

Kolby Kolbet: Millions in rural communities vulnerable without action from Congress

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Of the 5,822,434 residents in Wisconsin, over [1.5 million](#) reside in rural communities. As providers of air ambulance services, at LifeLink III this is critical information. Many of the cases we take on originate in rural areas as they lack the number of medical facilities and a variety of health care resources that urban areas experience. We have to know how to best cater to these patients' needs given our duty of providing safe and *effective* air medical transport to those in our communities.

With the global health crisis, our mission has only intensified the demand for the vital transportation we provide. With so many in the state having issues accessing health care due to their rural location, COVID-19 has just further compromised the pre-existing lack of access. In all of Wisconsin, there are only 58 critical access hospitals and [100 rural health clinics](#). These medical facilities do not have unlimited resources, they are responsible for covering the varied health care needs of over one million people in the rural parts of Wisconsin.

Unfortunately, limited medical resources for rural communities is nothing new. Since 2010, [119 rural hospitals](#) have closed throughout the country, making it more difficult for rural residents to access medical care. Though only one of these hospital closures was in Wisconsin, rural residents in the state still face a gap in accessing the care they need due both to a lack of resources and their distance from care. Amidst a global pandemic, this is unacceptable and brings light to the necessity of air ambulance services. And pandemic or not, rural voters should have access to the same amount of medical resources as those in Milwaukee or Madison.

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Even though Wisconsin hasn't experienced the same degree of rural hospital closures as the rest of the country, the sheer lack of health providers in rural areas calls for the right method of assistance and aid to bridge this gap, not just during COVID-19 but always. The need for air ambulances has been prevalent for some time now but providing these services has been complicated by the current crisis. Air medical transport is expensive to operate and the consistent lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), price-gouged or otherwise, has been limiting the first responders on the frontlines of this crisis from doing their jobs as safely as possible. Additionally, the pandemic has added more strain to the health care system which calls for access to medical transportation.

Air ambulance staff and frontline workers must be well-equipped to respond to calls, ensuring they can continue providing for the rural communities they serve. PPE has been limited since the beginning of the crisis, we must ensure provisions are included in future legislation in Congress that provides PPE to not only all first responders, but EMS professional including air ambulance staff.

We need dedicated support from lawmakers like Sen. Ron Johnson to stand up for these essential needs. Having parents born and raised in rural communities and serving on the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation that oversees aviation gives the Senator the unique ability to rightfully advocate for the needs of residents in more remote regions of Wisconsin through the protection of air medical services.

LifeLink III has remained a reliable source of essential transportation to Wisconsin's rural communities even before the pandemic. We need to have strong support to be able to continue saving lives and work towards maintaining Wisconsin's rural residents' health despite their distance from urban centers.

- Kolby Kolbet is the Vice President of Clinical Services for LifeLink III. LifeLink III provides safe and effective air medical transportation in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and throughout the United States.