

Statewide offices: Ag commissioner

For my next column to describe the important statewide races on the November 8 ballot and the Democratic vision for that office, I'll review the Texas Department of Agriculture.

The Texas Legislature established the TDA in 1907. The agency's key objectives are to promote production agriculture, consumer protection, economic development and healthy living. The agriculture commissioner oversees the agency and is elected every four years.

TDA's mission is to partner with all Texans to make Texas the nation's leader in agriculture, fortify our economy, empower rural communities, promote healthy lifestyles and cultivate winning strategies for rural, suburban and urban Texas through exceptional service and the common threads of agriculture in our daily lives.

Among other programs, the TDA includes the State Office of Rural Health, a rural hospital program, and has responsibility for rural economic development. Rural Texas cannot survive literally or economically without vast improvement to its healthcare system. Rural healthcare has been dying on the vine with more than two dozen hospitals closing in the last several years, resulting in Texas leading the nation in rural hospital closures since 2010 and 55 percent of the remaining rural hospitals



in danger of closing.

Rural Texas is older, less healthy with higher heart disease, cancer and respiratory disease rates, more prone to injuries, but less likely to be insured than urban Texas. Those with means will leave rural Texas as they age because of the lack of healthcare, taking with them their discretionary spending in the community. Democrats will turn rural healthcare around with strong leadership, effective analysis of the needs of rural Texas and the resources available to help, and the energy to find additional resources to fill the gaps.

First, Democrats will expand Medicaid. This would help rural Texas in two ways. The uninsured will get access to health care keeping those individuals healthy, working and productive.

Expanding Medicaid will also make rural hospitals more economically viable. When an uninsured person hits the ER, the hospital cuts the tab. The more insured people in a community, the more likely it is that community's hospital can pay its own bills and stay open. Medicaid is funded by our tax dollars. Refusing to expand Medicaid only ships our money off to

other states while short-changing Texans.

Second, Democrats will create more competition and options in the health insurance marketplace. Rural Texans have fewer health insurance options compared to their urban counterparts. Many rural counties have only one or at best two private health insurance carriers offering coverage.

Fewer health plans in rural areas mute competition and gives health plans a monopoly to set unaffordable, take-it-or-leave-it health insurance premiums. Health insurers can also pick and choose to operate only in urban counties, essentially redlining rural patients. Democrats will stop the redlining of rural patients.

Third, Democrats will promote a more robust healthcare workforce in rural Texas. We'll start by promoting health care education to rural kids who are more likely to work in rural areas after completing their education. We'll prioritize admissions to health care education programs for underrepresented rural and rural-interested students as they are most likely to practice in rural Texas once licensed. We'll support training programs for doctors set in rural Texas. If a doctor trains in the country, he or she will more likely stay to work in the country. TDA can tap into federal funds through the USDA to help local communities decide what

methods work best for that individual community.

Another important issue for TDA is cannabis reform. Thirty-seven states have full medical cannabis programs and 18 states have legalized cannabis, including New Mexico.

And the sky has not fallen in those states. Instead, these states see concrete benefits from drops in opioid deaths and public spending on prescription drugs, to an improved quality of life for those suffering from chronic pain or PTSD as they substitute cannabis for opioids and other prescription drugs with serious side effects.

While more and more states legalize around us, more and more cannabis products are coming across state borders. Meanwhile, Texas is missing out on significant economic development opportunities and tax revenues that could benefit all Texans. Democrats will lead the way on legalizing cannabis.

The last day to register to vote in the November election is October 11. Go to www.votetexas.gov to check your registration or to register to vote. For more information on statewide offices or to register to vote, call our office at 830-331-1243 or visit www.kodemo.us

Laura Bray is chair of the Kendall County Democratic Party. Susan Hays and the TDA contributed to this article.

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