to gather data for AI weather forecasting models. Workers contracted to monitor the early warning system use this aggregated data to determine if they should trigger an alarm.<sup>21</sup> Mozambicans would see the system's competence first-hand, creating community ownership and shifting the local culture to respond to flood evacuation orders by participating in monitoring.<sup>22</sup>

To measure the effectiveness of the National Red Alert system and nature-based solutions, three criteria should be analyzed: technical reliability, warning reliability, and risk

reduction effectiveness. Technical reliability measures the accuracy of the monitoring equipment. In comparison, warning reliability measures the probability that a human correctly issued a warning. Mozambique’s National Institute of Meteorology in Disaster Risk Management would be able to determine the effectiveness of the policy through collecting data on the number of casualties, injuries, and the magnitude of damage following floods.<sup>23</sup>

Through implementing nature-based and AI solutions to flooding and upgrading the National Red Alert system, Mozambicans will be better prepared for natural disasters, saving countless lives and property.

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# HEALTH POLICY

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# Mandating Physician Signatures to Address Fraudulent Medicare Advantage Insurer Diagnoses

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*Congress should implement a policy that would require all Medicare Advantage insurer-generated diagnoses to have a physician's co-signature before risk-adjustment payment eligibility, closing the gap that enabled MAOs to inflate risk scores and collect federal payments without justification.*

## Background

Medicare Advantage (MA) insurers currently operate under a payment system that financially incentivizes reporting sicker patients. MA private insurers, known as Medicare Advantage Organizations (MAOs), receive monthly payments from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) based on the health status of their enrolled patients.<sup>1,2</sup> Through a risk adjustment system, the CMS assigns higher payments to plans whose enrollees present with multiple or more severe medical conditions.<sup>2,3</sup> Though intended to compensate insurers for covering sicker Medicare patients, concerns have emerged around “upcoding.” This refers to the practice where MAOs report internally generated diagnoses through paper chart reviews and home visits, marking conditions that a patient’s physician has not confirmed. Such insurer-generated diagnoses allow plans to collect higher payments without covering additional care.<sup>3</sup>

Enrollment in MA has grown significantly, with over 50% of eligible patients on private plans in 2023.<sup>3,4</sup> With this increase in enrollment, the CMS projects that the federal government paid between \$500 and \$600 billion in MA payments to MAOs in 2025.<sup>2,3</sup> Further research has shown that upcoding has become an

increasingly significant financial burden on the Medicare program. According to the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC), CMS overpaid for Medicare Advantage by \$50 billion in 2024 due to higher coding intensity than traditional Medicare.<sup>4</sup> The analysis runs parallel to reports that MAO-conducted health risk assessments (HRAs) using home visits resulted in diagnoses for 1.7 million Medicare enrollees with no follow-up care or treatment by the patient’s physician.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that the diagnoses were either inaccurate or that enrollees did not receive care for serious conditions.<sup>4</sup> The current Medicare Advantage risk-adjustment payment structure created a financial incentive for MAOs to inflate patient diagnoses, increasing CMS reimbursements and resulting in excessive payments that do not produce better health outcomes.

## Policy Idea

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) should revise its internal compensation policy to require that any diagnoses submitted by Medicare Advantage insurers for risk-adjustment payment eligibility be confirmed and co-signed by a physician responsible for the patient’s care. To alter the system for Medicare Advantage payments, such

legislation would need to pass as a bill in Congress. Under this policy, medical conditions entered into the patient’s record via insurers’ health risk assessments, internal home visits, or chart reviews would remain on record for informational purposes only. Under the current risk-adjustment payment system, physicians are not the authoritative source of clinical diagnoses that determine CMS compensation for MAOs. This revision would preserve insurers’ efforts to address potential diagnosis gaps while preventing them from adding diagnoses for financial benefit. In doing so, it would reinforce physicians’ professional authority, protect patients from inaccurate medical records, and preserve the risk-adjustment system.

## Policy Analysis

Restoring the authority of the enrollee’s physician will reduce unnecessary payments to MAOs for diagnoses established through internal health risk assessments, eliminating the upcoding incentive that does not serve Medicare enrollees. Despite MA overpayments, plans spend 9% less on medical services than traditional Medicare does for comparable enrollees.<sup>5</sup> The inflated risk scores bolster MAO income rather than fund additional care for patients, raising the premiums of millions of

Medicare beneficiaries not enrolled in MA plans.<sup>5,6</sup> Chart reviews and health risk assessments contribute to approximately half of the increased coding seen in MA plans compared to traditional Medicare per beneficiary.<sup>7</sup> Because insurers can tie physician payment to the intensity of patient diagnoses, they have created an incentive for more aggressive coding.

Additional efforts, while meaningful, do not address the primary mechanism by which MAOs add unnecessary diagnoses. The No Unreasonable Payments, Coding, or Diagnoses for the Elderly (No UPCODE) Act, which Senators Bill Cassidy (R-LA) and Jeff Merkley (D-OR) introduced on March 25, 2025, proposes to exclude patient diagnoses identified through chart reviews and health risk assessments entirely from the risk-adjustment model and expand the diagnostic data window used in risk-adjustment calculations to two years.<sup>5</sup> However, the act does not require a physician's co-signature to validate diagnoses before their inclusion into risk scores.

Requiring the treating physician's co-signature would remove the billing benefit from inaccurate diagnoses and ensure true clinical evaluation. It would also protect beneficiaries from the effects of incorrect diagnoses on their health histories, which can negatively impact future care.<sup>8</sup> Currently, there are no federal CMS requirements for a physician co-signature to submit a condition for risk-adjustment, though partial precedents at the program level exist.<sup>9</sup>

### Highlights

- Medicare Advantage private insurers receive higher

monthly Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) payments based on the health status of eligible enrollees through a system known as risk adjustment. An independent review found that CMS overpaid Medicare Advantage by \$50 billion in 2024, revealing a higher coding intensity.

- The CMS should require that any risk-adjustment payment-eligible diagnoses from Medicare Advantage (MA) insurers include the patient's treating physician's confirmation and cosignature. Requiring a co-signature would preserve the risk adjustment system, restore patients' physicians as the signing authority on billable diagnoses, and maintain the utility of HRA and chart review.
- This proposal builds on a partial precedent of internal reviews of MA upcoding and CMS proposals, underlining the necessity of chart reviews linked to beneficiary encounters before affecting risk scores.

### Implementation

To introduce a federal policy that equates a physician's co-signature for risk-adjustment eligible diagnoses in Medicare Advantage, Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA), the primary author of the proposed No UPCODE Bill, would introduce a revised version of the bill that centers on this. The Senate Finance Committee, which maintains jurisdiction over Medicare and CMS payment policy, would then hold hearings on the

policy and determine its feasibility.<sup>10,11</sup> Key allies include Senators Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Tina Smith (D-MN), and Roger Marshall (R-KS), all of whom collaborated on a letter raising concerns about coding pattern differences between MA and fee-for-service Medicare and petitioning CMS Administrator Mehmet Oz to alter the risk-adjustment methodology.<sup>12</sup> The policy's aim to reduce excess upcoding and the increased federal spending as a result has been demonstrated to concern members of both parties, furthering the chances of the policy garnering bipartisan support among both chambers of Congress. Specifically, the restoration of physician authority and the protection of patient health records align with both Republican priorities to reduce spending and Democratic priorities to protect against exploitative insurance practices.

The policy will likely face political resistance from MAOs, who may argue that the co-signature requirement would exacerbate administrative burdens and delay reporting diagnoses.<sup>13</sup> Despite this opposition, by emphasizing to policymakers that the requirement for a physician co-signature would focus only on the unconfirmed insurer-generated diagnoses and leave the overall risk-adjustment system in place, the policy can maintain support.

After the policy passes both the House and the Senate, implementation would proceed in four phases. In phase one, over three months, the CMS would assemble a technical advisory panel of stakeholders, composed of practicing physicians who primarily treat Medicare beneficiaries, health policy experts, and MAO

representatives. This panel would develop clear co-signature standards and draft updated risk-adjustment submission guidelines. Phase two would then begin in the next six months, where CMS would update the risk-adjustment data submission systems to (1) recognize and flag diagnoses originating from chart reviews or HRAs, and (2) require a verified and attached physician co-signature before the diagnoses can move on to be payment-eligible. Once the diagnosis processing infrastructure has been updated, phase three of the policy would proceed. Requiring a patient co-signature would initiate a provider-and-insurer education campaign in conjunction with the American Medical Association and relevant specialty societies, focusing on specialties that treat many Medicare beneficiaries. While this program is in effect, phase four will include CMS and MedPAC annually collecting and analyzing data on the effectiveness of the co-signature requirement as an additional metric, while delivering their reports on coding-intensity differences between MA and fee-for-service Medicare, as well as risk-adjustment payment plans. After the annual findings, CMS can adapt the co-signature requirements to address any remaining compliance gaps.

Through a combination of federal regulatory revisions and restored physician authority, the new CMS implementation of mandated physician co-signatures for risk-adjustment-eligible diagnoses will provide both fiscal and patient protection in the Medicare program.

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# Standardizing Grief Screening in New York Primary Care

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*The state of New York should implement a Bereavement Risk Screening and Support Act that requires standardized grief screening within primary care settings to allow for early identification of and targeted intervention for individuals experiencing prolonged grief.*

## Background

Grief following the death of a loved one is a universal human experience. A set of bereaved individuals experience persistent symptoms of grief that interfere with daily life and function, a condition known as prolonged grief disorder (PGD).<sup>1</sup> Estimates suggest that up to 10% of bereaved adults experience PGD, where emotional pain and functional impairment last much longer than the expected average grieving periods.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, PGD is associated with several public health issues, ranging from heightened substance misuse to increased risk to cardiovascular health.<sup>3,4</sup>

Despite these risks, bereavement-related mental health needs are often overlooked in primary care settings, where early intervention could prevent long-term complications.<sup>5</sup> Primary care physicians have the unique ability to identify individuals at risk for PGD and to provide support when intervention is necessary. However, information regarding the death of a loved one is rarely conveyed in a timely manner to one's clinician.<sup>6</sup> Such delays put patients at risk for receiving inadequate psychiatric support, especially for certain overlooked populations with higher demographic risk factors, such as females, the elderly, and individuals of lower socioeconomic status.<sup>7</sup>

It is additionally important to consider that low-income populations and racial and ethnic minorities also encounter structural barriers in accessing mental health services, which include stigma surrounding mental health support, limited insurance coverage, and shortages of culturally competent providers.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Currently, there is no statewide policy in New York that requires bereavement risk screening within routine medical practice, an important gap to address in preventive mental health care.

## Policy Idea

The New York State legislature should establish a Bereavement Risk Screening and Support Act that requires all primary care practices to conduct consistent check-ins with high-risk individuals following the death of a close relative or friend. The New York State Department of Health (NYDOH) would develop a standardized set of grief-focused questions for annual physical examinations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a patient's risk of PGD. The NYDOH would rely on evidence-based protocols, such as the Prolonged Grief Disorder-13 (PG-13), a 13-question survey that assesses a patient's prolonged grief symptoms.<sup>11</sup> Patients identified as high risk would receive physician

referrals to community grief support programs, behavioral health providers, or social services, as appropriate. Provider training and screening implementation would be supported through state behavioral health integration programs.<sup>12</sup>

## Policy Analysis

Current studies indicate that only about 29.3% of physicians feel very comfortable with providing support to bereaved families.<sup>13</sup> From a physician stakeholder perspective, implementing a structured screening program could better equip providers with not only resources to make informed decisions but also the confidence to provide appropriate counseling when necessary. Studies indicate that brief grief risk assessment tools administered within clinical settings can reliably identify patients experiencing persistent grief symptoms.<sup>14</sup> As a result, further integration of the proposed standardized grief screening would improve early identification of individuals at risk for severe grief-related mental health complications. Early identification is crucial in addressing the aforementioned concerns surrounding substance misuse, depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal thoughts.<sup>15</sup>

From a broader healthcare system perspective, preventative grief care offers the potential to

reduce long-term medical expenditures associated with untreated mental health disorders.<sup>16</sup> Individuals who experience prolonged grief frequently utilize healthcare services at higher rates due to comorbid conditions, such as major depressive disorder or sleep disturbances.<sup>17,18</sup> Studies indicate that early supportive interventions, including bereavement support groups, psychological and counseling interventions, and specialist grief therapy, are effective for those at high risk.<sup>19</sup> As a result, it can be assumed that identifying high-risk patients through primary care screening would limit the need for more intensive mental health treatment later in a patient's plan of care.

The act also addresses structural inequities in access to bereavement care. Research signals that low-income communities and racial and ethnic minority groups disproportionately face barriers to mental health services following bereavement.<sup>20</sup> By embedding grief screening within primary care practices—particularly in federally qualified health centers—New York can expand access to early bereavement support while reducing inequities in mental health outcomes.

### Highlights

- Prolonged grief disorder (PGD) affects up to 10% of bereaved adults and is associated with increased risks of depression and substance use disorders, among other adverse health outcomes.<sup>3,4</sup>
- The policy would require primary care physicians to administer standardized grief screening tools during

routine patient visits following a patient's loss, allowing for early identification of individuals who are high risk for prolonged grief.<sup>11</sup> Providers will refer such patients to community grief support programs and further mental health care in order to ensure timely intervention.

- The New York State Department of Health (NYSDH) would oversee this process and work towards establishing screening guidelines while simultaneously supporting provider training for consistent and statewide implementation.
- The policy would improve access to mental health support for underserved and high-risk populations, which can reduce long-term healthcare utilization and associated costs.<sup>17,18,19</sup>

### Implementation

This policy requires the New York State Legislature to introduce the Bereavement Risk Screening and Support Act through both the Assembly and Senate Health Committees. Legislators focused on mental health/health equity would provide sponsorship. After both chambers confirm their approval, the NYSDH should begin implementation over approximately one to two years in phased increments. Advocacy organizations such as the Hospice and Palliative Care Association of New York State may help address opposition or concerns regarding cost by highlighting benefits such as long-term healthcare savings. However, bipartisan support is a likely

outcome since the policy highlights both early intervention and cost reduction, two major and current healthcare concerns.<sup>21</sup> Decisions in this policy require extensive communication amongst the Early Intervention Coordinating Council, Health Equity Council (Minority Health Council), and Rural Health Council.

The first three months of implementation require close discussion with healthcare professionals. NYSDOH should bring together a panel of clinical experts in the fields of psychiatry and primary care and work towards developing standardized screening protocols. These guidelines will highlight the manner in which screenings should be conducted, outlining a list of recommended tools and key questions for providers to ask and providing a plan for integrating annual wellness visits and follow-up appointments after a documented loss.

The brief questionnaire or survey will be integrated within existing electronic health record systems. A patient reporting the death of a close relative should trigger automated prompts, further contributing to the standardization of care. In addition to this implementation, NYSDOH should collaborate with state behavioral health programs such as the Office of Mental Health. Here, they will work together to produce training modules for primary care physicians and office staff.

In the next four to five months, NYSDOH should begin formalizing targeted referrals. Primary care practices that serve high-risk populations should gain enhanced access to social workers and services coordinating care. To address geographic and

transportation barriers that many high-risk patients face, NYSDOH will expand telehealth options in this phase.

Additionally, NYSDOH would need to expand the state's Medicaid program to reimburse grief screening in compliance with federal Medicaid guidelines. To evaluate the program's effectiveness and to make necessary adjustments over time as needed, NYSDOH needs to place an emphasis on collecting and analyzing data on screening rates and patient outcomes. To further incentivize the program, NYSDOH could reward physician practices that demonstrate higher screening rates and successful referral follow-ups.

This policy should be implemented to enable early identification of prolonged grief and expand access to timely mental health support.

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# Bridging Detection and Action: A Federal Emergency Contingency Fund for Early Outbreak Response

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*Congress should authorize and appropriate a Federal Contingency Emergency Fund that releases financing to federal and local early-response programs within 24 hours of an infectious disease outbreak.*

## Background

In a 2019 study, Johns Hopkins University ranked the United States as the most prepared country for a pandemic or epidemic.<sup>1</sup> The researchers found the US had strong capabilities in pathogen prevention, epidemic response, and health capacity.<sup>1</sup> Yet a year later, the US would experience over a million deaths and approximately a \$16 trillion GDP loss at the hands of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19).<sup>2,3</sup> The US fared far worse than most other countries due to a decentralized federal response, delayed testing, and inadequate quarantine.<sup>4</sup> The pandemic revealed vulnerabilities in the US public health system and highlighted the need to reevaluate the country's approach to infectious disease emergency preparedness.

The responsibility of coordinating a federal pandemic response spans many government agencies. Within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response (ASPR) coordinates deployable medical response teams, maintains antibiotic and vaccine stockpiles, assesses new and emerging threats, and strengthens medical supply chains.<sup>5</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), another HHS agency, conducts disease

surveillance and runs the Public Health Emergency Preparedness Program, which funds state and local health departments to build emergency capabilities.<sup>6</sup>

While the US has made strides in funding and building preparedness infrastructure, a lack of flexible emergency spending to enable rapid operational responses remains. Congress must approve most public health emergency funding, delaying agencies' ability to respond to new threats. During the 2017 Zika virus outbreak, Congress took seven months to approve emergency funding.<sup>7</sup> While funding stalled due to partisan conflict, the Obama administration had to redirect funding from essential programs to begin outbreak response.<sup>7,8</sup> Addressing these emergency funding delays is critical to improving the nation's ability to respond rapidly to infectious disease outbreaks.

## Policy Idea

Congress should authorize a Federal Contingency Emergency Fund (FCEF), structuring the fund as an initial congressional appropriation with automatic replenishment requirements and designating ASPR for administration. The FCEF would automatically deploy financing within 24 hours of when key

epidemiological thresholds are met. Criteria indicating an emerging infectious disease threat would include confirmed cases, case fatality rate, transmission rate, geographic spread, and/or impact on health systems. ASPR will release funding to the CDC, HHS, state, and local health departments to support early-action response infrastructure, such as national disease surveillance systems, diagnostic testing capacity, rapid-response teams, vaccine and therapeutic distribution, and healthcare surge coordination. In this manner, the FCEF would close the funding gap between congressional appropriations and early outbreak response.

## Policy Analysis

This policy is modeled after the World Health Organization (WHO) Contingency Fund for Emergencies (CFE), which releases funding within 24 hours to support a country's response infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> Since its inception, the CFE has responded to over 130 emergencies, stopping five Ebola outbreaks in Africa and demonstrating success in providing rapid, flexible funding.<sup>10</sup> In 2026, the Trump administration formally severed ties with the WHO, eliminating US access to resources such as the CFE.<sup>11</sup> An American counterpart that mirrors

the CFE’s structure would ensure the successful mobilization of funds during infectious disease outbreaks.

To qualify for the release of funds, the FCEF will depend on outbreak detection by the CDC and the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System (NNDSS).<sup>12</sup> NNDSS continuously collects and analyzes data from state and local health departments, which receive reports from providers and labs.<sup>13</sup> Through the CDC’s Data Modernization Initiative, NNDSS has improved real-time data collection to detect unusual patterns faster.<sup>14,15</sup> As a result, NNDSS was effective in identifying and tracking cases during the most recent mpox outbreak, enabling actions to protect high-risk populations.<sup>16</sup> These improvements demonstrate NNDSS’s value in rapid surveillance to inform timely and evidence-based resource allocation from the FCEF.

ASPR will administer FCEF funds, leveraging its existing real-time response infrastructure and central role in emergency coordination. The agency oversees initiatives like the Hospital Preparedness Program that distribute funding while strengthening surge capacity, allowing FCEF resources to scale existing infrastructure.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, ASPR coordinates public health emergency response across HHS, FEMA, and state institutions.<sup>18,19,20</sup> This makes ASPR uniquely qualified for deploying FCEF resources in alignment with public health needs.

The FCEF, modeled after the WHO’s CFE, would leverage NNDSS outbreak detection and ASPR’s existing coordination infrastructure to enable rapid

release of resources during infectious disease outbreaks.

### Highlights

- Despite high pandemic preparedness rankings, the US experienced severe COVID-19 outcomes due to fragmented federal response and delayed funding, exposing the need for rapid-response emergency funding mechanisms.<sup>1,2,8</sup>
- Congress should authorize a Federal Contingency Emergency Fund (FCEF) that deploys funding within 24 hours to early-response programs at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and state and local hospitals once key epidemiological thresholds are met.
- CDC epidemiologists would set these thresholds, adjusting for specific infectious disease and deciding using continuously reported case data from the National Notifiable Disease Surveillance System.<sup>12</sup>
- The Office of Management and Budget would determine and distribute a percentage of FCEF funds within 24 hours to the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response to support rapid disease containment programs.<sup>5,17,18,19,20</sup>

### Implementation

Congress should enact legislation to authorize and appropriate the FCEF.<sup>21</sup> However, securing congressional support for pre-authorized spending

mechanisms without direct oversight presents challenges. The FCEF would be pre-appropriated with automatic triggers, limiting Congress’s ability to debate and approve spending on a case-by-case basis—a central tenet of its “power of the purse” authority.<sup>22</sup> An automatic trigger would not require new congressional approval, thereby reducing direct oversight and raising concerns about the misuse or misallocation of funds. These challenges could be addressed with clear statutory language.

Congress can retain authority by including the following statute provisions:

1. To prevent underfunding and set clear spending limits, the statute can set a fixed initial congressional appropriation with a fund ceiling and capped automatic replenishments once funds fall below a defined threshold.
2. The statute can require a nonpartisan body of CDC epidemiologists to certify activation using evidence-based support from the NNDSS. Strengthened credibility in fund release would alleviate congressional concerns over misuse.
3. The statute can specify apportionment rules under which the OMB releases only a percentage of funds once triggered, which would allow Congress to prevent overspending and enforce budget discipline.
4. The statute may bind funds to broad categories such as surveillance, testing, and response, while allowing

ASPR to allocate funding to specific programs. General budget constraints would balance guardrails and accountability in fund allocation with ASPR's ability to respond to fast-changing outbreaks.

By embedding these safeguards in the statute, the FCEF addresses concerns about oversight and fiscal discipline, thereby increasing its political feasibility and likelihood of bipartisan support.

Members of Congress serving on key committees, including the House Energy and Commerce Committee, the Senate HELP Committee, and both chambers' Appropriations Committees, would likely introduce and support the legislation.<sup>23</sup> Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), who championed the PREVENT Pandemics Act, and Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA), who most recently assembled a Republican working group on enhancing disease response in the CDC, are likely bipartisan supporters.<sup>24,25</sup> Congress has historically passed outbreak funding with bipartisan support, including the 2020 emergency COVID-19 funding bill.<sup>26</sup> The FCEF, by contrast, provides long-term financing but similarly relies on the context of COVID to generate support. Strong bipartisan precedent and key committee support would make passage of the FCEF politically feasible.

Existing systems, such as the Government Accountability Office, would continuously conduct independent audits year-round to evaluate whether the FCEF reduces the time between outbreak detection and fund disbursement, with an emphasis on the effectiveness of allocations to specific programs.<sup>27</sup>

The NNDSS and CDC would verify improvements in early response capacity and decreases in transmission and hospitalization rates. The long-term maintenance of the FCEF would minimize the effects of another pandemic on the US, as funding would flow directly to early-action programs to contain the outbreak.

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# Reducing Health Disparities Through a Health Equity Impact Review in Georgia

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*Georgia experiences severe racial and geographic health disparities, yet policymakers lack a formal mechanism to evaluate how legislation may worsen these inequities. Establishing a Health Equity Impact Review would ensure laws promote equitable health outcomes.*

## Background

Georgia faces persistent health disparities across racial, geographic, and socioeconomic lines, with racial inequities representing some of the most severe health gaps in the state. Black women in Georgia are more than twice as likely to die from pregnancy-related causes as White women, reflecting one of the largest maternal health disparities in the United States.<sup>1</sup> These disparities extend beyond maternal health outcomes; Black residents experience disproportionately higher rates of chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease compared to White residents, contributing to higher rates of preventable illness and premature mortality.<sup>2</sup>

These disparities begin early in life. Georgian Black infants are more than twice as likely to die before their first birthday compared to White infants.<sup>3</sup> Public health researchers attribute these inequities to structural determinants of health, including unequal healthcare access, economic inequality, environmental exposures, and long-standing patterns of residential segregation.<sup>4</sup> Policies shaping housing, environmental conditions, transportation access, and economic opportunity all influence these determinants and ultimately affect population health outcomes.

Geographic disparities further compound these inequities. Many rural communities in Georgia face limited access to healthcare due to hospital closures, provider shortages, and transportation barriers.<sup>5</sup> These geographic challenges frequently overlap with racial and socioeconomic disparities, as many rural counties in Georgia have large Black populations and high poverty rates.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the communities experiencing the greatest healthcare access barriers often face the highest burden of chronic disease and preventable illness.

Despite these challenges, Georgia currently lacks a formal legislative mechanism requiring policymakers to evaluate how proposed laws may affect health equity.<sup>7</sup> Without such tools, legislation across sectors may unintentionally worsen disparities or create new barriers to health for vulnerable communities.

## Policy Idea

To address this gap, the Georgia General Assembly should establish a Health Equity Impact Review requirement for major state legislation. This policy would require certain categories of bills to undergo a two-to-four-week analysis within the legislative calendar, evaluating potential impacts on population health and

disparities before final legislative consideration, called the Health Equity Impact Review (HEIR).

A small analytical unit housed within the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) would conduct the HEIR. Using public health datasets, demographic indicators, and peer-reviewed research, the unit would evaluate how proposed legislation influences key determinants of health. The review would remain advisory rather than regulatory, meaning it would not prevent legislation from advancing through the legislative process. However, if a review identifies significant disparities, the bill's sponsor(s) would be required to submit a written response explaining how the legislation addresses the identified risks and why the policy should proceed despite them.

## Policy Analysis

Governments across the US have implemented Health Impact Assessments (HIAs), which serve as the model for this proposal, to evaluate the impact of policy decisions on population health.<sup>8,9</sup> Research from the National Academies of Sciences finds that HIAs help policymakers anticipate unintended health consequences, improve cross-sector collaboration, and incorporate public health evidence into policy design.<sup>9</sup> A

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found changes in 11 of 23 cases, and low costs between \$10,000 and \$150,000.<sup>8,9,10</sup> By evaluating health effects before implementation, these assessments allow governments to identify disparities earlier and reduce negative impacts.

California's Health in All Policies Task Force demonstrates how equity-focused, cross-sector policymaking can address structural drivers of health disparities by integrating health considerations across sectors, highlighting the need for Georgia to adopt a similar approach. The Health Equity Impact Review would function similarly to existing legislative tools, such as fiscal impact statements, informing lawmakers while preserving legislative authority. Like fiscal analyses, health equity reviews would provide legislators with evidence to guide decision-making while preserving legislative authority. Similar approaches have been implemented in California through the Health in All Policies Task Force, an initiative that integrates health into policymaking across sectors.<sup>9,11</sup> This has influenced cross-sector policymaking by integrating health considerations into areas such as transportation, housing, and environmental planning, influencing over \$4 billion and reaching more than 400 communities.<sup>12</sup>

Requiring bill sponsors to address identified disparities would further strengthen the policy's effectiveness by increasing transparency and accountability in the legislative process. This requirement ensures that health equity considerations are formally acknowledged during policymaking

without imposing significant regulatory burdens.

By integrating public health expertise into the legislative process, Georgia could better anticipate unintended health consequences and design policies that promote healthier and more equitable communities.

### Highlights

- Georgia's policymaking process rarely evaluates how legislation affects health equity, particularly in sectors such as housing, transportation, and economic development, allowing policies to unintentionally worsen inequities.<sup>4,5,6,7</sup>
- The Georgia General Assembly, in conjunction with the Georgia Department of Public Health, will require Health Equity Impact Reviews for major legislation, ensuring lawmakers assess health equity impacts before enactment to address disparities
- Modeled after Health Impact Assessments, these reviews have been shown to influence policy outcomes, with a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention evaluation finding changes in 11 of 23 cases and typical costs ranging from \$10,000 to \$150,000.<sup>8,9,10</sup>
- Similar cross-sector approaches, such as California's Health in All Policies Task Force, demonstrate the feasibility of integrating health considerations into

policymaking across government sectors.<sup>11</sup>

### Implementation

The DPH, in collaboration with the Georgia General Assembly, would establish an HEIR process requiring select bills, particularly those affecting healthcare access, environmental regulation, housing, or economic policy, to undergo structured review before final committee or floor votes. The HEIR program would be housed within the DPH as a dedicated unit responsible for conducting analyses, coordinating interagency input, and publishing findings.

Implementation would occur through a phased rollout to ensure feasibility and minimize administrative burden. During the first year, the DPH would appoint a Director of Health Equity Impact Review, recruit a small interdisciplinary team of policy analysts and epidemiologists, and develop standardized review templates, screening criteria, and data protocols. The department would also convene an advisory group composed of public health experts, policymakers, and community stakeholders to guide implementation and ensure transparency. Key stakeholders—including public health experts, state agencies, community-based organizations, and representatives of disproportionately affected populations—would provide testimony and input to build public support, demonstrate urgency, and reinforce feasibility.

In the second phase (year two), the HEIR unit would pilot reviews on legislation with clear implications for health determinants. Reviews would occur

during the legislative process after bills are introduced but before final committee or floor votes. The HEIR unit would conduct reviews using existing public health data and evidence-based frameworks to assess potential impacts on vulnerable populations. Each review would produce a report outlining anticipated health effects, distributional impacts, and specific recommendations, such as mitigation strategies or policy modifications to reduce disparities. To promote accountability, bill sponsors would be required to submit formal, publicly available responses to identified risks during the legislative process before final committee or floor votes.

By the third year, the program would expand to a broader set of qualifying legislation based on predefined screening criteria, such as population impact or potential health risk, with timelines ensuring reviews do not delay legislative processes. The DPH would also publish annual reports summarizing findings, legislative responses, and trends in health-related policy impacts to increase transparency and inform stakeholders.

This implementation prioritizes cost-effectiveness by relying primarily on existing data and a small specialized team. Based on comparable HIA models, program costs are expected to remain modest relative to potential long-term savings from preventing adverse health outcomes and reducing disparities.<sup>8,9,10</sup> By identifying harmful policy impacts early, the review process can prevent increases in costly outcomes such as hospitalizations and emergency care utilization,

which are among the largest drivers of healthcare spending.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

Because the program relies on existing infrastructure and remains low-cost, it is unlikely to impose a significant administrative burden, addressing a key concern underlying potential political opposition. While some lawmakers may view the HEIR as an added hurdle, the review is advisory and fully integrated into existing legislative timelines, ensuring it does not slow the legislative process while minimizing additional burden on lawmakers.

By integrating health considerations into policymaking in a structured, transparent manner, this approach would allow Georgia to proactively address disparities, improve policy outcomes, and promote more equitable health across communities.

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