THE AMERICAN MAINSPRING PROJECT

# The National Master Platform

Five promises, delivered by ten pillars - the complete set of policy briefs in one document.

Build what people need. Repair what no longer works. Make systems serve human life.

# Contents

PILLAR 1 · DEMOCRACY

# Easy to Participate In, Hard to Corrupt

A democracy easy to join, hard to buy, and strong enough to survive bad-faith power.

## Summary

A democracy has to do two jobs at the same time. It has to protect every citizen's right to take part, and it has to be hard for the powerful to corrupt. Right now ours does the reverse. It makes voting harder than it needs to be, lets gerrymandered maps and the Electoral College hand power to the side that lost the most votes, allows concentrated money to drown out ordinary citizens, and leaves the courts and the executive branch with too few guardrails against people who would abuse them. This brief is not a list of small fixes. It is a plan to make American democracy easy to join, hard to buy, and strong enough to survive people who would tear it down from the inside.

It proposes ten reforms: automatic voter registration at eighteen, secure and flexible verification, Election Day as a national holiday, real standards for polling access, protection against intimidation and economic coercion, fair representation through the National Popular Vote Compact and an end to gerrymandering, statehood for Washington, D.C. and self-determination for Puerto Rico, campaign finance reform that confronts Citizens United, ethics and term limits for the Supreme Court, and durable safeguards against authoritarian abuse. The lead reform is worth stating plainly, because its history makes it hard to dismiss as partisan. Universal voter registration was first put before Congress by a Democratic president from the South, Jimmy Carter, in 1977[1], and the first states to put automatic registration into practice through their motor vehicle agencies include Georgia, which did it under Republican officials.

## The Principle

There are two comfortable ways to be wrong about democracy. One says it is basically fine as long as the formal procedures still run, even when those procedures no longer produce equal representation or public trust. The other treats every safeguard and every verification as a trick. Both are wrong. A democracy should be easy to participate in, hard to corrupt, and able to deliver results. It is not only how we choose our leaders. It is how people govern the systems that shape their daily lives, and it has to actually work for them. A government that is easy to capture, easy to buy, and unable to deliver will not hold the public's faith for long, and a democracy that loses the public's faith does not stay a democracy. The reforms here are deliberately ambitious, because the threats are not modest and the small fixes have not met them.

## The System Failure

Start with access, because it is the most basic. Across the country, registration is made unnecessarily hard, polling places close and consolidate in the places that can least afford long lines, and a wave of state laws over the past several years has compressed early and absentee voting and added new burdens that fall hardest on lower-income voters and voters of color. None of this makes elections more secure. It makes them harder to take part in, which is the point of it.

The deeper damage is structural. Partisan gerrymandering lets mapmakers choose their voters instead of the other way around. The Electoral College and the malapportionment of power regularly let the candidate who lost the popular vote take office. The Supreme Court's 2013 decision in Shelby County v. Holder disabled the part of the Voting Rights Act that had blocked discriminatory voting changes before they took effect. Citizens United opened the door to unlimited and often hidden money. The Court itself operates with no enforceable ethics code while its public standing falls. And the last several years have shown how quickly a determined leader can bend public agencies to personal ends, intimidate civil servants, and stretch emergency powers. These are not failures of too little procedure. They are the failures of a democracy that has become too easy to corrupt and too weak to defend itself.

It is worth noting what works, because the strongest reform in this brief has already been tested, in red states and blue, and measured. Georgia, under Republican officials, began automatically registering eligible citizens through its motor vehicle agency in 2016, and the share of eligible Georgians registered climbed from 78 percent to 98 percent by 2020[2], nearly doubling the state's rate of new registrations. Oregon, the first state to pass the law, quadrupled its rate of new registrations at the DMV and registered roughly 116,000 people who would otherwise likely never have registered at all.[3] Across the first eight jurisdictions to adopt it, automatic registration signed up about 2.2 million new voters in just a few years, with registration gains ranging from 9 to 94 percent across states of every size and both parties.[4] Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia now run some form of it, adopted with strong bipartisan support in states as different as West Virginia, Vermont, and Georgia. The tools to fix this exist. What has been missing is the will to use them everywhere.

## The Proposal

The Constitution gives Congress real authority over federal elections and real power to enforce the Reconstruction Amendments, and states and localities run the machinery. This brief proposes ten reforms across those levels.

1. **Automatic voter registration at eighteen.** Turning eighteen should mean full participation in American democracy, with every eligible citizen registered automatically and issued a registration card. The burden of navigating a confusing system should not fall on the citizen. This is not a fringe idea. It was first proposed by a U.S. president, it has been put into practice by states under both parties, and where it has been tried it has pushed registration toward universal. It should be the national standard. The evidence also answers the question of who this reaches, and the answer is the people the current system misses most. Oregon's data showed automatic registrants were disproportionately young, more rural, from lower-income and less-educated areas, and from more Latino areas than traditional registrants, which means the reform did not just grow the rolls, it made the electorate more representative of the actual public. And it cleans the rolls as it grows them: with roughly one in eight registrations nationwide outdated or inaccurate, a system that updates automatically at every DMV visit is an accuracy reform as much as an access reform, which is why election officials of both parties tend to like it once they run it.

2. **Secure, flexible verification.** Voting should be secure and accessible at once. A voter should be able to confirm eligibility with a registration card, a government ID, or a registration card paired with reasonable proof of name and address. The goal is to keep safeguards from hardening into barriers.
3. **Election Day as a national holiday.** Whether a person can vote should not depend on having a flexible job, paid time off, childcare, or an understanding employer. Make Election Day a national holiday, close nonessential federal services, and require or support paid time to vote, with help for small businesses. No one should have to choose between a paycheck and a ballot.
4. **Real standards for polling access.** No citizen should face hours in line or an inaccessible polling place because of where they live. Federal standards should guarantee enough locations, real accessibility, language assistance, early voting, and mail voting. A long line is not a sign of civic enthusiasm. It is a sign that the system failed.
5. **Protection against intimidation and economic coercion.** No employer, landlord, or powerful institution should be able to use economic pressure to dictate how a person votes. People and organizations are free to argue for their views. They are not free to threaten someone's job, housing, or livelihood over a ballot. The rule is written to protect speech while prohibiting coercion and retaliation.
6. **Fair representation.** Every vote should carry equal weight. Advance the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, end partisan gerrymandering through independent redistricting, allow proportional or multi-member districts where they fit, and restore the Voting Rights Act's protections. The Electoral College and gerrymandered maps routinely convert a minority of the votes into a majority of the power, and a serious democracy should not treat that as normal.
7. **Statehood and self-determination.** People who live under American law deserve a vote in writing it. Washington, D.C. should become a state, and Puerto Rico should be given a binding process of self-determination that Congress commits in advance to honor, including statehood if its people choose it. Equal citizenship cannot mean a permanent second-class political status.
8. **Campaign finance and anti-corruption reform.** Public office should not be for sale. Confront Citizens United through a constitutional amendment or structural limits, expand public financing, strengthen disclosure, restrict dark money, and enforce anti-corruption law. There will always be money in politics. Concentrated wealth should not be allowed to drown out everyone else.

9. **Ethics and term limits for the Supreme Court.** Courts must be independent, but independence is not the same thing as having no accountability at all. Put in place enforceable ethics and recusal rules, regularize appointments, and adopt staggered, long terms for the justices. The aim is not to capture the Court. It is to keep it from becoming an unaccountable political institution.
10. **Safeguards against authoritarian abuse.** Democracy has to be protected from capture. Build durable safeguards against the abuse of executive power, loyalty tests that replace expertise, political retaliation through public agencies, the intimidation of civil servants, and the use of public power for private revenge. A free government needs rules strong enough to survive a bad-faith leader.

## Privacy Is a Democratic Safeguard

Surveillance belongs in this brief because a democracy where the government or anyone with a checkbook can assemble a citizen’s complete life is a democracy with a standing vulnerability. The position: a comprehensive federal privacy law with data minimization and real enforcement; closing the data-broker loophole by requiring a warrant for government purchase of location and communications data it would otherwise need a warrant to collect; strict limits on facial recognition and biometric surveillance in public spaces, with bans on their use against protected speech and assembly; and the authoritarian-abuse safeguards of this brief extended to the surveillance stack, because the machinery built for convenience is the machinery a bad-faith leader inherits. The platform practices what it proposes: this site runs no trackers, and its privacy page is written in plain language.

## Implementation Pathway

Most of this agenda runs through Congress: automatic registration standards, the Election Day holiday, polling and verification standards, restored Voting Rights Act protections, anti-coercion law, campaign finance reform, statehood, the Puerto Rico process, and judicial ethics and term limits. The honest obstacle is the Senate filibuster, which has buried versions of this agenda before, so filibuster reform and patient coalition-building are part of the work rather than a footnote. The National Popular Vote Compact moves a different way, state by state, and takes effect once states holding a majority of electoral votes have joined. Independent redistricting, expanded early and mail voting, registration modernization, and state-level public financing are state choices, and accessible polling, language access, and the recruitment of election workers are local ones. This is not only a Washington project. It has to be built everywhere people meet their government.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

Most of this costs very little. Automatic registration runs through systems states already operate, and it tends to save money by keeping voter rolls accurate. The Election Day holiday, polling standards, and verification are administrative. The structural reforms are mostly questions of rules, not spending. The one real expense, public financing of elections, is modest set against the prize, which is a politics less owned by concentrated money. The return is the foundation the rest of this platform stands on. A democracy that is easy to join, hard to buy, and able to deliver is what makes it possible to win and hold everything else, from housing to health care to fair markets. That is why this pillar comes first.

## Risks and Guardrails

One honesty requirement, so the claim never outruns the evidence: automatic registration is proven to grow and clean the rolls, but registration is not the same as turnout. People registered automatically vote at lower rates than people who registered themselves, partly because they skew younger, and the research finds the turnout gain is real but more modest than the registration gain, enough new registrants vote that overall participation rises, but the effect is measured in points, not landslides. So the case for the reform rests where the evidence puts it: equal access, representative rolls, accuracy, and lower administrative cost, with a modest turnout dividend on top. That is a strong case. It does not need inflation, and inflating it hands opponents the only rebuttal they have.

Access and security are not opposites, and the verification reform here is built to deliver both, with auditable, transparent systems. The anti-coercion rule has to draw a clear line between protected argument and actual threats or retaliation; it targets coercion, not opinion. Court reform has to be built around ethics, legitimacy, and regularity rather than partisan revenge, because term limits and ethics rules strengthen the institution while packing it for advantage would wreck it. And none of this works on paper alone. Registration, mail and early voting, polling standards, and election security all require funding, staffing, and administration, and reform has to connect to delivery, so that people can see a working democracy improve their lives.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on participation, fairness, and trust.

- The share of eligible citizens registered and voting, and the gaps across race, age, and disability.
- Wait times and the rate at which absentee ballots are rejected, tracked for disparities. • How fairly district maps translate votes into seats, measured against partisan-skew benchmarks, and the gap between the popular vote and the result. • The share of campaign money that is small-dollar or publicly matched, set against the volume of dark money. • Adoption of judicial ethics and recusal rules, and public confidence in the courts. • Retention of election administrators and the number of threats made against them.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will call this a partisan power grab. The lead reform, automatic registration, was proposed by a president of one party and put into practice by officials of the other, and it is supported by a clear majority of Americans across the spectrum. The agenda is about equal citizenship, not advantage. If a fair process happens to favor one side, that is a fact about that side's appeal, not a reason to keep the process unfair. And the adoption record settles it. This reform was implemented under Republican officials in Georgia and passed with strong bipartisan votes in West Virginia and Vermont, and the registration gains showed up across party lines in every kind of state. A policy Republicans adopted and Democrats championed, that grows the rolls and cleans them at once, is not a power grab. It is the rare election reform with a track record instead of a talking point. Some will say that ending the Electoral College or adding states rigs the system. Counting every vote equally is the opposite of rigging. The National Popular Vote Compact simply means the candidate with the most votes wins, and statehood for D.C. and self-determination for Puerto Rico extend representation to citizens who already pay taxes and obey the law without a vote in Congress. Some will say that term limits and ethics rules attack judicial independence. Independence and unaccountability are not the same thing. Enforceable ethics, recusal standards, and regular, staggered terms are how serious institutions hold their legitimacy, and they strengthen the Court rather than bend it to a party. And some will say you cannot get money out of politics. The aim is not to remove money but to stop concentrated wealth from drowning out everyone else, which is exactly what public financing and disclosure are built to do.

## Legal Pathways and Risks

Democracy reforms get litigated, so this brief states its legal theory in advance: which power each plank runs on, where the courts are likely to push back, and what the fallback is. Pretending these questions away is how reforms die in year three.

**The voting floor (planks 1 through 4).** Congress's power over the times, places, and manner of congressional elections is broad and directly stated in the Constitution's Elections Clause, and it is the settled basis of the motor-voter law the Supreme Court has enforced. So automatic registration, verification standards, early and mail voting floors, and polling-access requirements are written to federal elections, where the authority is strongest; in practice states run one registration system, so the floor carries. Extending mandates to purely state and local elections rests on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment enforcement powers, which the current Court reads narrowly, so the design does not depend on that reach.

**Restoring the Voting Rights Act (plank 6).** The John Lewis Act rebuilds the preclearance coverage formula that Shelby County v. Holder struck down in 2013, using current data because that was the Court's stated objection. It will be tested before the same Court that decided Shelby and narrowed Section 2 in Brnovich, and this platform does not pretend otherwise. The fallback is the unglamorous one: litigation under what remains of Section 2, disclosure, and the federal-election floor above, which does not depend on preclearance.

**Anti-coercion (plank 5).** Federal law already criminalizes voter intimidation; this plank extends the logic to economic retaliation by employers and landlords. It is drafted against conduct, threats and retaliation, never against speech or persuasion, which is what lets it survive First Amendment review.

**Fair representation (plank 6).** Rucho v. Common Cause closed the federal courts to partisan-gerrymandering claims in 2019, which is exactly why the remedy here is structural rather than judicial: independent commissions, which the Court upheld when created by initiative in the Arizona redistricting case, and statutory options for multi-member or proportional districts in congressional elections, which sit on the same Elections Clause authority as everything else. The National Popular Vote compact is the honestly uncertain one: whether it requires congressional consent under the Compact Clause is an open question scholars split on, litigation at the moment it takes effect is certain, and the fallbacks are stated, seek congressional consent to cure the defect, or continue the state-by-state work the compact requires anyway.

**Statehood (plank 7).** Congress admits states by simple statute and has done so thirty-seven times. The real complication for D.C. is the Twenty-Third Amendment, which would leave three electoral votes attached to the shrunken federal district; an honest statehood bill pairs admission with repeal or statutory neutralization of that remnant, and expects litigation either way. Puerto Rico's binding process is statutory start to finish.

**Money in politics (plank 8).** The brief already splits this honestly: disclosure survives current precedent, the Citizens United decision itself upheld disclosure eight to one; voluntary public financing is constitutional; anti-corruption enforcement is statutory. Spending limits on independent expenditures do not survive current precedent, which is why the brief says amendment or structural limits rather than promising a statute the courts have already rejected.

**The Supreme Court (plank 9).** Enforceable ethics and recusal rules extend a statute that already binds the justices on paper, and regularizing appointments is statutory. Term limits are the contested piece: the senior-status design, where justices rotate to other duties after eighteen years, is defended by serious scholars and doubted by others under the good-behavior clause, so the honest statement is that statute is the fast route with real constitutional risk, and amendment is the certain route on a slower clock. The plank's aim, staggered long terms, can be pursued on both tracks at once.

**Safeguards against abuse (plank 10).** Almost entirely statutory and squarely within Congress's power: civil-service protections, inspector-general independence, vacancy-law reform, and emergency-powers limits. The real risk is not constitutionality but enforcement against a hostile executive, which is why the designs favor automatic mechanisms, protected independent officials, and court-enforceable rights over norms that depend on goodwill.

## What Would Change Our Position

Automatic registration earns its place from measured results, so results could take it away: if AVR states began producing documented noncitizen registration at meaningful rates, or sustained roll-integrity failures that manual systems avoid, the plank would need rework rather than defense. If ranked-choice or open-primary systems showed persistent ballot-error rates concentrated among low-income or elderly voters, adoption would slow until design fixed it. And if courts foreclose the statutory route to a federal right to vote, the honest fallback is the amendment path, stated as the longer road it is. What would not change the position: turnout effects staying modest, which the brief already concedes; registration is the gate, not the guarantee.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. A democracy should be easy to join, hard to buy, and strong enough to survive people who would abuse it. Right now ours is close to the opposite. So register every American at eighteen, the way it has already been done in red states and blue. Make Election Day a holiday. Stop bosses and landlords from leaning on your vote. Count every vote equally. Get the dark money out, put real ethics on the Supreme Court, and give the citizens of D.C. and Puerto Rico the representation they are owed. None of this is radical. It is just what a democracy is supposed to be.

## Footnotes

1. President Carter's 1977 election reform message to Congress (American Presidency Project) ↩

2. Center for Election Innovation & Research on Georgia's automatic voter registration ↩

3. Center for American Progress analysis of Oregon's first-in-the-nation AVR rollout (advocacy-adjacent analysis of state data) ↩

4. Brennan Center for Justice, "AVR Impact on State Voter Registration" (democracy-reform advocacy organization; figures from state registration records) ↩

PILLAR 2 · GOVERNMENT

# No Bigger by Habit, No Smaller by Ideology

A government sized to its mission, capable enough to build, and judged by whether it delivers.

## Summary

The argument about whether government should be big or small is the wrong argument. The right question is whether it works for the people it is supposed to serve. Government should be mission-sized: no bigger out of habit, no smaller out of ideology, strong where public capacity is necessary, limited where power could be abused, and accountable everywhere. And it should be capable, because a government can be sized correctly on paper and still fail if it cannot decide, cannot execute, and never reviews what it is already doing.

This brief proposes five things aimed at both failures at once: a National Government Maintenance Act that puts every major program on a regular review schedule, a fix for the vetocracy that gives people a voice without giving every objection a veto, public capacity built through staffing and modern systems rather than bloat, a Tax Code Public Value Test applied to the roughly $2.2 trillion a year (FY2025) that moves through the tax code unexamined, and a government responsive enough to be judged on delivery, with the workers who deliver protected through every change.

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## The Principle

The argument about whether government should be big or small is the wrong argument. The right question is whether it works for the people it is supposed to serve. Government should be mission-sized: no bigger out of habit, no smaller out of ideology, strong where public capacity is necessary, limited where power could be abused, and accountable everywhere.

But being the right size is not enough. A government can be sized correctly on paper and still fail, because it cannot execute, cannot move, and never reviews what it is already doing. So this pillar is about capability. Capable means it has the people, the tools, and the authority to do hard things. Nimble means someone is actually in charge, can use the power the law already grants, and can decide without waiting years for permission. We have spent a long time arguing about size while letting capability decay. This is about rebuilding it.

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## The System Failure

America used to build. It built the world’s greatest rail network, a national electrical grid, the interstate highways, Social Security, the Apollo program. Today, on the things that touch people every day, housing, clean energy, transit, we feel stuck. The failure has two layers, and they sit on top of each other.

The first is that we have quietly made it almost impossible to decide anything. Over the past half century, in a well-intentioned reaction against the abuses of unchecked power, we diffused the authority to act, pushing it down and out, until we built what Marc Dunkelman calls a vetocracy: a thicket of overlapping reviews, court challenges, and local veto points in which nearly anyone can stop a project and no one is truly empowered to move it forward. We have, in his phrase, so many checks that no one is actually in charge. A broadly beneficial project can be killed by a handful of narrow objections, and the result is a government that looks powerful on paper and is paralyzed in practice. This is not an abstraction. Full federal environmental impact statements take about four and a half years on average, highway reviews over seven, with some stretching past two decades, and the mere risk of years of delay and litigation shapes what gets attempted at all. The honest version matters here, because credibility depends on it: fewer than one percent of these reviews are full statements, most projects clear far faster, and the government wins most of the lawsuits. The problem is not that we review everything to death. It is that the biggest, most important projects, the transmission lines, the rail, the clean energy, are exactly the ones that get caught, and the cost of a single six-year delay across the major infrastructure sectors has been estimated in the trillions.

The second failure is that even when we decide to build, we often cannot execute, because we have hollowed out the public capacity to manage the work. Look at California high-speed rail. It was sold to voters in 2008 at $33 billion, with trains running by 2020. Today the estimate runs between $128 and $231 billion, as much as seven times the promise, roughly $15.7 billion has been spent over sixteen years, and not one mile of high-speed track has been laid. Some of that is the vetocracy, the land that could not be assembled, the utilities that could not be relocated, the review conducted before the route was even chosen, the two full weeks the project was halted because a vehicle struck an endangered snake. But much of it is raw capacity failure: the state broke ground in 2012 with the design only fifteen percent complete, before it owned the land or finalized the route, partly to hit a federal spending deadline, and it managed the contracts and the risk so poorly that the overruns were, in the state auditor's word, predictable. Neither failure is solved by the old fight over size. A bigger version of a government that cannot decide or execute is not the answer, and neither is a smaller version that has been starved of the people who do the work.

There is a counter-example, and it comes from a Republican-led suburb of Atlanta. Sandy Springs incorporated in 2005 as Georgia's first new city in decades, and with only months to stand up a government from nothing, it outsourced nearly everything but police and fire, one giant contract covering public works, finance, courts, parks, and IT. For years it was the world's most famous experiment in privatized government. Then the market changed, the bids came in high, and in 2019 the same city ran the numbers and brought most of those services back in-house, projecting about $13.5 million in savings over five years. By the city's own accounting, the actual savings came in near $26 million, almost double the estimate. The lesson is not that outsourcing is wrong or that public delivery is sacred. It is that Sandy Springs did exactly what this pillar demands of the whole federal government: it treated the structure of government as a tool rather than a creed, measured what delivered, and changed course when the evidence said to. Outsourcing served a startup city that needed a government in months. Insourcing won when the vendors stopped delivering value. No bigger by habit, no smaller by ideology, proven in one Georgia city's own books.

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## The Proposal

Five things, aimed at both failures at once.

1. **Maintain what we run. Pass a National Government Maintenance Act.** Create a regular, scheduled review of the major parts of the federal government: large programs, agency functions, regulations, tax preferences, subsidies, grant systems, and the public-facing processes people actually deal with. The standard is simple. If a program works, strengthen it. If it is outdated, modernize it. If it duplicates another, consolidate it. If it mainly produces paperwork or protects a narrow interest, phase it out. Nothing today forces this honest look, so the default is always to add and never to trim. Maintenance is not an attack on government. It is how anything built to last gets cared for.

2. **Fix the vetocracy. Give people a voice, not a veto.** This is the reform the standard platform ducks, and it is the one that unlocks the build agenda, the climate agenda, and the housing agenda all at once. The goal is a system where someone is clearly in charge of a decision, holds a real mandate, weighs the trade-offs in the open, and is accountable for the result, rather than a process where authority is so scattered that no one can be blamed and nothing can move. Concretely: name a lead decision-maker for major projects, consolidate overlapping federal reviews into a single process on a firm schedule, set enforceable deadlines, and preserve public input and fair compensation while ending the ability of any single objector to impose years of delay. The line to hold is exact. People should have a voice. They should not have a permanent veto over projects their own communities and the country need.

   And because “voice, not veto” can be gamed from either direction, dressed up as deregulation by industry or denounced as deregulation by opponents, this platform states the test as a rule any permitting reform must pass, all six parts, before it earns support here:

First, even-handed coverage: the same fast, certain process applies to transmission, housing, transit, clean generation, and fossil projects alike; a reform that fast-tracks one category while leaving procedural weapons aimed at the others is industrial policy wearing reform's clothes, and it fails. Second, deadlines, not lowered standards: the reform binds the calendar, decisions within firm timelines, consolidated reviews, one lead agency, while leaving the substantive environmental, safety, and labor standards themselves intact; speed comes from process, never from weakening what a project must actually meet. Third, input early, standardized, and time-capped: communities get real notice, real hearings, and a written response to substantive objections at the front of the process, in exchange for finality at the back; the trade is genuine participation for an end to participation-as-attrition. Fourth, judicial review bounded, not abolished: challenges get filed within a short statute of limitations, resolved on an expedited track, and remedies default to fix-the-defect rather than start-over, so courts still catch real illegality without becoming the delay mechanism of first resort. Fifth, the harms that concentrate get weighed where they land: cumulative local burdens, on the communities that have historically absorbed everyone else's infrastructure, are assessed and mitigated or compensated as part of the decision, and tribal consultation and treaty obligations are a floor no streamlining touches, because a nation-to-nation obligation is not a procedural delay. Sixth, who decides is written down: the distinction between legitimate harm and obstruction is made by the accountable lead decision-maker, in a published decision responding to the record, appealable on the bounded track above, not by whoever can outlast whom.

Applied honestly, this test cuts both ways, and that is the point. It is the standard by which this platform supports permitting reform for clean energy and housing, and the standard by which it opposes the fossil-industry version that fast-tracks pipelines while leaving everything else stuck. One test, every project, no exceptions for anyone's favorites, including ours.

3. **Build public capacity, not bloat.** The reason big projects run over is very often that the public side lacked the skilled people to manage them, the reviewers, engineers, scientists, planners, and project managers whose absence is the real bottleneck, and the modern digital systems that staff and citizens have to use. Give agencies enough of those people, fix the hiring and procurement systems that make it hard to bring them in, and modernize the technology. This is not a larger government for its own sake. It is competence, which is usually a question of staffing and skill rather than raw size. And it is the rare spending that pays for itself, because the alternative is the California pattern, projects that run billions over because no one on the public side could manage them well.

4. **Make every tax break earn its keep. Apply a Tax Code Public Value Test.** The country spends roughly $2.2 trillion a year (FY2025) through the tax code, in deductions, credits, preferential rates, exemptions, and carveouts, a sum on the order of all federal discretionary spending combined, and almost none of it is ever reviewed. Lawmakers created or modified dozens of these preferences in a single recent year alone. Every major one should have to answer a plain question: what public value does this create? Does it support work, family stability, housing supply, clean energy, domestic production, research, retirement security, small business, or mobility, or does it mainly reward those who can afford the lawyers to find it? Preferences that serve a real public purpose stay and are strengthened. The rest are reformed or ended. This is one of the strongest tools available for fiscal honesty, and it belongs both here and in the fair-markets agenda.

5. **Be responsive, and protect the workers who deliver.** Much of responsive government needs no new law. It needs leadership that uses the authority it already has, sets clear delivery goals, and is judged against them, and it means letting routine paperwork be automated so public servants can spend their time on judgment and on people. AI should handle the paperwork. People should make the decisions. And when programs are consolidated, digitized, or phased out, workers should be retrained and redeployed into the mission areas that are short-staffed, with their benefits and standing protected, rather than fired at random. Frontline workers should help design the changes, because they usually understand the system’s real failures better than anyone above them.

## Implementation Pathway

The Maintenance Act, the Tax Code Public Value Test, and the worker-protection framework are federal statutes. The vetocracy reforms run partly through statute, consolidating reviews, setting deadlines, naming lead agencies, and partly through the same permitting and transmission reforms in the build and climate pillars, since this is the shared machinery underneath all of them. The capacity investments and digital modernization run through appropriations, where the staffing that determines whether government can execute is actually decided. And much of responsive government requires no new law at all, only an administration that uses existing authority well and lets itself be measured on delivery. That part can begin immediately.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

This pillar tends to save money rather than spend it. Regular maintenance catches the waste, duplication, and obsolete programs that would otherwise run forever. The Tax Code Public Value Test recovers revenue lost to preferences that serve no public purpose, out of a pool of roughly $2.2 trillion a year (FY2025) that goes almost entirely unexamined. Fixing the vetocracy saves the enormous sums lost to delay, where a single multi-year holdup on major infrastructure can cost more than the reform ever would. And capacity investment is the rare spending that pays for itself, because understaffing is precisely why large projects run over budget and behind schedule. A capable, decisive government is cheaper over time than a cheap one that cannot deliver.

## Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is the one history warns about most loudly. A generation ago, unchecked builders like Robert Moses bulldozed neighborhoods and displaced the powerless, and the reaction against that abuse is what built the vetocracy in the first place. So “voice, not veto” cannot become a license to return to the bulldozer. The guardrail is precise: input, transparency, environmental protection, and fair compensation all remain, and what is removed is only the ability of a narrow interest to impose indefinite delay. The goal is a middle ground between one person deciding everything and no one able to decide anything.

The second risk is that an efficiency drive becomes a cover for gutting services people depend on, which is why the standard here is strengthen what works, not cut for its own sake, why the review must be honest rather than ideological, and why worker protection is written in. The third is that a maintenance process gets captured, so it must be insulated to serve the public rather than whichever interest most wants a given program kept or killed. And responsiveness must stay inside the law, because using authority well is not the same as stretching it past its limits.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on delivery, capacity, and honesty.

- Time to deliver core services and decisions, benefits, permits, approvals, and the backlog in each, tracked toward months rather than years.
- Programs reviewed on schedule, and the share modernized, consolidated, or ended as a result.
- Revenue and waste recovered through the Tax Code Public Value Test.
- Project delivery against cost and timeline, and the staffing and skills in the roles that determine whether projects move.
- Permitting and review timelines for major projects, and the share completed within their deadlines.
- Public trust that government can act and deliver, measured over time.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say this is a quiet plan to cut government. It is the opposite. The standard is to strengthen what works and modernize what is outdated, worker protection is written in, and a program is only ended when it has stopped serving a public purpose, in the open. Maintenance is how you keep public institutions strong, not how you dismantle them.

Some will say government simply cannot be made to move quickly. It moved quickly for most of the twentieth century, when it built the highways and the grid, and it moves quickly today where it has capacity and where someone is clearly in charge. It stalls where authority has been scattered and where no one is accountable for delivery. Fix those two things and it can act.

Some will say government cannot solve big problems at all anymore. The ozone layer says otherwise. When scientists showed that refrigerant chemicals were tearing a hole in the sky, governments regulated them, every country on Earth ratified the Montreal Protocol, and industry innovated its way to substitutes. Nearly 99 percent of the banned chemicals are gone from production, the ozone layer is on track to heal fully within decades, and the EPA's own accounting projects the treaty will prevent 443 million skin cancer cases and 2.3 million skin cancer deaths in the United States alone. That is what delivery looks like: a planetary problem, identified by science, fixed by regulation, solved within a lifetime. And government can deliver at speed as well as at scale. Operation Warp Speed, launched under a Republican administration and carried through under a Democratic one, put more than $10 billion behind vaccine candidates, guaranteed the purchases, ran trial and manufacturing stages in parallel instead of in sequence, and produced safe, effective vaccines in about eleven months against a process that normally takes a decade.[1] Independent modeling credits the vaccination program with averting 3.2 million American deaths[2] and 18.5 million hospitalizations in its first two years. The failure of some programs is an argument for maintenance, not for surrender.

Some will say "voice, not veto" tramples communities. No. Input, compensation, and environmental protection all stay. What ends is the power of a single objector to hold a needed project hostage for years. The alternative to a permanent veto is not a bulldozer, it is a fair process that actually reaches a decision, and the people most failed by paralysis are usually the ones who most needed the housing or the transit that never got built.

Some will say the Tax Code Public Value Test is a tax hike in disguise. It is a test, not a hike. Preferences that create real public value are kept and strengthened. Asking the rest to justify themselves, out of $2.2 trillion a year (FY2025) that no one currently reviews, is not raising taxes. It is ending subsidies that no longer serve the public.

## What Would Change Our Position

The voice-not-veto trade is falsifiable on both sides. If streamlined review demonstrably produced the harms the old process existed to catch, environmental damage, safety failures, or projects steamrolled through vulnerable communities, the guardrails were drawn wrong and get redrawn before anything else advances. If maintenance reviews started functioning as stealth cuts, ending programs that still served their purpose, the worker and purpose protections failed and the tool gets rebuilt. And the structure-as-tool principle cuts both ways by design: where outsourcing beats public delivery on evidence, as insourcing beat outsourcing in Sandy Springs, this platform follows the evidence there too.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. Stop arguing about whether government should be big or small and start asking whether it works. Build it to the size of the job, no bigger out of habit and no smaller out of ideology, and then make it capable enough to actually deliver. Put someone in charge who can be held accountable, and give people a voice without giving every objection a veto, so we can build the housing and the clean energy and the transit the country needs. Staff the government to build and decide, and automate the paperwork so public servants can serve people. Review what we already do instead of letting it run forever on autopilot, and make every tax break prove it earns its keep. A government that can act, and that people can see acting, is the whole point.

## Footnotes

1. GAO, "Operation Warp Speed: Accelerated COVID-19 Vaccine Development" (GAO-21-319) ↩
2. Commonwealth Fund, modeled estimate of deaths and hospitalizations averted by the US COVID-19 vaccination program ↩

PILLAR 3 · HEALTHCARE

# Healthcare Should Follow People Through Life

Universal, comprehensive, affordable care as the standard - Medicare for All the clearest path, a Swiss-style bridge to get there - and the lead brief of a broader foundation.

## Summary

Healthcare is part of the basic infrastructure of a free life, and it should not depend on a person's job, wealth, age, or luck. The goal of this project is plain. Everyone covered, automatically, with coverage that follows you from job to job and year to year, care you can actually afford, and no family destroyed by medical debt. The end state is universal, comprehensive, and genuinely affordable healthcare: everyone covered for the full range of care - primary and preventive, mental health, dental and vision, maternal and reproductive, and long-term care - with no one priced out and no one bankrupted. Medicare for All - a single, publicly funded program covering everyone - is the clearest way to reach that standard, and the path this project favors; any universal system that truly meets the standard qualifies. Other wealthy countries reach universal coverage by several routes, single-payer like Canada, a national health service like Britain, and tightly regulated nonprofit multipayer like Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands; what they share is that everyone is covered, which is the standard, and the choice of vehicle is what this project holds open. Getting there from today's fragmented private system takes a bridge, and the clearest one is the Swiss model - everyone required to be covered, private insurers barred from profiting on basic care and required to accept all comers at community rates, and public subsidies so no one is priced out - which reaches universal coverage now, on structures we already have, and lays the foundation to move toward public, comprehensive care. What is not open to debate is the standard itself.

This is the lead brief of the Foundations of a Dignified Life, the pillar that treats healthcare, care, food security, education, and economic security as the ground on which freedom stands. Further foundation briefs will follow. Healthcare comes first because the failure is so visible and the cost of inaction so high: tens of millions uninsured, medical debt a major driver of financial distress, coverage that vanishes when someone changes jobs or gets sick, and rural hospitals closing across the country.

## The Principle

Healthcare should follow people through life. It should not disappear because someone changes jobs, starts a business, gets sick, ages, or happens to live in the wrong county. A right to care means nothing without a system that delivers it, so this project commits to universal, automatic, portable coverage and treats the standard as non-negotiable. Everyone covered. Coverage that travels with you. Care you can afford. Medical debt no longer a thing that ruins lives. Primary care, prevention, mental health, dental and vision care, reproductive and maternal care, care for children and people with disabilities, eldercare, rural healthcare, and public health are not extras to be bought if there is money left over. They are infrastructure, and a serious country builds them the way it builds roads.

## The System Failure

The American system already costs more than any other in the world and still leaves tens of millions without coverage and millions more a single illness away from financial ruin. The numbers are not close. The country spent $4.9 trillion on healthcare in 2023, $14,570 per person and 17.6 percent of the economy,[1] roughly double what comparable wealthy countries spend, and in the Commonwealth Fund's ten-country comparison the United States ranks last in overall health system performance while spending the most.[2] That money buys 27.1 million people no coverage at all, a number that rose by about a million in 2024,[3] and it leaves roughly 100 million adults carrying medical or dental debt, at least $220 billion of it.[4] A staggering share never reaches care in the first place: $812 billion a year, 34 percent of all health spending, goes to administration, about $2,500 per person against roughly $550 in Canada.[5] The question is not whether we can afford to cover everyone. It is whether we keep paying the way we do now, through premiums, deductibles, debt, untreated illness, and that administrative overhead, or build a system that simply covers people.

Several failures compound each other. Coverage is tied to employment, so losing or changing a job means losing care. In the states that declined to expand Medicaid, a coverage gap traps people who earn too much for traditional Medicaid and too little for subsidized insurance, and some of those states have spent real money on work-requirement programs that cost more to administer than they ever delivered in care.[6] Rural hospitals are closing across the country, taking maternity wards and emergency rooms with them,[7] and recent cuts threaten hundreds of millions more in rural-hospital revenue. The enhanced premium credits that made marketplace coverage affordable were allowed to lapse, and premiums jumped accordingly. Every one of these traces back to the same root. Coverage in America is conditional, fragmented, and easy to lose, when it should be universal and automatic.

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## The Proposal

The destination is universal coverage. The path runs through a national commitment and a set of immediate steps that get people covered along the way. This brief proposes six things.

1. **Commit to universal, comprehensive, affordable coverage.** Adopt the standard at the national level - covering primary and preventive care, mental health, dental and vision, and maternal care as core, not extras - and name the path. The comprehensive part is not decoration: traditional Medicare itself still excludes dental, hearing, and vision care, and the gap shows, with close to half of beneficiaries reporting difficulty hearing while only 8 percent used hearing services,[8] and out-of-pocket costs near $900 a year for those who do get dental or hearing care. Teeth, eyes, ears, and minds are part of the body; a system that covers everything below the neck and calls itself comprehensive is not. Medicare for All is the clearest destination and the one this project favors, though any universal system that meets the standard qualifies. The bridge is a Swiss-style universal system - a coverage requirement paired with regulated, nonprofit basic insurance and public subsidies - which reaches everyone now using the structures we already have, then moves toward public, comprehensive care. Judge every step by the same test: everyone covered, coverage that travels, comprehensive and affordable care, no medical-debt crisis, strong primary care, mental health, and rural capacity.

2. **Close the coverage gap.** As the immediate floor, create a federal route to coverage for the people stranded in the gap because their state declined to expand Medicaid, and strengthen the incentives for full expansion. No one should be uninsured because of a decision made in a state capitol they cannot control.
3. **Restore marketplace affordability.** Restore the enhanced premium tax credits that were allowed to lapse, since their expiration drove premiums up sharply and is projected to push large numbers of people off coverage. This is the most immediate lever available, because the price increase has already hit.
4. **Protect Medicaid and save rural hospitals.** Reverse the cuts threatening rural-hospital revenue, fund rural-hospital stabilization, and protect the coverage Medicaid provides, which in many places pays for a large share of births, of children's care, and of nursing-home care for seniors. Repeal the work-requirement mandate, using the documented record of those programs as the evidence that they function as paperwork barriers rather than work programs.
5. **Make primary care, mental health, and maternal care core.** Treat mental health as healthcare, expand primary and preventive care, and invest in maternal, reproductive, and pediatric care and in the rural workforce, so that having coverage actually means being able to reach care.
6. **Bring down the price of care.** Extend prescription-drug price negotiation, rein in the middlemen who mark up medicines, and ease the provider shortage through measures like debt relief for medical residents, so that universal coverage is also affordable coverage.

## Reproductive Healthcare Is Healthcare

This platform's standard is universal, comprehensive care, and comprehensive includes reproductive care, stated without euphemism. The position: codify the Roe-era floor in federal law, protect contraception and IVF explicitly, and treat abortion access as the health and economic question the evidence shows it is. The largest study of its kind, tracking women for years after they sought abortions, found that those denied care were four times more likely to fall below the poverty line and three times more likely to be unemployed, more likely to stay tethered to violent partners, with worse outcomes for their existing children, while receiving care produced none of the predicted harms. Restrictions are associated with higher maternal mortality, and the states with the tightest bans carry, on average, the weakest maternal supports, a combination this platform's maternal-care planks exist to answer. The same paragraph belongs to veterans, because the VA is this brief's standing proof that public delivery works: systematic reviews consistently find VA care as good as or better than non-VA care, and the housing-plus-services HUD-VASH program has helped cut veteran homelessness by more than half since 2010. Finish that job to zero, and extend to every American the quality of public care the country already delivers to those who served.

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## The Financing Design

Outside reviewers correctly said the financing rhetoric needed a design, so here it is, stated as mechanism with the rates left honestly to official scoring rather than invented for effect.

**The bridge design: maintenance of effort, converted.** Employers already pay enormous premiums; the bridge does not pretend that money away, it redirects it. Employers currently offering coverage convert what they now spend on premiums into a per-worker healthcare contribution at approximately their existing average outlay, which then phases over several years into a standard payroll-based contribution, so no employer faces a cliff and the money that already funds care keeps funding care. Employees' premium payments convert the same way, below their current average. Employers not offering coverage phase into the payroll contribution with a small-business exemption at the bottom. Public subsidies continue for those outside employment. This is the design that honors the binding constraint most directly, since most families' new contribution is calibrated against what they already pay in premiums and out-of-pocket costs, and it is the messiest to administer, which the platform accepts as the price of a transition that does not yank anyone's coverage.

**The end-state elements: wealth carries its share.** As the system matures toward the public program, the financing tilts progressive: a surtax on the highest incomes, and the closure of preferences that let large fortunes escape tax entirely, beginning with stepped-up basis at death, consistent with the platform's tax-work-no-harder-than-wealth doctrine. These are named as real taxes, per The Ledger's rules.

**What is deliberately not specified here:** the exact percentages. Rates set in a brief rather than scored in legislation are theater. The commitments that bind instead: the financing must demonstrate, against independently reviewed household-type tables published before passage, that most working families pay less in new contributions than they now pay in premiums plus out-of-pocket costs, and until those tables exist this is a design requirement, not a proven result; the default structure is a progressive schedule with an exempted first band of wages, and no design advances that leaves below-median wage-earning households paying more than they do today, because the version-zero tables already show a flat rate failing exactly that household; provider payment rates are governed by the access metrics already named as this brief's falsifier; ERISA transition, Medicaid integration, and state maintenance-of-effort get resolved in the legislation with the same publish-the-tables discipline; and if the tables cannot be made to satisfy the family constraint, the design changes until they do, because the constraint is the promise.

## Implementation Pathway

Universal coverage requires federal legislation. The clearest destination is Medicare for All, though any universal system that meets the standard can serve, and the bridge is a Swiss-style universal system that covers everyone first, so no one waits for care while the larger transition is built. The near-term floor moves faster. Closing the gap from the federal side and restoring the premium credits are legislative, and protecting Medicaid and rural hospitals runs largely through the appropriations and oversight process. Full Medicaid expansion remains a state decision, which is why the federal agenda centers on a fallback route to coverage rather than a mandate on the states.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

Universal coverage is not a new cost stacked on a working system. It is a redirection of money already being spent badly. The country already pays for the uninsured through emergency-room care, uncompensated care, lost productivity, and the $812 billion a year in administrative overhead that a fragmented system requires, and the states that closed their coverage gaps cut their uncompensated-care costs sharply. The Congressional Budget Office's own analysis of single-payer designs found that while federal spending would rise substantially, total national health spending would stay roughly flat or fall while covering everyone. Read that honestly: CBO's numbers are illustrative scenarios whose outcomes turn on provider payment rates, benefit design, cost sharing, and financing choices, not a prediction about any unspecified bill, which is why this platform commits to specifying those design choices as the legislation advances rather than waving the range as a promise. The full accounting, stated without flinching, is in The Ledger. Dollars aimed at coverage reach far more people than dollars aimed at verifying eligibility or propping up a fragmented insurance market. The return on coverage, in fewer emergencies, hospitals that stay open, healthier workers, protected pregnancies, and less debt, is larger and more durable than the alternative. Freedom that comes from stability is the dividend.

## Risks and Guardrails

The standard is non-negotiable, and the transition runs in stages - universal coverage first through a Swiss-style system, then toward public, comprehensive care such as Medicare for All - so honesty about that path and its cost is part of the credibility. The answer to how we pay for it is that we already do, only worse. Whatever model is chosen, the transition should protect people's continuity of care rather than yank coverage out from under them, which is why automatic, portable enrollment is the design principle. Coverage also has to connect to care; a card with no hospital within an hour is not a health system, so coverage has to be paired with rural-hospital stabilization and workforce investment. And any work-requirement scheme should be judged by its measured results, which have consistently been tiny enrollment and administrative costs that dwarf the care delivered.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on coverage, cost, and care.

- The uninsured rate, nationally and in rural areas, tracked toward zero, and the number of people in the coverage gap.
- Medical debt and its role in financial distress. • Rural hospitals open, in the red, or closed, and the status of maternity and emergency services. • Access to primary care, mental health, and maternal care, and maternal and infant outcomes. • Marketplace premiums and enrollment as tax-credit policy changes.
- For any work-requirement program, enrollment as a share of those eligible and the ratio of administrative spending to care.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will call universal coverage unaffordable socialized medicine. The current system is already unaffordable, and we pay for it through premiums, debt, and waste rather than through coverage. Universal, automatic coverage can be built on the structures we already have, and the work-requirement experiments that some states ran as the alternative were themselves expensive government failures that spent more on bureaucracy than on care. Some will say this takes away private insurance. The bridge keeps private insurers - regulated and nonprofit for basic coverage, as in Switzerland - and even under Medicare for All, private supplemental plans continue, exactly as they do for people on Medicare today. What ends is a system where losing a job or getting sick means losing care. What it requires is that no one is left uninsured because they changed jobs, got sick, or live in the wrong place. Some will say work requirements promote responsibility. Most adults in the coverage gap already work. The records of these programs show the requirement functioning as a paperwork barrier that covered a small fraction of the eligible while spending the bulk of its budget on verification. And some will say a state cannot afford to expand coverage. It is already paying, through emergency-room costs, uncompensated care, and hospital closures. Expansion shifts most of the cost to the federal match and brings revenue to hospitals that are struggling. The expensive choice is the one many states are making now.

## What Would Change Our Position

Be precise about what is falsifiable here. The standard, everyone covered, comprehensively, affordably, is a commitment, not a hypothesis. The path is a hypothesis, and evidence could redraw it: if a fully specified single-payer financing design showed most working families paying more than their current premiums and out-of-pocket costs combined, the financing design changes. If provider payment rates caused measurable access shortages in trials or early phases, rates change. If the Swiss-style bridge stalled short of universal enrollment or its regulated-nonprofit structure failed to control costs, the bridge loses its claim and a different vehicle carries the standard. The destination stays; every road to it is negotiable on evidence.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. Healthcare should follow you through life. It should not depend on your job, your luck, or your zip code. Right now millions of people are one illness away from losing everything, coverage disappears the moment you change jobs, and rural hospitals keep closing. We can do better than keep patching a broken system. The goal is simple, and it is not radical. Everyone covered, coverage that follows you, care you can afford, and no family destroyed by medical debt.

## Footnotes

1. CMS, National Health Expenditure Fact Sheet (2023 data) ↩
2. Commonwealth Fund, Mirror, Mirror 2024: ten-country health system comparison ↩
3. U.S. Census Bureau, Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2024 (P60-288) ↩
4. KFF Health Care Debt Survey ↩
5. Himmelstein et al., “Health Care Administrative Costs in the US and Canada,” Annals of Internal Medicine (2020) ↩
6. GAO report on Georgia Pathways: administration outspent care (GAO-25-108160) ↩
7. Commonwealth Fund on rural hospital closures and inpatient-care losses since 2010 ↩
8. KFF, dental, hearing, and vision costs and coverage among Medicare beneficiaries ↩

PILLAR 3 · CARE

# Care From the First Year of Life to the Last

Childcare, eldercare, and the people who provide both, treated as the infrastructure they are.

## Summary

Every human life begins and ends in dependence. Someone cared for you before you could care for yourself, and someone will likely care for you when you no longer can. Care is not a niche issue or a women's issue or a family's private problem. It is the work that makes all other work possible, and it holds up the entire economy from underneath. A country that treats care as invisible gets exactly what we have: parents priced out of work by childcare that costs more than college, aging people stranded without help, a paid care workforce so underpaid it cannot hold its people, and 59 million family members quietly absorbing a trillion dollars a year of unpaid work.[1]

This brief proposes six things: cap what families pay for childcare at 7 percent of income and build the supply to back it, pay the people who do the work, support the invisible workforce of family caregivers with a tax credit, paid leave, Social Security credit, respite, and training, make aging at home the default it should be, grow the paid care workforce including through the legal immigration front door, and count care so it stops being invisible. The clock is running: by 2034, adults over 65 will outnumber children under 18 for the first time in American history.

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## The Principle

Every human life begins and ends in dependence. Someone cared for you before you could care for yourself, and someone will likely care for you when you no longer can. Between those two points, most people will spend years caring for someone else: a child, an aging parent, a spouse, a sibling with a disability. Care is not a niche issue or a women's issue or a family's private problem. It is the work that makes all other work possible, and it holds up the entire economy from underneath.

A country that treats care as invisible gets exactly what we have: parents priced out of work by childcare that costs more than college, aging people stranded without help, a paid care workforce so underpaid it cannot hold its people, and tens of millions of family members quietly absorbing a burden that breaks their finances, their careers, and often their health. The principle of this brief is that care is infrastructure. A serious country builds it the way it builds roads and power, because everything else runs on it. Everyone gets a floor. The deepest barriers get the deepest investment.

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## The System Failure

Start with the beginning of life. The average cost of center-based infant care in America is about $1,230 a month, and in 28 states the annual bill for infant care exceeds the cost of public college tuition. In Washington, D.C. it runs over $24,000 a year, more than four times the tuition at a public college and about the rent on a one-bedroom apartment. The federal government defines affordable childcare as costing no more than 7 percent of household income. Not one state in the country meets that standard for infant care. Not one. And even where families can pay, the care often is not there: more than half of Americans now live in a childcare desert, an area where licensed slots are so scarce that at least three young children compete for every one. Subsidies fall short of the actual cost of care by more than $400 a month in half the states. The predictable result is parents, overwhelmingly mothers, pushed out of work or into impossible arithmetic, at exactly the moment their families can least afford it.

Now the end of life, where the failure is larger and mostly hidden. The long-term care system in this country runs on an invisible workforce of family members. Fifty-nine million Americans provided unpaid care to adults in 2024, delivering 49.5 billion hours of it, the equivalent of nearly 24 million full-time workers, roughly 17 percent of the nation's entire full-time workforce. AARP values that care at more than one trillion dollars a year, which is more than the country spends on Medicaid and more than private business spends on health care. This is the largest workforce in America, and it is unpaid, unsupported, and mostly untrained: more than half of family caregivers now perform medical tasks like managing feeding tubes, catheters, and ventilators, and only about one in five has ever received any training for it. The average caregiver also spends more than $7,200 a year out of pocket, and 61 percent hold a job at the same time, sacrificing wages, advancement, and retirement savings to do work the system has silently assigned them.

The paid side of the system cannot take the weight either. Direct care workers, the aides and attendants who make it possible for people to stay in their homes, earned a median wage of $17.36 an hour in 2024[2], with median annual earnings just under $26,000, and home care workers earn less than $23,000 a year, so little that nearly three in five rely on public assistance. The shortage of them means that even families who can afford help often cannot find it. Long-term care costs run from roughly $20,000 a year for adult day care to over $100,000 for a private nursing-home room, and national spending on long-term services is projected to nearly double within the decade.

And the clock is running. By 2034, for the first time in American history, adults over 65 will outnumber children under 18, at the very moment the pool of potential family caregivers is shrinking relative to the people who will need them. We are aging into the largest care demand in our history with a system that was never really a system at all, just millions of families holding it up alone. That is not a personal failing to be managed. It is a structural failure to be fixed, and the cheapest disaster is the one we prevent.

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## The Proposal

Six planks, running from the first year of life to the last.

1. **Cap what families pay for childcare, and build the supply to back it.** Set a national standard that no family pays more than 7 percent of its income for childcare, the government's own definition of affordable, phased in with the deepest help first for the families furthest under water. A cap without supply is a waiting list, so pair it with direct investment in building capacity where the deserts are: funding to open and expand licensed centers and home-based providers, especially in the rural and working-class areas where more than half the country now lives without adequate options. Demand-side help and supply-side building move together or neither works.
2. **Pay the people who do the work.** Childcare is expensive and childcare workers are poor at the same time, which tells you the problem is not greed, it is a broken market: parents cannot pay more and workers cannot earn less. The same is true of direct care workers in eldercare and disability care. Public investment has to go through the workforce, with wage floors and standards attached to public dollars, so that care jobs become jobs someone can live on and stay in. High turnover is not a staffing nuisance, it is a quality-of-care crisis, and wages are the fix.
3. **Support the invisible workforce.** Family caregivers provide a trillion dollars of care a year and get almost nothing back. Change that with a federal caregiver tax credit against the thousands they spend out of pocket, paid family and medical leave so caring for a parent does not cost a job, Social Security credit for years spent caregiving so the penalty does not follow people into their own old age, respite care so caregivers can rest before they break, and training for the medical tasks the system already expects them to perform. We are not creating a new obligation. We are finally recognizing one that 59 million people are already carrying.
4. **Make aging at home the default it should be.** Most people want to age in their own homes, and home care is usually cheaper than institutional care, yet the system's money and defaults still tilt toward institutions while hundreds of thousands wait for home and community-based services. Fund home and community care to clear the waiting lists, and connect it to the healthcare pillar's long-term care commitment, so the place a person ages is a choice and not a default set by a payment rule.
5. **Grow the paid care workforce, including through the front door.** The country cannot meet the coming demand with the workforce it has. Build career pathways and apprenticeships into direct care, make it a track within the national service program in the civic pillar, and use the legal immigration channels in the immigration pillar for care work, where the labor shortage is not speculative but measured. This is where three pillars of this platform lock together on purpose.

6. **Count care, so it stops being invisible.** What is not measured is not managed. Require standardized public data on the care workforce, paid and unpaid, its size, wages, turnover, and gaps, so that policy is built on the true scale of the system rather than on its invisibility. A trillion-dollar workforce should at minimum appear in the national accounts of what the country runs on.

### Disability Rights Are Labor Rights

The invest-in-people doctrine has a test case hiding in plain sight: Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act still lets certified employers pay roughly 39,000 disabled workers below the minimum wage, about half of them $3.50 an hour or less, some as little as 25 cents.[3] Twenty-five states have already restricted or ended the practice; a federal phase-out was proposed and then withdrawn in 2025. The position: finish the job federally, phase out 14(c) with transition support for workers and providers, and pair it with what the evidence shows works, competitive integrated employment, enforced ADA accessibility everywhere public life happens, home and community-based services funded so disabled people direct their own lives, and the universal design standard this platform already writes into its service and new-places briefs. A country that says work confers dignity cannot keep a legal category of workers whose work is priced at a quarter an hour.

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## Implementation Pathway

The childcare cap and supply investment are federal legislation, delivered through the states, building on the existing block-grant machinery rather than inventing a new one. Wage standards travel with the public dollars, through Medicaid rates for direct care and through the terms of childcare funding, which makes them enforceable without a new agency. The caregiver credit, paid leave, and Social Security caregiving credit are federal statutes. Home and community-based funding runs through Medicaid, where the waiting lists live. The workforce pathways run through the service and immigration pillars already built. None of this is exotic. Most of it is money and standards moving through pipes that already exist, which is exactly why the failure to do it is a choice.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

The honest answer on cost is that the country is already paying, in the least efficient and most brutal currency available: a trillion dollars a year in unpaid labor extracted mostly from women, parents pushed out of the workforce at the peak of their productivity, caregivers spending down their savings and their health, and a preventable slide toward the most expensive care settings because the cheaper ones were never funded. Childcare investment returns workforce participation and lifelong gains for children, which is why economists across the spectrum score early care among the highest-return public investments there is. Home care is cheaper than the institutional care it replaces. Paying care workers reduces the turnover that drives up cost and drives down quality. The choice is not between spending and not spending. It is between building a care system on purpose and keeping the hidden one that bills families directly and breaks them quietly.

## Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is a cap without supply, which produces waiting lists instead of affordability, so the demand and supply sides are built to move together and measured together. The second is that public money inflates prices instead of wages, so the wage standards travel with the dollars and the books stay open. The third is over-institutionalizing what should stay human-scale: home-based providers, family child care, and community care are part of the answer, not obstacles to it, and the funding has to reach them and not only the large centers. The fourth is treating family caregiving support as a substitute for building the paid system, when it is a complement; recognizing the invisible workforce must not become a way of keeping it invisible and merely tipping it. And the honest constraint is fiscal sequencing: this is real money, so it phases in floor-first, deepest need first, exactly as the platform's standard says.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on affordability, supply, the workforce, and the caregivers.

- The share of families paying more than 7 percent of income for childcare, tracked toward zero, and the share of the population living in a childcare desert.
- Parental, and especially maternal, workforce participation as care becomes available.

- Direct care and childcare wages and turnover, measured against the cost and quality of care.
- Waiting lists for home and community-based services, tracked toward zero, and the share of long-term care delivered at home by choice.
- Out-of-pocket caregiver spending, caregiver employment retention, and uptake of the credit, leave, and respite supports.
- The size and readiness of the paid care workforce against the 2034 demographic line.

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## Opposition and Responses

Some will say care is a family responsibility, not the government's. Families are already carrying it, to the tune of a trillion dollars a year in unpaid work, and no one proposes taking that from them. The question is whether a caregiver doing a nurse's tasks with no training, no leave, and $7,200 a year in personal costs is being supported or exploited. Honoring family responsibility means backing it, not billing it.

Some will say we can't afford universal childcare. We are already paying more than the program would cost, in mothers pushed out of the workforce, in lost lifetime earnings and tax revenue, and in childcare bills that exceed college tuition in most states. Early care is among the highest-return investments government can make, and the current arrangement is the expensive option.

Some will say this will just drive up the price of care. Only if the money moves without standards, which is why wage floors and cost transparency travel with every public dollar. The point is to fix a market where parents cannot pay more and workers cannot earn less, not to pour subsidy into the same broken structure.

Some will say immigrant care workers take American jobs. The direct care shortage is measured, current, and growing, and it is already leaving families without help they can pay for. Filling a real gap through legal channels, with full labor rights and the same wage floor, protects the workers already here rather than undercutting them. A deportable underclass is what undercuts wages; a legal, rights-bearing workforce does not.

Some will say aging at home sounds nice but institutions exist for a reason. They do, and they remain for those who need them. The point is that the system's defaults should not send people to the most expensive and least wanted setting because the cheaper, preferred one was never funded. Choice, not a payment rule, should decide where a person ages.

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## What Would Change Our Position

The care agenda bets that raising the floor raises the supply. If Medicaid wage pass-throughs shrank total care capacity instead, agencies exiting faster than workers arrived, the mechanism failed and gets redesigned. If childcare cost caps reduced available slots rather than expanding them, same answer. The tracked falsifiers are vacancy rates, turnover, and total hours of care delivered: if those move the wrong way while wages rise, this platform says so and adjusts, rather than declaring victory on the wage number alone.

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## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. Every one of us starts life needing care and most of us will end life needing it, and in between, millions of us will provide it. Right now the system runs on parents paying more for daycare than for college, on care workers paid too little to stay, and on 59 million family members doing a trillion dollars of unpaid work a year with no training, no leave, and no recognition. That is not a care system. It is a quiet emergency held together by exhausted people. So cap what families pay for childcare and build the supply to match. Pay care workers enough to stay. Back the family caregivers who are already doing the work, with a tax credit, paid leave, and the training the job now demands. And fund care at home, because that is where people want to age. Care is the work that makes all other work possible. It is time the country treated it that way.

## Footnotes

1. AARP, Valuing the Invaluable: 59 million caregivers, $1.01 trillion in unpaid care ↩
2. PHI, Direct Care Workers in the United States (median wage data) ↩
3. GAO analysis of Department of Labor 14(c) certificate data ↩

PILLAR 3 · FOOD SECURITY

# No One Hungry in a Country of Plenty

Food security as a foundation of freedom, and the proof that hunger in America is a policy choice.

## Summary

A person who is hungry is not free. A child who is hungry cannot learn, a worker who is hungry cannot work well, and a parent skipping meals so their kids can eat is carrying a weight no one in a country this rich should carry. America grows more food than it needs, wastes an enormous share of what it grows, and still left 47.9 million people, including 14.1 million children, in food-insecure households in 2024. That combination, abundance and hunger side by side, is not scarcity. It is a delivery failure, and the pandemic years proved it in both directions: when the supports were on, child food insecurity fell to a historic low of 12.5 percent; when they lapsed, it climbed back to 18.4 percent.

This brief proposes five things: restore and protect SNAP as the first line of defense, close the eligibility gap that may exclude nearly half of food-insecure people, feed every kid at school with no forms and no stigma, build the local food layer for daily access and for the day the trucks stop, and keep the count, by statute, so no administration can cut food assistance and then cancel the measurement that would show what happened.

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## The Principle

A person who is hungry is not free. A child who is hungry cannot learn, a worker who is hungry cannot work well, and a parent skipping meals so their kids can eat is carrying a weight no one in a country this rich should carry. Food is the first foundation, older than housing, older than healthcare, and the test of a food system is the simplest test in this platform: does everyone eat?

America fails that test, and it fails it by choice. This is not a country that lacks food. It grows more than it needs, wastes an enormous share of what it grows, and still leaves tens of millions of its people uncertain where the next meal comes from. That combination, abundance and hunger side by side, is not scarcity. It is a delivery failure, and rights require delivery systems. The principle here is plain: in a country of plenty, no one goes hungry, and the systems that feed people get built, funded, and maintained like the essential infrastructure they are.

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## The System Failure

Start with the count, while we still have one. In 2024, 47.9 million Americans lived in food-insecure households, about one household in seven. Within that, 7.2 million households experienced very low food security, the bureaucratic phrase for skipping meals and going whole days without eating. Among households with children the rate was 18.4 percent, which means 14.1 million children in the wealthiest country in history did not reliably have enough to eat last year. Hunger is in every single county in America, and in the hardest-hit counties nearly half the children face it. The burden is not evenly carried: about one in four Black households, one in five Hispanic households, and nearly one in three American Indian and Alaska Native households were food insecure, at least double the white rate.

Now the finding that settles the argument about whether this is solvable. During the pandemic, the country briefly ran the experiment. Expanded SNAP benefits, free school meals for every student, and an expanded Child Tax Credit drove food insecurity among households with children down to 12.5 percent in 2021, a historic low. Then those supports were allowed to lapse, and by 2024 the rate had climbed back to 18.4 percent, erasing a decade of progress in three years. The dial moved down when we turned it down and up when we let go of it. Hunger in America is not a mystery, a market outcome, or a character defect. It is a policy choice, demonstrated in both directions, in real time, in the government's own data.

The safety net that does exist is effective and full of holes at once. SNAP is the nation's first line of defense against hunger, and the research record is consistent: benefit increases reduce food insecurity, and benefit cuts reduce food spending and worsen health, especially for children. But the eligibility lines are drawn so low that an estimated 47 percent of food-insecure people may not qualify for SNAP at all, working families who earn too much for help and too little to eat reliably. And the program is now being cut, not patched: the recent budget law made the deepest SNAP cuts in the program's history, with the Congressional Budget Office estimating around four million people losing some or all of their food assistance, including children, seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities. Note also who is being cut: more than a quarter of SNAP households have earned income, and among SNAP households with children, more than half do. These are working families.

And then there is the failure that should alarm anyone who cares about honest government, whatever their politics. After the 2024 report, the administration is ending the household food security survey itself, the nation's longest-running and most consistent measure of material hardship, the benchmark on which three decades of policy has been built. The deepest cuts to food assistance in history and the elimination of the instrument that would measure their consequences are happening at the same time. That is turning off the smoke detector before the fire. A government confident in its policy measures the results. A government that stops measuring is telling you it already knows.

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## The Proposal

Five planks: restore the floor, close the gap, feed the kids, build the local layer, and keep the count.

1. **Restore and protect SNAP as the first line of defense.** Reverse the cuts, restore the four million people pushed off assistance, and defend benefit adequacy, because a benefit too small to buy a month of groceries is a promise half kept. Repeal the expanded paperwork requirements that function, exactly like their Medicaid cousins in the healthcare brief, as barriers dressed up as work programs; most SNAP households with children already work, and the documented record of these requirements is administrative cost without employment gains. Judge the program by the only standard that matters: does it reduce hunger. The evidence says it does, every time it is funded to.

2. **Close the eligibility gap for working families.** Nearly half the people facing hunger may not qualify for the main program built to fight it, which means the lines are drawn wrong. Raise and simplify the income thresholds so that a family that cannot reliably afford food is not disqualified from food assistance by a wage that cannot cover it, and smooth the benefit cliff so that earning one more dollar never costs a family its groceries. A floor with a hole in the middle is not a floor.
3. **Feed every kid at school, full stop.** Universal free school meals, breakfast and lunch, for every student, no forms, no lunch debt, no stigma line in the cafeteria. We ran this during the pandemic and it worked; several states kept it and it works there now. It is the single most efficient delivery system for child nutrition the country has, the meals arrive exactly where the children already are, and the evidence ties school meals to health, attendance, and learning. Pair it with summer feeding so the floor does not vanish in June. A country that requires children to attend school can feed them while they are there.
4. **Build the local food layer, for daily access and for the day the trucks stop.** This is where food security meets the resilience agenda in the climate and security pillars. Invest in local and regional food systems, community agriculture, food hubs, and the retail infrastructure that puts real groceries within reach of the neighborhoods that lack them, because a benefit card is only half the answer if there is nowhere nearby to spend it on real food. And treat local food capacity as the survival infrastructure it is: when a disaster breaks the long supply chain, the communities that eat are the ones with food systems close to home. Food deserts and disaster fragility are the same weakness wearing two coats.
5. **Keep the count.** Restore the household food security survey permanently, by statute, so that no administration of any party can turn off the nation’s hunger measurement again. Tie it into this platform’s broader accountability architecture: named public signals, tracked over time, with someone answerable for the trend. What is not measured is not managed, and a measurement that can be killed the moment it becomes inconvenient is not a measurement, it is a courtesy. The country deserves to know whether its children are eating, especially when the policy just changed.

## Food Systems That Can Take a Punch

Feeding people reliably requires food systems built like the resilient infrastructure this platform demands everywhere else: regional, redundant, and able to absorb shocks. The position is localized, sustainable food networks as national policy: regional processing and storage capacity so a single plant closure or contaminated shipment cannot empty a region's shelves, procurement that rewards sustainable practices, farm-to-institution pipelines feeding the universal school meals this brief proposes, and support for the small and mid-size farms that make a food system plural instead of brittle. Cities belong inside the food system, not at the end of it: no neighborhood should be an agriculture desert, and the urban layer, community gardens, rooftop growing, greenhouses on waste heat, and controlled-environment agriculture where its economics genuinely work, adds freshness and shock absorption while the surrounding region carries the staples. The new-places brief carries this design into the next generation of communities; this plank carries it into every community that already exists.

## Give Farmers Back Their Farms: Break the Squeeze, End the Cruelty

A farmer is one of the most essential jobs in the country and one of the most quietly endangered. The 2022 Census of Agriculture counted 1.9 million farms, down about 7 percent in five years, worked by producers whose average age is now 58.[1] And of every dollar Americans spend on food, the farm gets only about 16 cents; the rest is captured downstream. The people who keep us fed are being squeezed off their own land, and the squeeze is not an accident of markets. It is the product of concentration. Four meatpackers control roughly 82 percent of beef, 54 percent of poultry, and 66 percent of pork,[2] up from a quarter to a third of each in the 1970s and 80s, and that handful sits between hundreds of thousands of ranchers and the entire eating public, setting the price on both ends. This platform's anti-extraction principle was built for exactly this: the goal is not fewer farms and bigger processors, it is farmers who own their work and answer to the land rather than to Cargill or Tyson.

So the position is to restore competition and independence to the people who farm. Enforce the antitrust and fair-dealing laws already on the books against processor concentration, and back a moratorium on the largest new factory operations while restructuring the contracts that trap growers, the model of the Farm System Reform Act. Protect farmers from the seed-patent trap directly: the story most people have heard, that companies engineered seeds biologically designed to die so farmers must rebuy, is not quite what happened, and the truth is more useful. The genetic “terminator” that would sterilize seed was patented but never brought to market after public backlash; what actually binds farmers is legal, not biological. Patent licenses and contracts forbid saving and replanting seed, and the Supreme Court upheld that control 9 to 0 in Bowman v. Monsanto in 2013.[3] A handful of firms now control most of the world’s seed. The danger to the food system is real either way: a food supply narrowed to a few patented, monoculture lines is brittle exactly where resilience matters, so the platform’s answer is a farmer’s right to save and replant seed, strong support for public and open-source seed breeding and the seed banks that guard crop diversity, and antitrust scrutiny of the seed giants. The dignity of farming is inseparable from control over the seed, the herd, and the contract.

Ethics belongs in this too, without apology and without policing anyone’s dinner. Concentrated animal feeding operations are the clearest case where cheap production externalizes its costs: they consume the majority of the medically important antibiotics sold in the United States,[4] which accelerates the drug resistance that threatens human medicine, they foul the air and water of the mostly rural, mostly lower-income communities around them, and they treat animals as units rather than creatures. The platform’s position is a real transition away from the CAFO model, paired with the investment that makes it survivable for the farmers inside it: enforce meaningful animal-welfare standards, hold operations accountable for the pollution they now offload onto their neighbors, curb the routine antibiotic use that is a public-health problem and not only an animal-welfare one, and fund the shift toward pasture-based and higher-welfare systems rather than demanding family farmers eat the cost of doing right. This is the invest-in-people doctrine applied to the land: a country that values the farmer over the conglomerate, and treats feeding people ethically as skilled and honorable work, not a race to the bottom run by four companies.

## Implementation Pathway

SNAP restoration, eligibility reform, and the statutory survey requirement are federal legislation, moving through the same farm bill and appropriations machinery that built the cuts, which means they are as reversible as they were passable. Universal school meals is federal legislation with a proven state track record to point to, and states can continue moving first while the federal standard is won. The local food layer runs through USDA programs, state and local investment, and the disaster-resilience funding streams in the climate pillar. None of this requires new inventions. The pandemic years already demonstrated every major piece at national scale. The task is not to design the machine. It is to turn it back on and bolt it down.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

Feeding people is cheap and hunger is expensive. Food insecurity drives costs through the health system, through worse chronic disease, worse child development, and more hospitalization, and through the schools, where hungry children learn less and need more. SNAP dollars are among the fastest-circulating dollars in the economy, spent immediately and locally, which is why the program doubles as economic stabilizer in every downturn. School meals purchased at scale cost less per meal than any patchwork of forms and means tests, and the administrative machinery of exclusion, the verification, the paperwork, the churn, is itself a cost that buying every kid lunch simply deletes. The country already paid to prove the counterfactual: when the supports were on, child hunger hit its historic low. The question is not whether we can afford to feed people. It is whether we can keep affording what hunger costs.

## Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is fraud-and-abuse framing swallowing the program, so the answer stays factual: SNAP's error rates are overwhelmingly administrative rather than criminal, most recipient households with children work, and integrity enforcement should target the actual documented fraud, which is concentrated among a small number of retailers, not the families buying groceries. The second is that universal programs get caricatured as waste on the non-poor, and the answer is that universality is the feature: it deletes the stigma, the paperwork, and the churn that keep eligible children unfed, and the cafeteria line stops sorting kids by their parents' income. The third is that local food investment drifts into boutique projects, so the standard is access and resilience, measured in neighborhoods reached and shelves stocked, not in ribbon cuttings. And the honest constraint is that this brief swims against the current policy tide, so the sequencing is defensive first: protect what remains, restore what was cut, then build.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on the only numbers that matter, and insist they keep being collected.

- The household food insecurity rate, overall and for households with children, tracked toward and below the 2021 low that proved what is possible.
- Very low food security, the skipped-meals number, tracked toward zero.
- The share of food-insecure people ineligible for assistance, tracked down as the lines are redrawn.
- School meal participation and the elimination of lunch debt.
- Food access in the lowest-access neighborhoods, and local food capacity as a resilience measure.
- The survey itself: restored, statutory, and published every year, whoever holds power.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say food assistance discourages work. Most SNAP households with children have earned income. The people being cut are disproportionately working families, seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities, and the documented record of paperwork requirements is that they remove eligible people through red tape without increasing employment. If the concern is work, the answer is wages and childcare, both elsewhere in this platform, not hungrier workers.

Some will say universal school meals waste money on kids who don't need them. The means-testing machinery costs money too, and it buys stigma, lunch debt, and eligible kids going unfed. Feeding every student is simpler, cheaper per meal at scale, and treats school food like school buses and textbooks, part of the infrastructure of the school day. We do not means-test the fire department.

Some will say the hunger numbers are exaggerated. They are the government's own numbers, collected the same way for three decades, and the response to doubting a measurement is to keep measuring, not to cancel the survey. Ending the count while cutting the program is the behavior of someone who expects the answer to be bad.

Some will say charity and food banks can handle it. Food banks themselves say they cannot, and they said it loudest when the cuts passed. Charity is the overflow valve, not the system. A food bank line stretching around the block is not evidence that private generosity works. It is evidence that public policy failed.

## What Would Change Our Position

This brief rests on the natural experiment, so new measurement could unsettle it: if the food security survey is restored and the numbers showed restored supports failing to move hunger, the program mix changes. If universal school meals at national scale showed no measurable attendance, health, or learning effects, or crowded out better-targeted spending, the plank would be revised toward what the evidence supports. What does not count as counter-evidence: the absence of data after the count was ended. A missing measurement is not a null result, which is exactly why keep-the-count is a plank and not a footnote.

The farmer-dignity plank carries its own tests. It rests on the claim that concentration, not efficiency alone, is what strands farmers on 16 cents of the food dollar; if breaking up processor concentration and restructuring grower contracts did not measurably move farm income or the farm share back toward producers, the mechanism would be rebuilt around what did. The CAFO-transition plank is bound to its stated harms: if pasture-based and higher-welfare systems could not be scaled without pricing food out of reach for the families this platform is most concerned about, the transition timeline and the public investment behind it get revised before the standard is imposed, because making ethical food a luxury is its own failure. And the seed plank rests on a fact already settled in court rather than a prediction, so what would change it is evidence that a right to save and replant seed measurably harmed the crop improvement it is meant to protect.

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## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. This country grows more food than it can eat and still lets 14 million kids go without enough of it. We know that is a choice, because we briefly made the other choice: during the pandemic we fed people, and child hunger fell to the lowest level ever recorded. Then we stopped, and it came right back. So make the other choice for good. Protect and restore food assistance, fix the lines that exclude working families, feed every kid at school with no forms and no stigma, build local food systems strong enough for daily life and for disasters, and keep counting, by law, so no government can ever again cut food from families and then cancel the measurement that would show what happened. In a country of plenty, no one should be hungry. That is not charity. That is the floor.

## Footnotes

1. USDA NASS, 2022 Census of Agriculture: Farm Producers highlights ↩
2. White House briefing on meat-processing concentration, with USDA data (September 2021) ↩
3. Bowman v. Monsanto Co., 569 U.S. 278 (2013), opinion of the Court ↩
4. FDA, ADUFA summary report on antimicrobials sold or distributed for food-producing animals ↩

PILLAR 3 · EDUCATION

# An Education That Delivers

Finish the recovery we abandoned, teach the way the evidence says, and build more than one path to a good life.

## Summary

Education is a foundation of freedom for the same reason healthcare and housing are: without it, the other freedoms are theoretical. The country is living through an education disaster it has quietly decided to stop responding to: 40 percent of fourth graders below the Basic level in reading, the worst in two decades, with the lowest performers still falling while the recovery money expired on schedule. In emergency management there is a name for that: we declared the disaster over before the recovery was complete.

This brief proposes five things: finish the disaster recovery we abandoned, with high-dosage tutoring aimed at the students the first recovery missed; deliver the evidence on reading everywhere, the way Mississippi did; hold the floor and judge the system by its bottom, not its averages; staff and maintain the system like the infrastructure it is, because Alabama showed what happens when the coaches get cut; and build more than one path to a dignified life, because college is a door, not the only door.

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## The Principle

Education is a foundation of freedom for the same reason healthcare and housing are: without it, the other freedoms are theoretical. A child who cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade is carrying a disadvantage that compounds for the rest of their life, in graduation, in earnings, in health, in everything. And the promise a public school system makes is not that every child will reach the same height. It is that every child gets the floor: the reading, the math, and the habits of learning that everything else is built on.

Two commitments follow. First, the floor is non-negotiable, and the deepest barriers get the deepest investment, which means the measure of the system is what happens to its lowest-performing students, not its averages. Second, teaching is a delivery system, and rights require delivery systems. Where the evidence about how children learn is strong, the system is obligated to use it, because a child gets one third grade. Good intentions taught the wrong way are still a failure the child pays for.

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## The System Failure

The country is living through an education disaster it has quietly decided to stop responding to, and the numbers describe it plainly.

The 2024 national assessment found reading scores still falling, two years after the pandemic ended, with 40 percent of fourth graders below the Basic level, the worst in two decades, and the share of eighth graders below Basic at a historic high.[1] And the failure is not evenly distributed, which is the most damning part. Where recovery has happened, it is mostly in math and mostly among higher-performing students, while the lowest performers kept falling from 2022 to 2024. One member of the assessment's own governing board put it in six words: the bottom continued to fall out. The seniors of 2024, the first class to spend all of high school after the pandemic, still carry measurable learning loss, and the research projects that loss forward into lower lifetime earnings and lower college attainment. Meanwhile chronic absenteeism, the leading indicator that tracks achievement more closely than almost anything else, remains stuck near 28 percent, far above where it stood before 2020.

In emergency management there is a name for what happened next: we declared the disaster over before the recovery was complete. The federal recovery money expired on schedule, whether or not the students had recovered, and the assessment board's own verdict was that what the nation did was insufficient. No serious emergency response walks off the site with the damage half repaired because the funding window closed. That is what American education policy did to its lowest-performing students.

Underneath the acute disaster sits a chronic one, and it predates COVID: reading scores were already declining in 2019. Part of that story is a delivery failure the field has known about for decades. The evidence on how children learn to read, systematic instruction in the relationship between letters and sounds, early identification of struggling readers, and targeted help before the gap hardens, is among the most settled in education research, and for decades much of the system taught some other way. When Mississippi, a state ranked near the bottom in child poverty, passed its 2013 early literacy law and actually delivered the evidence, trained its teachers, put coaches in classrooms, screened early, and wrote an individual reading plan for every struggling reader, a rigorous causal study found gains of roughly a quarter of a standard deviation in fourth grade reading for the children who grew up under it, among the largest state-level gains ever measured. Be honest about the caveats, because credibility demands it: whether those gains fully persist into eighth grade is genuinely contested, and the retention component of the law raises real equity concerns in how struggling readers are identified. But the fourth-grade effect is real, the claims that it was a statistical trick have been examined and debunked, and the transferable lesson is not a miracle. It is a delivery-system lesson: the state did what the evidence said, sustained it for a decade, and it worked.

Alabama supplies the warning that completes the picture, and it is this platform's maintenance principle wearing a school uniform. Alabama invested in evidence-based reading in the early 2000s, and scores rose. Then the recession came, the literacy coaches were laid off, and the gains vanished. An education system, like every system in this platform, is not a monument you build once. It is infrastructure you maintain, and when the maintenance stops, the results stop.

One more failure frames the rest: the system still runs on a single default path, four-year college for everyone, even as undergraduate enrollment among young adults sits below its pre-pandemic level and millions of good careers in the trades, in care, in clean energy, and in public service go unfilled, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics projecting roughly 650,000 openings a year in the construction trades alone and some two million new health and care jobs this decade. A country with one sanctioned route to a dignified life has built a bottleneck and called it a meritocracy.

## The Proposal

Five planks: finish the recovery, deliver the evidence, hold the floor, staff the system, and build more than one path.

1. **Finish the disaster recovery we abandoned.** Stand up a national learning recovery effort scaled to the actual damage and aimed where the damage is, at the lowest-performing students the first recovery missed. The centerpiece is high-dosage tutoring, small groups, several sessions a week, during the school day, because it is the single best-evidenced intervention education research has produced for accelerating students who are behind, and it is exactly what expired when the recovery money did. Pair it with a direct national campaign on chronic absenteeism, because no instruction works on a student who is not there, and the attendance number is the earliest warning light on the whole dashboard. Fund it for the duration of the recovery, not the duration of a budget window. A disaster response ends when the recovery is complete, not when the money runs out.
2. **Deliver the evidence on reading, everywhere.** Make evidence-based literacy the national standard of practice: teacher training and coaching in how reading actually works, universal early screening so no struggling reader goes unidentified past the point of easy repair, and an individual reading plan with real support for every child who is behind, the parts of the Mississippi approach the evidence most clearly supports. Where the evidence is contested, as with retention, let states weigh it honestly rather than mandating it. The federal role is to fund the training, the coaches, and the screening, and to stop funding instructional approaches the research has left behind. A child gets one third grade. The system does not get to keep relitigating settled evidence on the child’s time.
3. **Hold the floor, and judge the system by its bottom.** Reorient accountability around the students below Basic, not around averages that let a system look fine while its most vulnerable students sink. Publish the floor numbers, reading and math below-Basic rates and chronic absenteeism, as named public signals in this platform’s accountability architecture, tracked over time with someone answerable for the trend. Averages flatter systems. Floors tell the truth.

4. **Staff and maintain the system like the infrastructure it is.** The Alabama lesson is the plank: gains built on coaches and training die when the coaches and training are cut, so literacy coaching, tutoring corps, and teacher development get funded as permanent infrastructure, not initiatives. Address the real teacher shortages, which are concentrated in specific fields and specific schools rather than everywhere, with targeted pay, residency pathways, and loan relief aimed at the shortage areas, and connect the tutoring corps to the national service program in the civic pillar, which gives a generation a way to serve and gives the schools the people the recovery requires. Two pillars, one workforce.
5. **Build more than one path to a dignified life.** Make career and technical education, apprenticeships, and work-based learning a first-class track, not a consolation prize: funded like one, counted like one, and connected to the real labor demand in the trades, care, clean energy, and infrastructure that the rest of this platform is built to expand. Keep the college path affordable and honest, and stop pretending it is the only door. The measure of an education system is not how many students it sends to a four-year campus. It is how many it delivers to a stable, dignified working life, by whichever door fits.

## Clear the Debt, Rebuild What Comes After High School

Americans owe about $1.7 trillion in federal student loans across roughly 43 million borrowers,[2] debt taken on for an economy that automation is now rewriting underneath them. This platform's position is plain: forgive it broadly, and say why honestly. The standard objection is that forgiveness helps graduates who will out-earn non-graduates, and the honest answer is that this is transition policy, not ordinary policy: the country is entering a decade in which AI and automation will redraw what work looks like, and it cannot send a generation into that transition carrying a trillion-dollar anchor for degrees the old economy demanded. Forgiveness pairs with fixing the machine that created the debt: debt-free public college and genuinely free community college, and a rebuilt training system that treats a wind-turbine certification, an apprenticeship, or an AI-era reskilling program with the same respect and funding as a bachelor's degree, designed around what the next ten years will actually reward rather than what the last fifty did. And because no one honestly knows what work looks like in a generation, the platform prepares floors rather than predictions: the child allowance, universal healthcare, and portable benefits already proposed here, plus rigorous evaluation of guaranteed income, where the first American randomized trial, Stockton's SEED, found recipients of unconditional $500 monthly payments moved into full-time work at more than twice the control group's rate while anxiety and depression fell.[3] That is an evaluated option being kept honestly open, not yet a commitment, and the falsifiability rules apply to it like everything else.

## Implementation Pathway

The recovery effort and tutoring corps are federal funding delivered through states and districts, the same pipes the pandemic money used, this time with the duration tied to recovery benchmarks instead of a calendar. The literacy standard moves through the federal education law's funding conditions and through the states, more than forty of which have already passed some version of evidence-based reading policy, meaning the wave exists and the federal job is to fund its weakest links, the training and the coaches, so it does not become another unfunded mandate that produces paperwork instead of readers. The accountability signals run through existing assessment and reporting systems. The career-pathway build runs through federal workforce and education funding, state systems, and the employer partnerships that make apprenticeships real. The service-corps connection runs through the civic pillar's machinery. Nothing here waits on an invention. Most of it waits on a decision to finish what was started.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

Learning loss is a liability already on the country's books; the only question is who pays it and when. The research is blunt that the unrepaired loss shows up as lower lifetime earnings, lower attainment, and lower tax revenue for decades, which makes tutoring and literacy investment now among the cheapest debt service available. High-dosage tutoring costs real money per student and returns multiples of it in recovered learning, which is why it kept being the answer every time the evidence was consulted. Evidence-based reading instruction costs little more than the ineffective instruction it replaces; the spending is training and coaches, and Alabama already demonstrated what cutting them costs. And the career-pathway investment pays back in filled jobs the economy is already short of. The expensive option, as everywhere in this platform, is the quiet one we are currently choosing: a generation carrying unrepaired damage into the workforce.

## Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is that the reading standard hardens into a rigid script that deprofessionalizes teachers, so the standard is the evidence and the training, delivered with coaching and judgment, not a mandated minute-by-minute curriculum; the goal is teachers equipped by the science, not replaced by it. The second is that the contested pieces get mandated along with the settled ones, so retention stays a state judgment made in the open, with equity guardrails on how struggling readers are identified. The third is that floor-based accountability curdles into punishment for the schools serving the hardest-hit students, so the floor numbers trigger investment first, the deepest barriers get the deepest investment, and takeover-style sanctions stay the last resort, not the first. The fourth is that career tracks re-create the old tracking that sorted poor kids away from college, so every pathway keeps the door back to further education open, and the choice belongs to the student, not to the system's expectations about them. And the honest constraint is duration: recoveries and reading reforms show results in years, not news cycles, so the funding and the political patience have to be built for the marathon Mississippi actually ran.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda by the floor, the recovery, and the paths.

- The share of fourth and eighth graders below Basic in reading and math, tracked down from the current historic highs, with the lowest performers weighted most.
- Chronic absenteeism, tracked back below pre-pandemic levels, as the leading signal it is.
- Recovery benchmarks against the measured learning loss, with the effort funded until they are met.
- Early reading: the share of students screened, the share of flagged readers with active plans, and third-grade reading proficiency.
- Teacher and coach staffing in shortage fields and schools, and tutoring corps placements.
- Apprenticeship and career-pathway completions, and the employment and earnings of graduates by path, so every door is measured by where it leads.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say the pandemic is over, stop relitigating it. The damage is not over, and the data says so: reading fell further after the pandemic ended, and the students hit hardest are the ones still falling. Walking away from an unfinished recovery does not close the disaster. It just transfers the cost to the kids.

Some will say this is just more money for a failing system. It is money aimed by evidence at the two interventions with the strongest records in the field, high-dosage tutoring and evidence-based reading instruction, with the results published as floor numbers anyone can check. Funding what works and measuring the floor is the opposite of a blank check.

Some will say the science of reading is a fad, and Mississippi is hype. The reading evidence is among the most settled in education research, and Mississippi's fourth-grade gains survived rigorous causal study and the debunking of the statistical attacks on them. The honest caveats, about persistence and about retention, are in this brief because credibility requires them. What is not honest is defending instructional approaches the evidence left behind while forty percent of fourth graders sit below Basic.

Some will say career tracks give up on poor kids going to college. The current system gives up on the millions for whom the single college path never fit, and hands them debt or a dead end. Multiple funded paths with the door back to college always open is more opportunity, not less, and the student holds the choice.

Some will say education is a local matter. It is, and most of this runs through states and districts. The federal role is what it has always been at its best: fund the recovery, fund the training, protect the floor, and publish the truth. No local district caused a national disaster, and none can finance the recovery from one alone.

## What Would Change Our Position

The brief already carries its own warnings, and they are commitments: if the Mississippi-style reading package fails to replicate in the next cohort of adopting states, as parts of it did in Alabama, the platform treats that as data about implementation conditions, not noise to be explained away. If third-grade retention shows harms that outweigh the instructional gains it is bundled with, retention goes and the instruction stays. If high-dosage tutoring effects collapse at national scale, the tutoring corps shrinks to the populations and formats where effects persist. Every education plank ships with its evaluation attached, because the field’s history is full of interventions that died at scale.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. The pandemic hit our kids like a disaster, and we walked off the recovery site with the job half done. The students who were already behind are still falling, four in ten fourth graders cannot read at a basic level, and the money to fix it expired on a schedule that had nothing to do with whether the kids had recovered. So finish the job: tutors in every school that needs them, for as long as the recovery takes. Teach reading the way the evidence says it works, the way Mississippi did when it climbed from the bottom of the country, and keep the coaches funded, because Alabama showed us what happens when you stop. Judge every school by its floor, not its average. And build more than one path to a good life, because college is a door, not the only door. Every child gets the floor. That is the promise, and it is time to keep it.

## Footnotes

1. The Nation’s Report Card, 2024 NAEP reading, grades 4 and 8 ↩
2. Congressional Research Service, “Student Loan Debt” (IF10158) ↩
3. Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED), randomized evaluation results ↩

PILLAR 3 · ECONOMIC SECURITY

# The Floor Under Every Life

Economic security from childhood to old age, because necessitous people are not free people. The capstone brief of the Foundations.

## Summary

In 1944, Franklin Roosevelt told the country that political freedom had proved incomplete without economic security, that necessitous men are not free men, and proposed a Second Bill of Rights. Eighty years later that bill remains unfinished, and this brief is the attempt to finish it: income security across the whole arc of a life, in childhood, through work and the loss of work, through disability, and into old age. The proof it can be done is already in: the 2021 expanded Child Tax Credit cut child poverty to 5.2 percent, the lowest ever recorded, and when Congress let it expire, child poverty more than doubled in a single year. The dial works. We let go.

This brief proposes five planks, following the arc of a life: make the child benefit permanent, rebuild the shock absorbers for working life, smooth the benefit cliffs so work always pays, secure retirement for the half the system forgot, and give every household a shock absorber, because economic security is disaster mitigation at the scale of a family.

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## The Principle

In 1944, with the war still on, Franklin Roosevelt told the country that political freedom had proved incomplete without economic security, that necessitous men are not free men, and he proposed a Second Bill of Rights: to a job, a living wage, a decent home, medical care, education, and protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment. Eighty years later that bill remains unfinished, and this pillar is the attempt to finish it. Healthcare, care, food, and education each got their brief. This one is the floor that runs under all of them: income security across the whole arc of a life, in childhood, through work and the loss of work, through disability, and into old age.

Be clear about the division of labor, because this platform keeps its pillars honest. The fair-markets pillar is about how the economy pays you: wages, worker power, and the end of extraction. This brief is about what holds you when the market does not, because you are a child, because the plant closed, because your body gave out, because you grew old. A country needs both. Wages without a floor leaves everyone one bad year from ruin. A floor without fair wages becomes a subsidy to bad employers. Together they are what economic dignity actually means.

And one more principle, drawn from the discipline that runs through this whole platform. In emergency management, resilience is the capacity to absorb a shock and keep functioning, and we build it into communities on purpose. A household needs the same thing. A family that cannot absorb a broken transmission or a two-week gap between jobs is a family living permanently inside a slow-motion emergency, and everything else in their lives, health, learning, work, marriage, is taxed by it. Economic security is disaster mitigation at the scale of a family. The cheapest crisis is the one the household could absorb.

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## The System Failure

Start with the finding that settles the argument, because this pillar keeps producing the same experiment and the country keeps ignoring the result.

In 2021, the expanded Child Tax Credit, larger, fully refundable, and paid monthly, reached the poorest families for the first time, and child poverty fell to 5.2 percent, the lowest rate ever recorded in data reaching back to 1967.[1] That one credit alone kept more than five million people above the poverty line. Then Congress let it expire, and in 2022 child poverty more than doubled, to 12.4 percent, the largest single-year increase on record, throwing more than five million children back under the line in twelve months.[2] By 2024 the rate stood at 13.4 percent, 9.7 million children. One poverty researcher summarized it in a sentence this brief adopts whole: the impact was immediate, measurable, and entirely reversible. Child poverty in America is not a mystery or a market outcome. It is a dial, we proved we can turn it, and we chose to let go.

The rest of the floor is cracked in the same places it was in 1944, just with newer paint. Unemployment insurance, the shock absorber for job loss, is a patchwork of state systems that the pandemic revealed as decades out of date, slow to pay, easy to fall through, and thinnest exactly where work is least stable. Thirty-seven percent of American adults could not cover a $400 unexpected expense with cash or its equivalent, by the Federal Reserve's own survey, which means tens of millions of households have no shock absorber at all, and a flat tire or a sick day cascades into missed rent, payday debt, and the long slide. Nearly half of private-sector workers, about 57 million people, work for an employer that offers no retirement plan, which means the country's retirement system quietly assumes an employer benefit that a huge share of workers never had, and Social Security, the one universal layer, is left carrying weight it was never sized for while its own finances are left to drift. And the benefits that do exist are riddled with cliffs, where earning one more dollar costs a family its childcare or its food assistance, a design that punishes exactly the behavior every politician claims to want.

The through-line is the one this platform names everywhere: the systems were built for a different economy, they have not been maintained, and the failure lands on the people with the least slack to absorb it. Rights require delivery systems, and the delivery systems for economic security are running on parts from another century.

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## The Proposal

Five planks, following the arc of a life.

1. **Make the child benefit permanent, because the proof is in.** Restore the expanded, fully refundable, monthly Child Tax Credit as a permanent child allowance, reaching the lowest-income families first, since they gained the most in 2021 and lost the most when it lapsed. This is the single best-evidenced anti-poverty instrument the country has ever tested at national scale: it cut child poverty nearly in half in one year, and the long-run research finds children in families receiving refundable credits are born healthier, do better in school, and earn more as adults, which is why a former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers calls it growth policy, not generosity. Every year without it is a year we choose the 13 percent number over the 5 percent number, on purpose, with the receipts in hand.

2. **Rebuild the shock absorbers for working life.** Modernize unemployment insurance into a system that actually functions as insurance: national minimum standards for coverage, benefit adequacy, and speed of payment, extended automatically in downturns instead of waiting on Congress to notice, and rebuilt to cover the gig, part-time, and independent work the old system pretends does not exist. Pair it with the paid family and medical leave already committed in the care brief, so that a birth, an illness, or a dying parent is not also a layoff. Job loss is a household disaster with a known frequency. Insuring it properly is not charity, it is actuarial common sense.
3. **Smooth the cliffs, so work always pays.** Redesign the benefit phase-outs across programs so that no family ever loses more in assistance than it gains in wages. A floor with cliffs built into it is a floor that traps people, and the fix is arithmetic, not ideology. Every earned dollar should leave a family better off, full stop, and the platform's Tax Code Public Value Test applies here too: a benefit design that punishes work fails the test.
4. **Secure retirement for the half the system forgot.** Protect Social Security's finances by fixing the regressive cap, as the fair-markets pillar commits, so the highest earners contribute on every dollar the way a nurse or a mechanic already does. Then close the coverage hole underneath it: automatic-enrollment retirement accounts, portable across jobs, for the roughly half of private-sector workers whose employers offer nothing, seeded and matched for low-wage workers, and built on the state auto-enrollment programs already proving the model. Retirement security in America was designed as a three-legged stool, and for half the workforce two of the legs were never installed. Build them.
5. **Give every household a shock absorber.** Treat household financial resilience as the mitigation investment it is: emergency-savings accounts attached to payroll and to the child benefit, seeded at the start and matched for low-income savers, so that the modest emergency that currently starts the slide, the car repair, the ER copay, the missed shift, gets absorbed instead. Pair it with the public and postal banking option in the fair-markets pillar, so that absorbing a shock never requires a payday lender, and with the disability system brought into this century, so that the people the floor exists for most are not the ones it serves worst. In emergency management we pre-position resources because response is always costlier than readiness. Do the same for families.

## Implementation Pathway

The child allowance is federal tax legislation, moving through the same reconciliation-friendly machinery that created and killed the 2021 expansion, which is precisely why it is winnable: it has already passed once, and there has been recurring bipartisan interest in partial restorations since. Unemployment modernization is federal standards over the existing federal-state system, with the technology rebuild funded the way any critical infrastructure is. Cliff-smoothing runs through program rules and the tax code, much of it administrative once the standard is set. The Social Security cap fix is the fair-markets pillar’s legislation; the auto-enrollment accounts build on live state programs and existing federal proposals with support from both parties’ pension wonks. The emergency-savings and banking planks ride the payroll system and the postal infrastructure the country already owns. As everywhere in this pillar, the machine mostly exists. The 2021-2022 whipsaw proved both that it can run and how fast it can be unplugged, which is why permanence, in statute, is the point.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

The child benefit is the best-documented investment in this entire platform: the research record ties refundable credits to healthier births, better school performance, and higher adult earnings, returns that compound for decades and come back as tax revenue, which is what growth policy means. Child poverty itself is the expensive option, carried in health costs, education costs, crime, and lost productivity, and the country pays it annually whether or not it appears in a budget line. Modernized unemployment insurance is a macroeconomic stabilizer that pays out exactly when the economy needs spending most. Cliff-smoothing raises work effort by definition, since it removes the tax on working. Retirement coverage now is cheaper than old-age poverty later, which lands on Medicaid and on families either way. The honest cost accounting is the same one every brief in this pillar has reached: the floor is cheaper than the fall.

## Risks and Guardrails

The first attack is dependency, so the design answers it structurally: the child benefit follows the child, not the parent's work status, because the child's development is the investment and the evidence shows families spend it on essentials; the cliffs are smoothed so work always pays; and the unemployment system is insurance with the incentives insurance has always had. The second risk is inflation-era timing, so the phase-in is honest, floor-first and deepest-need-first, with the child benefit leading because its per-dollar return is highest. The third is that a federal savings-and-banking push crowds out community institutions, so credit unions and community banks are partners in the delivery, not casualties of it. The fourth is programmatic sprawl, and the guardrail is this platform's maintenance doctrine: every plank here enters the National Government Maintenance Act's review cycle like everything else, judged by the floor numbers it exists to move. And the honest constraint is the big one: permanence requires statute and statute requires a majority, so this brief is sequenced with the platform's ten-to-twenty-year arc, defensive where the floor is being cut, restorative next, permanent last.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the floor by whether people fall through it.

- The child poverty rate, tracked back toward and below the 5.2 percent the country already proved possible, and the number of children below the line, tracked toward zero.
- The share of unemployed workers actually receiving unemployment benefits, and the speed of first payment.
- The share of households able to absorb a modest emergency expense from savings.
- Retirement plan coverage among private-sector workers, tracked toward universal, and elder poverty.
- The effective marginal tax rate on low-income workers across the benefit cliffs, tracked down until every earned dollar pays.
- And the honest meta-metric this pillar has earned: whether the measurements themselves survive, in statute, whoever holds power.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say cash benefits create dependency and discourage work. The 2021 evidence says otherwise: employment did not collapse, families spent the money on food, rent, and school costs, and food insecurity and financial distress fell. What discourages work is the cliff design this brief eliminates, where earning more costs a family its benefits. If the concern is work, smoothing the cliffs is the pro-work position, and it is in plank three.

Some will say we can't afford a permanent child allowance. We ran it for a year and measured the return, and the long-run research says children who receive it are born healthier, learn more, and earn more, which comes back as growth and revenue. What we cannot afford is what we are buying now: 9.7 million children in poverty, billed annually to the health, education, and justice systems, forever.

Some will say Social Security is going broke, and this adds to it. This platform is the one proposing to fix Social Security's finances, by lifting the cap so high earners pay on every dollar like everyone else. The people waving the solvency flag while defending the cap are protecting the problem, not solving it.

Some will say this is just the welfare state under a new name. It is insurance and investment under their true names. A child benefit is growth policy with a fifty-year evidence base. Unemployment insurance is insurance. Retirement accounts are savings. The floor is what lets people take the risks a dynamic economy claims to want, change jobs, start businesses, move, because the fall is not fatal. Necessitous people are not free people, and they are not entrepreneurial ones either.

Some will say states and charity can handle it. The pandemic tested the state patchwork and it buckled, and the charity sector says loudly that it is the overflow valve, not the system. Insurance against universal risks priced across the whole country is what federal systems are for. That was true in 1935 and it is true now.

## What Would Change Our Position

The child allowance carries the platform's clearest falsifier. Critics projected that an unconditional credit would push parents out of work, with estimates as high as 1.5 million fewer workers; post-2021 studies generally found small or no decline, and this platform's position rests on that finding. So if a permanent allowance at scale produced the labor-supply exodus the critics predicted, visible in single-parent labor-force participation, the design changes: phase-ins, earnings supplements, whatever the evidence supports, with the goal of keeping the poverty reduction while fixing the incentive. If child poverty gains failed to persist beyond the first years, the platform would investigate rather than celebrate the launch.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. Eighty years ago Roosevelt said what everyone still knows: people who are one bad month from ruin are not free, whatever their paperwork says. We finally proved his point with data. In 2021 we sent families a modest monthly check for each kid, and child poverty fell to the lowest level ever recorded. Then we stopped, and it doubled in a year. The dial works. We just have to stop letting go of it. So make the child benefit permanent. Rebuild unemployment insurance so losing a job is a setback and not a catastrophe. Fix the cliffs so every dollar you earn leaves you better off. Give the half of workers with no retirement plan a way to build one, and shore up Social Security by asking the highest earners to pay on every dollar like everyone else does. And help every family build the small cushion that keeps a flat tire from becoming an eviction. A floor under every life, from childhood to old age. That is not charity. That is what freedom costs, and we already know it works.

## Footnotes

1. U.S. Census Bureau, "Record Drop in Child Poverty" (Supplemental Poverty Measure, 2021 data) ↩
2. U.S. Census Bureau, Supplemental Poverty Measure 2022: child poverty more than doubled after the credits lapsed ↩

PILLAR 4 · HOUSING

# Build Enough, Build Well

Enough homes to end the shortage, built to last, and connected by infrastructure that gives people their time and money back.

## Summary

A home is the foundation almost everything else is built on. It is hard to hold a job, raise a child, recover from illness, or take a risk without a stable, affordable place to live. A right to housing means nothing without enough housing to deliver it, so the work is to build. The shortage is manufactured: the country is short on the order of four million homes, about 75 percent of residential land in American cities is zoned for single-family houses only, and the median first-time buyer is now 40 years old, the oldest on record. This scarcity is not a law of nature. It is the predictable result of rules we wrote, which means it is something we can rewrite.

This brief proposes nine planks in three movements. Build enough: legalize the homes we banned, fast-track approval to clear standards and end the local veto, build social housing on public land, expand community land trusts, and protect tenants while targeting investor concentration where it actually harms. Build well: build to perform on lifecycle cost, and buy clean, durable, resilient materials. Build to connect: reuse the corridors we already have, and build transit that gives people their time and money back. One discipline runs through all of it: enough, not endless.

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## The Principle

A home is the foundation almost everything else is built on. It is hard to hold a job, raise a child, recover from illness, or take a risk without a stable, affordable place to live. A right to housing means nothing without enough housing to deliver it, so the work is to build. But building is not enough on its own. Build the wrong way and you get homes that decay, bills that climb, and neighborhoods that fall apart faster than they went up. Build without protecting the people already there and you displace the community you meant to help. Build without connecting it and you trap people in long commutes and car dependence.

So the standard is threefold. Build enough. Build well. Build at the scale the problem actually calls for. And it is worth being clear about something the housing debate usually skips: this scarcity is not a law of nature. It is the predictable result of rules we wrote, which means it is something we can rewrite. What is artificial can be undone.

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## The System Failure

The shortage is manufactured, and the numbers say so. The country is short somewhere on the order of four million homes by most recent estimates, and short roughly seven million rentals that are affordable and available to its lowest-income renters. That gap did not appear because we ran out of land, workers, or demand. It appeared because we made building hard.

The biggest cause we can actually fix is that we made the ordinary home illegal. Interest rates, construction costs, and materials all matter and lie mostly outside local control; this is the large lever that does lie within it. About 75 percent of residential land in American cities is zoned for single-family houses only,[1] which bans the duplexes, townhomes, and small apartment buildings that used to fill the space between a house and a high-rise. On roughly 60 percent of residential land in the largest metro areas, construction is capped at the height of a single-family home, two or three stories, and buildings can rise five stories or more on just 7 percent of it. Parking minimums force garages almost nobody asked for. Approval processes stretch for years and can be killed by a handful of objections, and completion times for both houses and apartments have recently hit record highs. Researchers describe the result not as a market failure but as regulation working exactly as designed, a system ruthlessly effective at preventing housing from being built. The proof that this is fixable is in the same data: Goldman Sachs found that if the most restrictive metros simply loosened their rules to match the least restrictive quarter of cities, the country would add about 2.5 million homes in a decade, erasing two-thirds of the shortage.[2]

The cost of all this lands on people. A third of American households, and half of all renters, are cost-burdened, spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Home prices are up more than half since the pandemic, the income needed to buy a single-family home has doubled since 2019, and the median first-time buyer is now 40 years old, the oldest on record, up from 31 a little over a decade ago. Homeownership, once the ordinary path into the middle class, has become an impossible dream for a generation.

Two more failures sit on top of the shortage. We build cheap instead of durable, bidding public projects on the lowest sticker price, which rewards short-term thinking and leaves taxpayers paying for early repairs; and much of the existing stock is both energy-wasteful, homes built before 1950 use about 45 percent more energy than new ones, and dangerously exposed, with FEMA's risk index placing more than 60 million housing units in areas of at least moderate disaster risk. And we keep building in a scattered pattern that locks in long commutes and car dependence. None of this is solved by building more of the same. A serious agenda has to fix the scarcity, the quality, and the connection together.

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## The Proposal

### Build Enough

1. **Legalize the homes we banned.** Allow duplexes, townhomes, accessory units, and small apartment buildings on residential land as of right, end mandatory parking minimums, and let more density rise near transit and jobs. This is the single biggest lever, and it mostly means getting government out of the way of housing that used to be normal to build. The evidence is unambiguous that this is where the supply is.
2. **Fast-track approval to clear standards, and end the local veto.** Replace open-ended, veto-prone review with fast, predictable approval for projects that meet clear standards on affordability, safety, labor, and climate. This is the housing face of the vetocracy fixed in the government pillar: give neighbors a voice, not a permanent veto. When missing-middle zoning passes and a handful of homeowners can sue to freeze it for years, the process has stopped serving the public. Cut delay, not standards. Speed should come from a process that is clear and quick, not from lowering what we expect a building to be.

3. **Build social housing on public land.** Use public and underused land to build permanently affordable, mixed-income housing through a public developer and through partnerships, the way other countries with functioning housing markets do. The private market will not build at the bottom of the income scale on its own, and public capacity is how that gap gets filled.
4. **Expand community land trusts and permanent affordability.** Grow community land trusts and other shared-equity models that take homes permanently off the speculative market, so public investment creates affordability that lasts instead of a subsidy that expires.
5. **Protect tenants and curb speculation, honestly and where it bites.** Protect tenants through just-cause standards, a basic floor of rights, and anti-displacement measures, so that new supply houses people rather than churning them. On corporate consolidation, be precise rather than populist, because the data demands it. Large institutional investors own only about 1 percent of single-family homes nationally, so they are not the reason housing is expensive; the shortage is. But their ownership is intensely concentrated, with roughly 80 percent of their homes in about 5 percent of counties and shares reaching a quarter of the single-family rentals in metros like Atlanta, and where they concentrate they evict at higher rates and push rents up faster. So target the concentration where it actually harms first-time buyers and renters, with anti-speculation, vacancy, and disclosure tools designed to survive legal challenge, and treat it as the secondary, local lever it is, not the main event. On rent, favor tools that do not choke supply: just-cause protection, anti-gouging limits, and social housing rather than blunt hard caps, which the evidence shows can shrink supply and mobility over time. Supply first, protection alongside it.

## Build Well

6. **Build to perform, and budget for the whole life of the thing.** Move public construction toward performance-based codes that say what a building or bridge has to achieve and let proven methods compete to get there, and budget on lifecycle cost rather than lowest bid. A cheap bridge that fails early is not actually cheap, and pretending otherwise is how we end up paying twice.

7. **Buy clean, build durable, build resilient.** Use public purchasing power to favor durable, low-carbon materials and methods, low-carbon and self-healing concrete, cleaner steel, mass timber, and modular construction, and build to withstand the disasters that now threaten tens of millions of homes. This is where housing meets the climate pillar: weatherize and harden as we build, because energy-wasteful and disaster-exposed housing is a bill and a risk we keep paying. Build it clean, build it strong, build it to last.

## Build to Connect

8. **Reuse what we already have.** Before building new corridors, use the ones we have. Underused freight and rail rights-of-way, existing roads, and existing public land can carry far more transit and housing than they do, at a fraction of the cost and disruption of starting from scratch.

9. **Build transit that gives people their time and money back, at world prices, and capture the value it creates.** Invest in transit at the right scale for each place, layering buses, bus rapid transit, rail, and even urban gondolas rather than forcing one answer everywhere, and plan housing and transit together so people can live near where they work. When public investment raises nearby land values, capture part of that value to fund the project and build affordable housing, and put anti-displacement protections in place before construction starts, not after the neighborhood has already turned over. The scandal is not that America builds transit. It is what America pays. New York's Second Avenue Subway cost 8 to 12 times the European baseline, about $2.6 billion per mile against Madrid's $320 million and Paris's $160 million, and the NYU Transit Costs Project, which studied 11,000 kilometers of rail across more than 50 countries, found the causes are fixable choices, not geology: soft costs that run 21 percent of construction here against 7 to 8 percent abroad, agencies that rent their judgment from consultants instead of keeping engineers on staff, procurement that pads every bid, and review processes that price in years of litigation. The fixes follow directly, and they are this platform's existing doctrine applied to transit. A green fast track: categorical exclusions from environmental review for electrified transit, cable, and bike projects inside existing public rights-of-way, with public input early, standardized, and time-capped, on the voice-not-veto principle, instead of late-stage lawsuits. Capacity as a condition: tie federal transit grants to in-house staffing benchmarks, so agencies rebuild permanent engineering and project-management teams and stop paying consultants to manage consultants. Standardization over monuments: modular station templates instead of bespoke underground caverns, and automated light-metro designs whose shorter, more frequent trains shrink the platforms and the digging. And empowered professional delivery organizations, benchmarked against the systems that actually hit their budgets, Madrid and Copenhagen, not the Anglosphere megaprojects that did not. The benchmark for ambition is Medellin, which stitched its steepest hillside neighborhoods into the city with gondola lines built for roughly $12 to $25 million per kilometer, a rounding error against American rail costs, now carrying more than 200,000 riders a day on an ordinary fare. And the returns went beyond mobility: in a peer-reviewed natural experiment, homicides fell 66 percent more in the Metrocable neighborhoods than in matched control neighborhoods. Transit built cheaply enough to actually build is safety and dignity infrastructure, not just mobility.

## Abundance Is Not Overbuilding

One discipline runs through all of it. The goal is enough, not endless. We are trying to build enough homes, infrastructure, and transit to meet real human need, not to chase development for its own sake. Abundance done well is built at human scale, in places people actually want to live, and it strengthens communities rather than bulldozing them. And it protects green space rather than consuming it: most of the housing legalized here is infill and gentle density inside places people already live, which is the opposite of sprawl. The single-family zoning regime this brief takes apart is itself a major driver of sprawl, forcing cities to pave outward, so building up and in actually saves open land. Prioritize infill over greenfield, protect parks, canopy, farmland, and wetlands, and treat access to green space as part of what makes housing humane.

## Homes End Homelessness

Homelessness is a housing problem before it is anything else, and the evidence for treating it that way is now overwhelming: Houston went all-in on Housing First, housing people directly and attaching services afterward rather than demanding sobriety or treatment as preconditions, and cut homelessness by more than 60 percent since 2011, housing over 30,000 people, the best performance among America's ten largest cities;[3] Finland ran the same play nationally and nearly abolished street homelessness. Houston's result came from more than the philosophy: a coordinated regional system that put every major provider onto one intake-and-housing pipeline, sustained federal and local funding, and a housing market with more slack than the coastal cities. The national version has to reproduce the coordination and the funding, not just the principle. The federal government has its own proof in HUD-VASH, which helped cut veteran homelessness by more than half.[4] The position: Housing First as the national standard, funded to scale, with supportive services attached to the home rather than gatekeeping it, and with the honest note that keeping people housed requires the affordable supply this whole brief exists to build. Criminalizing sleep solves nothing and costs more; homes solve homelessness, and the cities that acted on that sentence have the numbers.

## Implementation Pathway

Most of the supply agenda is decided by state and local governments, which control zoning, parking, and approvals, so the federal role is largely to push: tie housing and infrastructure dollars to the legalization of more housing, and fund the planning and public developers that get homes built. Social housing, community land trusts, and tenant protections run across all three levels, and the federal government can seed and finance them. The clean-construction standard moves through federal and state procurement and building codes. Transit runs through federal funding paired with regional planning, and value capture is largely a state and local tool federal money can encourage. The honest part is that none of this is fast unless the rules change, which is why so much of this brief is about clearing process rather than only writing checks.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

Much of the supply agenda costs little, because legalizing housing and speeding approval are mostly about changing rules. The public-housing and infrastructure investments are real, but they are designed to return public value: value capture lets the gains from public investment help pay for it, lifecycle budgeting saves money over the life of every project, and permanent-affordability tools mean a dollar of subsidy keeps working instead of expiring. The deeper return is economic. A region that cannot house its workers cannot grow, and one that traps people in long commutes and high rents taxes every family and every business. Enough housing, built well and connected, is among the highest-return investments a country can make.

## Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is that speed becomes an excuse to gut protections, so the rule is fixed: cut delay, not standards, and fast approval is reserved for projects that meet real bars on affordability, safety, labor, and climate. The second is displacement, where new investment prices out the residents it was meant to help, which is why anti-displacement protection comes before construction and why permanent-affordability tools matter. The third is that supply simply becomes new inventory for investors, which is why the tenant-protection and anti-speculation planks sit right next to the build agenda, scoped to where consolidation actually concentrates. The fourth is overbuilding for its own sake, which the discipline of enough checks. And the fifth, worth naming plainly, is that building more must not come at the expense of green space; the answer is to build in the right direction, infill and density over sprawl, which protects open land rather than consuming it.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on supply, stability, durability, and access.

- Homes permitted and built, especially missing-middle and permanently affordable homes, measured against the roughly four-million-home gap.
- Rent and home prices relative to local incomes, and the number of cost-burdened households, tracked toward the day the median first-time buyer is not 40.
- Eviction and displacement rates in areas receiving public investment, and investor concentration in the metros where it is highest.
- The share of public construction using performance-based codes, lifecycle budgeting, and clean, resilient materials, and the durability of what gets built.
- Transit access, commute times, and the share of new housing built near transit and jobs.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say this is federal overreach into local zoning. The federal government is not seizing zoning. It is attaching conditions to its own housing and infrastructure dollars, which it has always done, and asking communities that take public money to allow the housing their own workers need. Local control should not mean a permanent veto on anyone else moving in.

Some will say the market will solve housing if government gets out of the way. Getting out of the way is half of this agenda, through legalization and faster approval, and the data says that is where most of the supply is. But the market on its own will not build at the lowest end of the income scale, so supply and public capacity are both required.

Some will say we are scapegoating Wall Street landlords. No, the brief says the opposite: institutional investors own only about 1 percent of single-family homes and are not the cause of the crisis, the shortage is. Where they concentrate, in a handful of Sun Belt metros, they do real harm to renters and first-time buyers, so we target them there, honestly, rather than pretending they explain a national problem they don’t.

Some will say clean and durable construction costs more. Performance-based codes and lifecycle budgeting are designed to lower total cost, not raise it, by ending the false economy of cheap projects that fail early, and durable, efficient housing cuts the energy and disaster bills we now pay twice.

Some will say transit and social housing are too expensive. The expensive option is the status quo, in which regions cannot house their workers and families lose thousands a year to rent and commuting. Value capture and durable building are how this pays for itself. And much of the expense is self-inflicted: when New York builds subway at 8 to 12 times European costs, the honest response is to fix the costs, the way the Transit Costs Project has mapped, not to abandon the trains. Medellin built world-changing transit for tens of millions of dollars per kilometer. The constraint is not physics or money. It is process, and process is a choice.

## What Would Change Our Position

The supply thesis is measurable, and it could fail: if the states and cities that legalized missing-middle housing show no supply response within roughly five to seven years, long enough to clear the planning, permitting, financing, and construction lags a real supply response must run through, or rents that do not bend against comparable markets, the diagnosis was wrong somewhere and gets revisited. If displacement in upzoned neighborhoods systematically outran the protections, the sequencing changes, protections first. If public developers delivered at California high-speed-rail cost multiples, the delivery model gets fixed before another dollar scales it. And on transit, if the green fast track produced actual environmental harm rather than faster clean building, the categorical exclusions were drawn wrong and get redrawn.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. We do not have a housing shortage because we ran out of land or workers. We have one because we made it hard to build, easy to speculate on, and slow to approve, and the result is a generation that cannot picture owning a home. So build more homes, legalize the duplexes and small apartments we banned, and speed up approvals without lowering our standards. Give people a voice, not a veto. Protect the people already living in our neighborhoods so that building helps them instead of pushing them out. Build it to last instead of building it cheap and paying twice. And connect it with transit that gives people back their time. Build enough. Build well. Cut delay, not standards.

## Footnotes

1. Brookings Institution, “What can the next administration do about the U.S. housing shortage?” (the roughly-three-quarters single-family-only figure) ↩

2. Goldman Sachs Research, “The outlook for US housing supply and affordability” ↩

3. CBS News reporting on Houston’s Housing First results ↩

4. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, veteran homelessness cut roughly in half since 2010 (advocacy-adjacent analysis of HUD data) ↩

PILLAR 4 · NEW CITIES

# Build the Next American Places

Rail-connected, nature-cooled, climate-ready communities: rebuild the cities we have, grow new districts beside them, and prove out a handful of genuinely new cities where the evidence supports them.

## Summary

America should build new places again: rail-connected, nature-cooled, walkable communities in the country's more climate-resilient regions, ready to receive the people that heat, fire, and flood will move. The honest structure is three tracks, not a wave of cities in empty fields. First and largest, rebuild the legacy cities that already have streets, water, universities, and room, places like Cleveland, Buffalo, St. Louis, and Toledo, whose infrastructure once served far more people than live there now. Second, build complete new districts, planned like new cities but attached to existing ones, on rail yards, closed bases, brownfields, and edge land, where a unified plan can deliver in years what parcel-by-parcel fighting delivers in decades. Third, and deliberately limited, build two or three genuinely new-city pilots where a viable rail corridor, long-term water, committed employers, and honest demand analysis all line up, sized in phases of ten to twenty-five thousand residents, with independent evaluations that decide whether each phase earns the next.

Every funded place meets the same standard: daily needs within a walk or a short transit trip, transit running from first occupancy, at least 30 percent permanently affordable homes, nature built in as working infrastructure the way Medellín's Green Corridors cooled that city by about 2 degrees Celsius, and construction that doubles as a national proving ground for mass timber, additive manufacturing, regional materials, and the building knowledge this continent's first peoples developed over millennia, engaged as partners, never mined. This is the platform's biggest build, and its most explicitly hypothesis-shaped: we know the components work; whether they combine into thriving new American places is exactly what the pilots exist to find out.

## The Principle

A country that cannot build new places is a country that has decided its map is finished. Ours is not. Climate change is already redrawing it, and the only question is whether the redrawing is planned or panicked: whether families leave flood-prone and fire-prone regions on their own terms, toward places prepared to receive them, or as refugees after the disaster, toward places that never made room. The principle is to build the receiving capacity before the emergency, in the regions with water and comparative safety, connected by rail to the country's economic life, and designed from the first street for the century they will actually face. And the ambition is deliberate: this is the platform's answer to the idea that America cannot do big things anymore, a race not to a moon but to a way of living, where technology serves the people inside it, growth means better rather than merely more, and the proof is a place you can walk through.

## The System Failure

Three failures converge here. First, the housing crisis is worst exactly where adding housing is hardest: the regulatory gauntlet this pillar's lead brief documents makes building in high-demand metros a decade-long, parcel-by-parcel war, while the vetocracy brief shows why. Second, climate displacement is arriving without receiving capacity. Researchers already identify the Great Lakes region as a likely climate destination and warn that receiving communities must prepare housing and services before migration accelerates, not after. Nothing in current policy does that preparation. Third, the country has simply stopped making new places. The nation that built railroad towns, land-grant communities, the New Deal greenbelt towns, and the TVA's purpose-built cities now treats the founding of a place as something other countries do.

Other countries do. China built more than 3,800 new towns over four decades that now house over 150 million people, proof that governments can build at civilizational scale, and proof of what goes wrong when they build against demand: the same record produced the ghost cities, the speculative debt, the empty towers. Saudi Arabia's Line is the cautionary tale at the other extreme, a technological monument designed around a rendering rather than around people. The lesson this brief takes is neither "never build" nor "build anything": it is that new places succeed when demand anchors come first, phases stay small enough to stop, and the design serves residents rather than spectacle. Meanwhile the American population math counsels focus, not fantasy: the Census Bureau projects the national population peaking around 370 million near 2080 before declining.[1] This program is not justified by national growth. It is justified by redistribution, the millions who will move as climate pressure builds and housing costs push, and by the shortage of good places for them to land.

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## The Proposal

1. **Three tracks, priority in this order.** Legacy-city renewal first and largest: federal partnership to rebuild underused neighborhoods in cities that already own streets, water systems, universities, and hospitals, where rehabilitation is honestly compared against new construction and usually wins. Rail-hub districts second: complete new districts, master-planned like new cities but attached to existing municipalities, on assembled public land (rail yards, closed installations, brownfields, contiguous edge sites), with one plan, one permitting authority, by-right approval against pre-set standards, and firm deadlines, the Voice-Not-Veto Test applied in full. New-city pilots third and smallest: two or three genuinely new communities, only where a demand test is met before ground breaks: a viable rail corridor justified by existing intercity travel, secured long-term water, at least one committed anchor employer or institution, and independent population and employment analysis. No project anywhere is sold as a climate haven; the standard is lower comparative risk with an adaptation plan, because no American place is climate-proof.

2. **Rail first, corridors chosen by demand.** The network is layered, not uniform: true high-speed rail where density justifies it (the Midwest corridors radiating from Chicago, and their peers elsewhere), fast electrified intercity rail between regional cities, and local transit feeding every station. New districts and pilot cities locate on corridors that are viable without them, so a station strengthens the line rather than excusing it, and every community is a hub on the national network from its first day, at the construction costs the world pays, not the American premium, per this pillar's transit-cost doctrine.

3. **Public stewardship, not giveaway partnership.** A public development authority acquires land before routes and sites are announced, so the public captures the value its own investment creates instead of paying speculators for it. The public keeps the land; private and nonprofit builders compete for long-term ground leases with affordability, labor, and performance terms attached; land-value gains finance the rail, parks, schools, and utilities; and contracts carry open books, audit rights, and clawbacks. Private firms build much of these places. They do not own the government, the essential utilities, or the public squares. At least 30 percent of homes in every funded place are permanently affordable, locked before the first station is announced, because rail investment without affordability protection is a displacement machine, and the record says so.

4. **Nature as working infrastructure.** Medellin turned the edges of 18 roads and 12 waterways into connected green corridors and cooled the city by about 2 degrees Celsius on average, up to 4 in the corridors themselves, while cleaning air and returning biodiversity.[2] That is the design language here: continuous tree canopy over the walking and cycling network, restored streams and wetlands doing flood-control duty, parks engineered to store stormwater, cool roofs and shaded streets, native habitat running through the city rather than fenced outside it, and hard limits on floodplain building. Cities designed for people walking, with cars accommodated but never sovereign: most daily needs within a short walk or ride, no mandatory parking minimums, streets safe for an eight-year-old on a bicycle.

5. **Voluntary relocation, never abandonment.** Families in repeatedly damaged places get a real choice: relocation assistance covering replacement-cost housing, not depressed pre-disaster value; open to renters as well as owners; available to whole communities that choose to move together, with jobs, schools, healthcare continuity, and moving costs handled; and paired with continued adaptation investment for those who stay. Managed retreat and forced displacement are opposites, and the program is built to keep them so: no service withdrawal to push people out, no pressure dressed as help, and the choice to remain is respected and supported.

6. **A national proving ground, technology-neutral.** These places are where American industry refines what the world will need: additive construction, modular and panelized building, mass timber, low-carbon concrete, microgrids and storage, water reuse, and controlled-environment agriculture, competing against conventional methods on measured lifecycle cost, durability, emissions, and resident experience, never adopted as spectacle. The solar lesson applies exactly as far as it applies: sustained public demand drove solar's cost down more than 80 percent, and stable procurement from these communities can do the same for manufacturable systems, while site-built construction may never follow that curve, which is why everything competes and the measurements decide. Food follows the same honesty: controlled-environment agriculture more than doubled its operations from 2009 to 2019 and belongs in these cities where its economics work, but its energy costs and crop limits make it a fresh-produce layer, not food independence; the goal is regional food resilience, greenhouses on waste heat, gardens, regional farm contracts, and reserves.

7. **Building with the land, and with its first stewards.** The deepest building knowledge on this continent predates the grid: orientation to sun and wind, earthen mass, courtyards and shade, settlement patterned on watersheds, land managed with fire and care across generations. The program tests hybrid systems, engineered timber with straw and hemp-lime insulation, compressed earth with modern reinforcement, passive design validated by modern instruments, in occupied pilot buildings, region by region, because a Great Lakes palette is not a Plains palette. And it treats Indigenous knowledge as the property of nations, not a database to mine: government-to-government consultation from site selection onward, authority to decline or restrict, paid leadership roles, data sovereignty over culturally sensitive knowledge, contracting priority for tribal enterprises, revenue sharing where knowledge becomes product, and support for tribally led demonstration communities where nations want them.

## The Pilot Pro Forma: Rules Before Dollars

A serious pilot publishes its financial and governance skeleton before it asks for a dollar, and it publishes rules rather than pretending to cost precision it cannot have yet. This is that skeleton, and every line is a commitment the enabling statute would carry.

**The budget ceiling.** Each pilot's total federal exposure is capped in the authorizing statute, hard, before ground breaks. The cap is set by reference-class forecasting, published alongside the bill: the documented actual costs of comparable district-scale projects, foreign and domestic, including their overruns, not their brochures. If projected costs reach 125 percent of the authorized ceiling, work pauses and nothing continues without re-authorization in public. No supplemental-by-default, no too-far-along-to-stop. The ceiling is the point.

**The sequencing that prevents stranded assets.** The critique that a stop rule after rail and schools are built leaves stranded public assets is correct, so the sequence is built to make it impossible: demand validation gates come before heavy infrastructure, not after. Land assembly and utilities-scale planning first; a validation phase in which actual pre-commitments, employers signed, housing reservations deposited, institutions committed, must clear published thresholds; only then rail extensions, schools, and major public works. If validation fails, what exists is land and plans, which unwind cleanly, not empty stations.

**Land, bought in daylight.** Public land assembly is where insider dealing lives, so the rules are bright lines. Acquisition at published independent fair-market appraisal. No eminent domain for new-place pilots, none; a project that cannot assemble land from willing sellers at fair prices has failed its first market test. Every parcel acquisition disclosed on a public register within 90 days of the assembly phase closing (a short confidentiality window exists only to prevent speculative front-running, and it ends on a statutory date, not at an official's discretion). Officials and contractors with project knowledge are barred from land dealing in the corridor under clawback and criminal penalty. Where any pilot touches tribal land or treaty interests, the partnership rules in this brief govern: consent, not consultation theater.

**The debt structure.** Land purchases run through a public land bank financed by long-dated bonds secured by the land itself. District infrastructure is financed by value-capture instruments only after the validation gate, sized to captured value actually contracted, not projected. The federal role is defined exposure, capital grants inside the ceiling and loan guarantees with first-loss limits, never an open-ended backstop; there is no general-fund backfill of district debt, and the statute says so, because the moment investors believe Washington will eat any loss, discipline is fiction.

**The affordability bands, defined.** "30 percent permanently affordable" is not allowed to stay vague: of that share, at least one-third serves households at or below 50 percent of area median income, at least one-third between 50 and 80 percent, and the remainder up to 120 percent, mixed between rental and limited-equity ownership. Permanence is structural, delivered through public ground leases and community land trusts that survive any later sale, not through covenants that expire in thirty years. The subsidy mechanism is named: the land came in at pre-announcement value, and the write-down between that basis and market-rate ground rent is the permanent, non-appropriated subsidy that funds the bands.

**Local consent.** No pilot lands on a region that did not ask for it. Site selection requires affirmative approval by the host county's elected governing body or a referendum, and the surrounding region's metropolitan planning organization signs the infrastructure plan. The new place pays negotiated transition payments to host-county services until incorporation, so existing residents are not taxed to subsidize their new neighbor.

**Governance, staged.** A state-chartered development authority with a statutory sunset runs the build. At a defined population threshold, residents vote on municipal incorporation, and the authority's powers transfer to the elected government on a published schedule; policing and schools are contracted from the host county until incorporation, then transition by agreement; water, sewer, broadband, and district energy are built publicly and stay publicly owned. An authority that outlives its sunset without an incorporation vote is a failure mode, and the statute treats it as one: sunset means sunset.

**The unwind plan, written before groundbreaking.** Every gate carries a named failure disposition, published in advance. If validation fails: the land bank disposes of assembled land at market over a decade, with proceeds retiring the bonds, right-of-first-refusal to adjacent communities and to the legacy-renewal track, and any affordability covenants already attached persisting through sale. If a later gate fails: completed infrastructure conveys to the county or utility district at written-down value rather than rotting in escrow, and the authority dissolves on its sunset. Publishing the funeral arrangements is not pessimism. It is the discipline that separates a pilot from a boondoggle, and it is what the evaluation-gated language in this brief means in practice.

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## Implementation Pathway

A National Resilient Communities and Corridors Act establishes the development authority, the three tracks, and the competitive process: regional partnerships propose projects, every proposal is scored on the same published criteria (water, climate exposure, rail viability, demand evidence, infrastructure reuse, ecological cost, local democratic support, lifecycle cost per resident), and the best projects win regardless of track. Phases are the discipline: plan and acquire land quietly, build a first district of ten to twenty-five thousand residents with schools, clinics, groceries, and transit open on day one, measure everything through independent evaluation, and let the results decide expansion. A reasonable opening portfolio is eight to twelve legacy-renewal and district projects and two or three new-city pilots. The federal role is infrastructure, credit, land stewardship, and standards; each community gets an elected government and the freedom to diverge from the original plan, because a city is not a product and residents are not users.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

The Ledger lists this honestly as not yet scored, and this brief does not invent the number; the pilot legislation gets scored like everything else. What the design guarantees is the direction of the flows: public land acquisition ahead of announcement means the appreciation that rail and infrastructure create returns to the public that created it, ground-lease revenue and value capture service the infrastructure debt, and the affordability share is financed by the land economics rather than bolted on. Federal rail and infrastructure dollars, low-cost credit, and state contributions do the heavy lifting early; the return arrives as tax base, as industrial capability, as avoided disaster losses, and, if the pilots succeed, as the template. When public investment creates land value, the public keeps a substantial share. That rule is the finance model.

## Risks and Guardrails

The honest risk list is long, and the design answers each named risk. Ghost cities: demand anchors before construction, small phases, occupancy and employment benchmarks with real stop rules, and no financing structure that depends on perpetually rising land prices. Draining the cities we should be saving: the track priority runs the other way, legacy renewal is first and largest, and new projects near struggling cities must show they complement rather than cannibalize. Greenfield harm: compact footprints, already-disturbed land preferred, more surrounding land conserved than developed, and full accounting of embodied carbon and induced sprawl; some economically attractive sites should lose on ecological grounds, and the scoring lets them. Corporate capture: the stewardship model exists precisely for this, public land, open books, clawbacks, competitive rebidding. Coercive relocation: the voluntary rules above, in statute. Technocratic sterility: elected local government, phased organic growth, and no requirement that anyone live as a demonstration. This platform’s own vetocracy critique cuts both ways here, and the same test that binds permitting reform binds this program.

## Metrics for Success

Every phase gate measures, independently: construction cost per home against regional conventional baselines; occupancy and the pace of household formation; housing affordability including the 30 percent floor; resident energy, water, and transportation costs; transit ridership and mode share; employment access and business formation; heat and flood performance against design targets; health and social-connection indicators; displacement effects in surrounding communities; and public financial return on the land model. Publication is automatic, the dashboards are public, and the evaluations bind: a phase that misses its gates is redesigned, re-managed, or stopped, and the money moves to the tracks that are working.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will call this utopian central planning. The design is nearly the opposite: government builds enabling infrastructure and sets public-interest rules, then lets communities grow, diverge, and govern themselves, with funding gated on results rather than faith. The utopian move would be promising dozens of cities; this proposes two or three pilots and a lot of measurement. Some will say fix existing cities instead, and this brief agrees: legacy renewal is the first and largest track, and the honest comparison between rehabilitation and new construction is built into the scoring. Some will say rail stops cannot conjure economies, and that is why corridors must be viable without the new stops and pilots must show committed employers before ground breaks. Some will say it is corporate welfare in green paint; the answer is the stewardship model, which is precisely the set of terms a giveaway would omit. And some will say people will not move. Some will not, and nothing here compels them; the program bets that affordable homes, real jobs, short commutes, and safety from the next flood are reasons people have always moved, and the pilots will test the bet in public.

## What Would Change Our Position

This is the platform's most explicitly hypothesis-shaped proposal, so the falsifiers are the design. If the pilot districts miss occupancy and employment benchmarks, expansion stops, and that is a promise, not a prediction. If independent lifecycle comparison shows legacy-city rehabilitation consistently outperforming new construction on cost per resident and outcomes, the money follows the evidence into the cities we already have, and the new-city track shrinks to whatever niche the data supports. If relocation assistance shows coercive drift in practice, the program pauses before it scales. If the hybrid building systems lose to conventional construction on measured lifecycle cost and durability, they remain research rather than policy. And if land-value capture fails to finance the infrastructure as modeled, the fiscal design gets rebuilt before another site is announced. The ambition is the race; the evaluations are the brakes; both are the point.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. America used to build new places: railroad towns, land-grant colleges with towns around them, whole communities with purpose built in. Then we stopped, and now the places people need to live are unaffordable, the places climate change will empty have no plan, and the places that could receive millions sit underused in the middle of the country. So build again, in order: rebuild the great lake and heartland cities that already have the bones; raise new rail-hub districts beside the towns we have; and prove out a few genuinely new cities, cooled by trees and streams instead of just air conditioning, connected by fast trains, walkable end to end, with a third of the homes affordable forever, testing the best building ideas this country and its first peoples ever had. Not a monument. Not a rendering. A network of places where an ordinary family can afford a good life, and the proof that America still knows how to build one.

## Footnotes

1. U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 national population projections ↩
2. UN Environment Programme on Medellín's Green Corridors ↩

PILLAR 5 · CLIMATE

# Climate Action Is Renewal

Cleaner air, lower costs, better jobs, safer homes, and communities strong enough to withstand the weather we already have. The proof is in your lungs and your electric bill.

## Summary

Climate action has been sold to Americans as sacrifice, a list of things to give up now for a payoff that is distant, global, and abstract. That framing is wrong, and the evidence says so plainly. The largest returns on climate action are immediate, local, and measurable in human health: burning fossil fuels warms the planet and fouls the air people breathe right now, causing on the order of 200,000 premature deaths a year in the United States, and study after study finds the health savings from cleaner air alone can exceed the cost of the policy that delivered them.

This brief runs in two movements, mitigation and resilience, held together by the emissions math and the health lens. Build the clean economy: deploy clean energy and the jobs that come with it, electrify and weatherize homes, cut methane because it is the fastest lever we have, decarbonize the hard industrial core, and protect workers through the transition. Keep the emissions spine honest, including about overshoot, with carbon removal as a backstop and not a permit. And prepare for the climate we already have: prevention over recovery, hardened infrastructure with heat treated as the health emergency it is, and local resilience in every community. The cheapest disaster is the one we prevent.

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## The Principle

Climate action has been sold to Americans as sacrifice, a list of things to give up now for a payoff that is distant, global, and abstract. That framing is wrong, and the evidence says so plainly. The largest returns on climate action are not distant and they are not abstract. They are immediate, local, and measurable in human health.

Burning fossil fuels does two things at once. It warms the planet, and it fouls the air people breathe right now. Air pollution from human activity causes on the order of 200,000 premature deaths a year in the United States, and some estimates run higher, most of it from the same combustion that drives warming. So when you cut those emissions, you are not only slowing a change that arrives over decades. You are preventing heart attacks, asthma attacks, and early deaths in the next few years, in the communities doing the cutting. Study after study finds that the health savings alone can exceed both the climate benefit and the cost of the policy that delivered them. This is the whole reframe, and it is not spin. Climate action is renewal because the renewal shows up now: in air you can breathe, bills you can afford, jobs that stay here, and homes and towns that can take a hit and keep going.

There is also proof this scale of repair can be done, because humanity has already done it once. The Montreal Protocol phased out the chemicals destroying the ozone layer; nearly 99 percent of them are gone from production, and the ozone layer is on track to recover fully, around 2040 for most of the world and 2066 over Antarctica. The same treaty's Kigali Amendment, phasing down climate-heating refrigerants, is projected to avoid 0.3 to 0.5 degrees Celsius of warming by 2100, one of the largest single acts of climate mitigation ever taken. Planetary-scale environmental repair is not a hope. It is a documented capability.

That gives this pillar two jobs, and a single logic that ties them together. Build the clean economy that lowers emissions and lowers costs. Prepare for the climate we already have, because the disasters are here and the cheapest disaster is the one we prevent. And judge every plank in both by the same question a public-health officer would ask: what does this do for the health, safety, and pocketbook of a real person, this year, in this place. The climate math matters, and this brief keeps it honest. But the reason to act does not wait for the thermometer.

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## The System Failure

Three failures compound each other.

First, we have underbuilt the clean economy. Families pay more than they should for energy, we ceded manufacturing jobs we could have kept, and we did it even as clean energy and storage became the cheapest power in much of the country. The gap is not technological anymore. It is a failure to build.

Second, we have measured climate by the wrong clock and missed the bill we are already paying. The public debate fixates on a global temperature in 2100 while the health cost of dirty air is charged every single year, in emergency rooms and cemeteries, and falls hardest on the communities living closest to the smokestacks and the highways. Treating climate as a far-off, planetary problem has hidden the near, personal, and unequal damage that is happening now.

Third, we are dangerously exposed to the weather we already get. Storms, floods, fire, and heat are hitting harder and reaching places once considered safe, and far too much of our spending comes after the disaster, in recovery, rather than before it, in prevention that costs a fraction as much. Heat in particular is the deadliest weather hazard in the country, and it kills quietly, mostly poor and elderly people without cooling.

Underneath all three is a brittleness problem. We leaned on big, centralized systems, a far-away grid, globe-spanning supply chains, food that travels thousands of miles, and we hollowed out the local systems that let a community look after itself when the big systems fail.

And the honest scoreboard on the emissions themselves is grim, which is exactly why the co-benefit case matters so much. The IPCC's math for holding warming near 1.5°C required global emissions to peak before 2025 and fall about 43% by 2030 from 2019 levels, with methane down about a third, reaching net-zero $CO_2$ in the early 2050s. We are nowhere close. The 2025 Emissions Gap Report puts the world on track for roughly 2.8°C under current policies, emissions hit a record high in 2024, and 1.5°C is now likely to be breached, at least temporarily, within about a decade. A plank that pretends otherwise is not credible. The point of leading with health is that the case for action does not collapse when the global number slips, because the local payoff is real either way.

## The Proposal

The work runs in two movements, mitigation and resilience, held together by one spine, the emissions math, and one lens, the health and cost payoff that makes it worth doing regardless.

### Renewal: Build the Clean Economy

1. **Deploy clean energy and the jobs that come with it.** Build out clean power, storage, transmission, and domestic clean manufacturing, and pair it with real apprenticeships and training so the jobs are good ones that stay in the country. The aim is lower bills, a stronger industrial base, and cleaner air, not only lower emissions. The health return here is not automatic, which the evidence is clear about: capturing it means strategically retiring the dirtiest plants and pairing deployment with pollution controls, and targeting the communities breathing the worst air first. Everyone gets cleaner air. The most burdened places get the deepest cleanup.
2. **Electrify and weatherize homes so families pay less and breathe easier.** Help households move to efficient heating, cooling, and appliances and seal up leaky homes, aiming the deepest help at the families with the highest bills and the worst housing. This is climate policy that arrives as a smaller utility bill and a home that stays livable in a heat wave.
3. **Cut methane, because it is the fastest, cheapest lever we have.** Methane warms hard and fast and then leaves the atmosphere, which means cutting it slows warming within years, not decades. The IPCC calls for roughly a third less methane by 2030, and analysts find that cutting methane alongside tripling renewables and doubling efficiency could slow the rate of warming by about a third within ten years. Plug the leaks in oil and gas systems, capture it at landfills and large farms, and enforce it. No serious climate plank in 2026 can leave methane out.
4. **Decarbonize the hard stuff, not just the easy stuff.** The IPCC is blunt that this is impossible without deep cuts across all sectors, and the clean-power story leaves out the industrial core: steel, cement, chemicals, heavy transport, aviation, and shipping. Use public purchasing power and clean-industrial investment to bring low-carbon materials and processes to scale, which ties directly to the clean-construction standard in the build agenda. The jobs in these sectors are exactly the good, place-rooted jobs a just transition is supposed to protect.

5. **Protect workers and communities through the transition.** Where the energy economy changes, invest first and deepest in the workers and towns most affected, with new industry, retraining, and revenue, so the transition is done with these communities rather than to them.

## The Emissions Spine and an Honest Word About Overshoot

6. **Commit to the math, and tell the truth about the gap.** Adopt a national emissions trajectory tied to the real marks, a steep cut this decade on the path to net-zero by 2050, and report progress against it honestly rather than against a friendlier baseline. Where current policy misses, say so. Credibility here is worth more than optimism.
7. **Treat carbon removal as a backstop, not a permit.** The IPCC finds that some carbon dioxide removal is unavoidable to cancel out the residual emissions from sectors we cannot fully clean up in time. Build that capacity honestly, and frame it exactly as what it is: a backstop for the last hard tons, not a license to keep emitting. The job is to make any overshoot of 1.5°C temporary and minimal, because every fraction of a degree and every year of overshoot means more damage, higher adaptation costs, and heavier reliance on removal that is still costly and uncertain. This is the emergency-management instinct applied to the atmosphere: minimize the exposure, do not gamble on a cleanup you have not proven you can afford.

## Resilience: Prepare for the Climate We Have

8. **Invest in prevention, not just recovery.** Fund pre-disaster mitigation at scale, the unglamorous work of elevating, hardening, relocating, and protecting before the storm, because it is among the highest-return spending government does. Restore and durably fund the federal pre-disaster mitigation program, and make that commitment survive the next political swing rather than depend on it.
9. **Harden the infrastructure people depend on, and treat heat as the health emergency it is.** Strengthen the grid, water systems, roads, and bridges against the conditions we now face, and build in redundancy so a single failure does not cascade. And plan for heat directly, because it kills more Americans than any other weather hazard: cooling, tree canopy, drainage, cool roofs, and honest risk maps that tell people the truth. Heat adaptation is not comfort policy. It is mortality policy.

10. **Build local resilience into every community, and count it as health infrastructure.** The piece large projects miss is the local one. Support regional food systems so a broken supply chain does not empty the shelves, distributed energy and microgrids so a neighborhood can keep its lights and its clinic running when the main grid goes down, and cooling and warming centers and resilience hubs people can reach on foot. Fund the local emergency capacity, mutual-aid networks, and community institutions that do the real work in the first hours of a disaster. These are not soft extras. They are survival infrastructure, and they are cheap compared to what their absence costs in lives.

## Waste Is a Design Choice: Make the Producer Own the End of the Product

Start with the honest numbers, because the recycling story most Americans grew up inside is not the system they actually live in. Of all the plastic ever produced worldwide, about 9 percent has been recycled; 79 percent sits in landfills or the environment.[1] The United States recycled 8.7 percent of its plastic in 2018, the most recent year the EPA published the figure, and even that counted exported material as recycled.[2] And what does get recycled is mostly downcycled: mechanical recycling degrades plastic with each pass, so a bottle becomes carpet fiber or park-bench filler on its way to the landfill it was always headed for, while virgin plastic, a fossil fuel product, keeps flowing in at the top. The fragments are now inside us. The first biomonitoring study to look for microplastics in human blood found quantifiable particles in 17 of 22 healthy adults tested.[3] A system this far from its brochure is not a recycling system. It is a waste system with good marketing.

The marketing was deliberate, and the platform names it precisely because the receipts are public. Keep America Beautiful, founded in 1953 by the American Can Company and Owens-Illinois Glass and later joined by Coca-Cola, ran the famous 1971 “Crying Indian” ad that taught Americans litter was a personal failing, while environmental groups resigned from its advisory council over its work against bottle bills. Decades later, industry insiders said the strategy out loud to NPR and PBS Frontline: the former head of the plastics industry’s own lobby explained that if the public believed recycling was working, “they are not going to be as concerned about the environment,” even as internal industry documents doubted plastic recycling could ever be made economically viable.[4] BP ran the same play on carbon, hiring an ad agency in 2004 to popularize the personal “carbon footprint” so the ledger would read as yours rather than theirs. And California’s 2024 suit against ExxonMobil alleges the current version: marketing “advanced recycling” while, per the complaint, 92 percent of the plastic processed became fuel that was burned, not new plastic.[5] Those courtroom claims are allegations, not adjudicated findings, and this platform labels them as such; the fifty-year pattern they sit inside is documented history. The play is always the same: move the responsibility for waste onto the person holding the wrapper and away from the company that designed the wrapper.

So the fix follows from the diagnosis: responsibility returns to the producer. Extended producer responsibility for packaging, where the companies that put material into the world fund the systems that take it back and answer for real targets, is already law in seven states: Maine, Oregon, Colorado, California, Minnesota, Maryland, and Washington. The platform’s position is a national floor built on what those states prove out. Pair it with a national deposit-return system, the most proven tool in the drawer: the ten bottle-bill states far out-recycle the rest, the two with a ten-cent deposit lead them all, and Michigan’s redemption rate averaged above 90 percent for decades,[6] though rates across deposit states have slipped since the pandemic and need the same maintenance any system needs. Add truth in labeling, so the chasing-arrows symbol can only appear on products actually recycled at scale, and honest accounting that counts material as recycled only when it becomes material again, not when it is exported or burned as fuel.

The deepest fix is upstream, which is exactly why producer responsibility is the right lever: once a company owns the end of its product, it finally has a reason to design a better product. That means refill and reuse systems, standardized returnable containers, glass where it serves, and public research into bio-based materials, including hemp-derived plastics, carried honestly as evaluation-gated bets rather than proven substitutes at scale, the same discipline this platform applies to every promising-but-unproven option. What would change our position here: if the state producer-responsibility programs now coming online fail to raise real, measured recycling and reuse rates over their implementation windows, the answer is to redesign the mechanism, not to retreat into the fiction that a person sorting into a blue bin can fix a system engineered upstream of them.

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## Implementation Pathway

The clean-economy agenda runs through federal investment, tax policy, and standards, much of it already in motion, but it is bottlenecked by something the standard platform ducks: we cannot build fast enough. Clean energy that cannot get connected lowers nobody's bill, and the binding constraints now are permitting timelines, transmission that takes a decade to site, and interconnection queues years deep. Permitting and transmission reform are therefore not a side issue, they are load-bearing, and they connect directly to the build agenda. Methane and industrial standards run through federal rules and procurement. Mitigation and resilience run through federal funding delivered to states, regions, and localities, where preparedness actually happens, and the public-health capacity this leans on is the same capacity the foundations pillar builds. The local-resilience agenda is the most decentralized of all, federal and state dollars supporting capacity built and run close to the ground. Coordination is the federal job: only national power can finance this at scale, set standards, and respond when a disaster exceeds any one community. The resilience itself lives locally.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

This is some of the best-returning money a government can spend, and the co-benefit evidence is why. Reviews of the decarbonization literature repeatedly find that the monetized health benefits of cleaner air, fewer deaths and hospitalizations, can offset the cost of the climate policy on their own, before counting a single dollar of avoided climate damage, and typically exceed the cost of the clean electricity that produced them. Pre-disaster mitigation pays back several times over in avoided damage, and every major flood, fire, and storm makes that math more lopsided. Electrification and efficiency lower bills, so the household feels the return directly. Local resilience is cheap relative to the cost of a community that cannot feed, power, or cool itself in a crisis.

So the public value here is unusually easy to state and unusually hard to argue with. It is measured in premature deaths that never happen, asthma attacks that never send a kid to the ER, bills that fall, jobs that stay, and disasters that never become catastrophes. Framing climate as renewal is not messaging. It is an accurate description of what these investments do, and the receipts are in the health data.

## Risks and Guardrails

The health co-benefit is real but it is not automatic, and the evidence is explicit on this. Cutting CO2 anywhere helps the climate, but the air-quality and mortality payoff depends on retiring the dirtiest sources and controlling pollution, and on aiming that cleanup at the most exposed communities, since carbon cuts alone do not close the racial and economic gaps in who breathes the worst air. So the guardrail is to design for health and equity deliberately, not to assume they fall out of decarbonization on their own. The just-transition plank has to be funded rather than promised, or the workers and towns it names will rightly stop believing it. The overshoot framing has to stay honest, minimizing and shortening the overshoot rather than treating removal as an escape hatch. And the balance between big infrastructure and local capacity has to be kept, because a plan that pours concrete while letting community capacity wither will fail the next time the concrete does.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on health, cost, emissions, and resilience, in that order, because that order is the argument.

- Premature deaths and hospitalizations avoided from cleaner air, tracked especially in the most burdened communities, and progress toward air-quality standards.
- Heat-related deaths and illness, and the share of vulnerable residents within reach of cooling and resilience hubs.
- Household energy bills, especially for lower-income families, and homes weatherized and electrified.
- Emissions against the stated national trajectory, methane specifically, and clean-energy and clean-industry capacity built, with the transition regions tracked by name.
- The ratio of money spent on prevention to money spent on recovery, and disaster losses avoided.
- Local-resilience capacity in place: food systems, microgrids and backup power, accessible cooling, and trained local emergency and mutual-aid networks.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say climate action kills jobs and raises costs. The opposite is the design. This agenda lowers energy bills, creates domestic jobs that cannot be offshored, and its health savings alone can exceed its cost. The families who save the most on bills, and who breathe the biggest air-quality gains, are the lower-income households paying the most today.

Some will say it is sacrifice now for benefits we will never see. This is the myth the health evidence kills. The largest returns are near-term and local, not distant and global. Cleaner air prevents deaths and illness in the next few years, in the communities doing the work. You do not have to wait for 2100 to get paid.

Some will say 1.5 is dead, so why bother spending. Because every fraction of a degree and every year of overshoot means more damage and more cost, and because the health and bill savings accrue no matter what the global thermometer does. Giving up is the one strategy guaranteed to maximize the harm, and it forfeits a health dividend that has nothing to do with the international number.

Some will say resilience and mitigation are too expensive. Recovery is the expensive option. We already spend enormous sums cleaning up after disasters we could have blunted for a fraction of the cost, and every prevented catastrophe is money and lives saved. The cheapest disaster is the one we prevent.

Some will say this is federal overreach. Coordination is exactly what only the federal government can provide, financing resilience at scale, setting standards, and responding when a crisis outstrips local capacity. The resilience itself is built locally, in communities, which is the opposite of a distant program imposed from above.

Some will say markets will handle the transition. Markets are already making clean energy cheap, which is welcome. But markets do not on their own protect the workers a transition displaces, capture the health co-benefits for the communities that need them most, or build the local resilience a community needs, and those are public responsibilities.

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## What Would Change Our Position

The health co-benefits frame rests on the air-pollution mortality literature; if that evidence were revised sharply downward, the brief's central reframe would weaken and the case would rest more on direct climate damages, stated at their EPA-estimated value. If fee-and-dividend in practice failed to cut emissions where implemented, or the dividend failed to protect lower-income households despite the design, the pricing plank would be rebuilt around standards and public investment. If methane charges produced no abatement response from operators, the fee was set wrong. The commitment is to the outcome, cheaper energy and fewer deaths, not to any single instrument.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. Climate action is not about what you have to give up. It is cleaner air in your lungs this year, a lower power bill this winter, good jobs that stay here, and a town that can take a hit and keep going. The pollution that heats the planet is the same pollution filling emergency rooms right now, so cleaning it up saves lives today, in your community, before it ever touches the global thermometer. So build the clean economy that lowers costs and creates work, cut the methane that is the fastest thing we can do, and get ready for the weather we already have, because we spend a fortune cleaning up after disasters we could have prevented for far less. And remember that resilience is not just big infrastructure. It is cooling centers, backup power, local food, and neighbors who look out for each other. Climate action is renewal. The cheapest disaster is the one we prevent.

## Footnotes

1. Geyer, Jambeck & Law, “Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made,” Science Advances (2017) ↩
2. EPA, Facts and Figures: Plastics Material-Specific Data (2018 data) ↩
3. Leslie et al., “Discovery and quantification of plastic particle pollution in human blood,” Environment International (2022) ↩
4. NPR/PBS Frontline, “How Big Oil Misled the Public Into Believing Plastic Would Be Recycled” (2020) ↩
5. California Attorney General, People v. ExxonMobil press release and complaint (allegations, not adjudicated findings) ↩
6. Bottle Bill Resource Guide, Michigan program data (deposit-advocacy source; figures from state agencies) ↩

PILLAR 6 · INNOVATION

# Innovate Boldly. Share the Gains.

When the public takes the risk and funds the breakthrough, the public should share in the reward.


## Summary

Public investment should produce public return, and innovation should serve human agency rather than erode it. When taxpayers fund the risky early work, they should not watch every dollar of the upside flow to private hands while the bill for the infrastructure, the failures, and the side effects stays public. The record is documented down to the agency and the grant: every technology that makes the iPhone smart was publicly funded before Apple assembled it, and NIH funding contributed to the research behind every single one of the 210 new drugs the FDA approved from 2010 to 2016. The public took the risk. The public rarely saw a dividend.

This brief proposes six planks: attach a public return when public money does the early, risky work, using authority the government has held since Bayh-Dole and almost never uses; pay a citizens' innovation dividend the way Alaska has for forty years; make publicly funded medicine affordable; make big new computing loads pay their own way under the cost-causation principle utility regulators already know; share the gains with the workers automation displaces; and reform patents to keep markets open. This is not an anti-innovation argument. It is the opposite: a country that shares the gains of innovation will invest more in the next breakthrough, not less. Innovate boldly, and share the gains.


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## The Principle

Public investment should produce public return, and innovation should serve human agency rather than erode it. Those are the two halves of one idea. The first says that when taxpayers fund the risky early work, they should not watch every dollar of the upside flow to private hands while the bill for the infrastructure, the failures, and the side effects stays public. The second says that technology, and artificial intelligence above all, should expand what people can do and decide, not concentrate power in a few hands or treat workers as costs to be removed. AI should handle the paperwork. People should make the decisions.

This is not an anti-innovation argument. It is the opposite. A country that shares the gains of innovation will invest more in the next breakthrough, not less, because the public keeps funding what it can see paying off. Innovate boldly, and share the gains.

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## The System Failure

The standard story of American innovation is a myth of lone genius and private daring, and the record does not support it. The public built the foundation, took the early risk, and then handed the returns away almost entirely.

Take the device that defines the myth. Every technology that makes the iPhone smart was funded by the public before Apple assembled it. The internet and Siri came out of DARPA, GPS out of the Navy's Navstar program, the multi-touch screen out of grants from the CIA and the National Science Foundation, the lithium-ion battery out of the Department of Energy.[1] Google's search algorithm was seeded by an NSF grant. Tesla's batteries and solar came out of Energy Department support. Steve Jobs' real genius was integration, taking decades of taxpayer-funded research and building something beautiful on top of it. The public took the risk. The public rarely saw a dividend.

Medicine is the sharpest case, because there the public pays twice. NIH funding contributed to the research behind every single one of the 210 new drugs the FDA approved from 2010 to 2016, more than $100 billion of public money across more than 200,000 grant-years. A follow-on study found $187 billion of NIH funding behind 354 of the 356 drugs approved over the full decade, an amount comparable to what the pharmaceutical industry itself invested. Since the 1930s, the public has put on the order of $900 billion into the biomedical knowledge base the entire industry stands on. And then Americans pay about twice the per-capita price for prescription drugs that people in other wealthy countries pay, for medicines their own taxes helped create. Fund the science, then pay monopoly prices on top of the science. That is paying twice, and we have simply gotten used to it.

Operation Warp Speed is the freshest proof of both halves of this argument. Public money and guaranteed public purchases produced safe, effective vaccines in about eleven months instead of the usual decade, government at its most capable, and the leading vaccine was co-developed with NIH scientists on a publicly funded platform. Then the pattern held: taxpayers funded the research, de-risked the manufacturing, and bought the doses, while the companies kept the patents and the pricing power once the emergency ended. The public took the risk twice and the return was priced like it took none. The lesson is not that the program was wrong. It is that public investment this powerful should carry the public's terms.

Two newer failures sharpen the pattern. Artificial intelligence and the data centers behind it are being built at a scale that strains shared public resources. Electricity bills were among the largest drivers of inflation in 2025, and in the regions where data centers cluster the cost pressure is intense: in the largest grid market, PJM, capacity prices jumped roughly elevenfold in two years, the independent market monitor tied 63 percent of the 2025-2026 auction increase to data centers,[2] and that one auction added $9.3 billion to the costs recovered from ordinary customers. The honest version of this problem is not that computing uses power. It is that the century-old utility model spreads the cost of new infrastructure across every household, so a single load the size of a city, owned by some of the richest companies on earth, can push its costs onto ordinary ratepayers unless regulators stop it. Meanwhile automation is moving into work faster than our institutions are preparing people for it, and patent thickets and monopoly power are increasingly used to block competition rather than reward invention. Innovation is being captured at exactly the moment its stakes are highest.

## The Proposal

Keep the part that works, bold public investment in research. Fix the part that does not, the one-way flow of the gains. Six planks.

1. **Attach a public return when public money does the early, risky work.** When public funding, public research, or public data is behind a commercial product, attach a return as a condition of the deal: an equity stake, revenue sharing, open or reasonable-cost licensing, affordability requirements, or clawbacks, scaled to the size of the public contribution. This is not a new power. The government already has the authority to put strings on its own money and its own research, including the march-in and licensing rights it has held since the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 and almost never uses. The job is to use it consistently and predictably across agencies rather than handing the entire upside away by default, and to keep the terms proportionate so they reward the public without punishing the private development that turns research into products.
2. **Pay a citizens' innovation dividend.** Direct the returns the public earns, from equity, royalties, and licensing, into a fund that pays back to the people, whether as a direct dividend, as reinvestment in the next round of research, or as support for the workers and communities most exposed to technological change. This is not utopian. Alaska has paid its residents an annual dividend from the returns on a public asset for over forty years, and Norway turned its public resource wealth into a fund that works for its citizens. The point is that people can see and feel their stake in the innovation their taxes made possible.
3. **Make publicly funded medicine affordable.** Where public research or public dollars helped develop a drug, attach reasonable-price and access conditions, so Americans are not charged monopoly prices for medicine they already paid to create. Pair it with the drug-price negotiation and the crackdown on pharmacy middlemen in the foundations agenda. This is the clearest case of paying twice, and the easiest to fix, and the evidence that the public funded the underlying science for essentially every recent drug is the argument that wins it.

4. **Make big new computing loads pay their own way.** Set the rule that the build-out of AI and the data centers powering it serves the public rather than billing the public. The fix is a principle utility regulators already know, cost causation: the party that causes a cost should pay it. Require that massive new loads cover the full cost of the generation, transmission, and grid upgrades needed to serve them, through dedicated rates and contracts, rather than smearing those costs across households that never agreed to subsidize them. Voluntary pledges from tech companies to cover their own power are welcome but not sufficient, because utilities and state regulators, not the companies, decide who ultimately pays. Put the protection in the rules. Pair it with public-interest investment in AI that improves public services, and with transparency and a right to contest high-stakes automated decisions, so consequential calls about people stay accountable and humane.
5. **Share the gains with the workers automation displaces.** As automation spreads, fund retraining, redeployment, and income support, give workers a real voice in how new technology is introduced, and treat the goal as augmenting human work and freeing people from drudgery rather than simply cutting headcount. Productivity gains built on public research should lift the workers who help generate them, not just the shareholders. AI should handle the paperwork. People should make the decisions.
6. **Reform patents and keep markets open.** Tighten patent quality and curb the abuses, the thickets, the evergreening, the strategic litigation used to block competition rather than reward invention, and use competition policy to keep the gains of innovation from hardening into permanent monopoly. Reward real creation while keeping the door open for the next innovator.

## Lead the AI Transition Publicly, and Make Citizens Shareholders

The internet is this brief's founding story: a government project, built as public infrastructure, that corporations then implemented and brought to consumers, creating trillions in value on a public foundation. Artificial intelligence inverted that order, corporations leading, the public reacting, and this platform's position is to put it back. AI is the culmination of accumulated human knowledge; the models are trained on the public's collective writing, science, art, and code, which makes AI a shared economic engine by its very construction, not a private invention that owes the public nothing. So: public leadership of the trajectory, through public research capacity, public compute, procurement power, and a federal evaluation capability that understands frontier systems as well as their makers do. Public terms on the money, the same Bayh-Dole logic this brief already applies, extended to AI: where public funding, data, infrastructure, or the public's accumulated knowledge underwrites commercial AI, the public holds a stake, and its returns flow into the citizens' dividend this brief already proposes, so every American is a shareholder in the technology their civilization trained. And the floor that already exists here holds: transparency, liability that stays with the deployer, workers sharing the gains of the automation they absorb, and AI handling the paperwork while people make the decisions. We are not against AI; this platform is partly built with it, and says so. We are against the future's most important technology being governed by the few companies that got there first.

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## Implementation Pathway

The public-return standard is established by federal statute and applied through the agencies that already fund research and buy first products, building on authority the government has but rarely exercises. The citizens' dividend is created in the same legislation that defines where the returns go. Medicine affordability runs through the terms of federal research funding and procurement and through drug-pricing law. The AI and large-load rules run partly through federal policy and heavily through state utility regulators, who hold the pen on who pays for new energy demand, so this is a federal-and-state fight, with live vehicles already moving at both levels. The transition fund is federal, and patent and competition reform run through patent law and antitrust enforcement. Most of this is less about new spending than about the conditions placed on spending and research the country already does.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

This pillar is designed to be largely self-financing, generating revenue over time rather than consuming it, a design claim carried as intent on The Ledger until it is scored. The returns that fund the citizens' dividend come from value the public helped create and would otherwise have surrendered entirely. Affordability conditions on publicly funded medicine save public health programs and households real money, given that Americans currently pay roughly double what other wealthy countries pay. Making large computing loads pay their own way protects ordinary ratepayers from subsidizing the infrastructure of the most profitable companies on earth. The public value is twofold: a fairer split of the gains from innovation, and a public that, seeing it shares in the upside, stays willing to fund the bold research that produces the next breakthrough.

## Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is that public-return conditions, set badly, discourage the very investment they are meant to reward. The guardrail is honesty about the division of labor. The evidence is clear that public money does the foundational, high-risk basic science, more than 90 percent of that NIH funding was research on the underlying biology, not the final drug, while the private sector usually does the applied invention and commercialization that turns science into a product. Both are real. So the return has to be proportionate to the public contribution, predictable, and designed to keep the United States the best place in the world to build, not a penalty on success. Claiming the public invents everything would be as false as the myth that it invents nothing, and the credible position rejects both.

The second risk is capture, where the conditions get bent to serve incumbents, which is why transparency and independence matter. On AI and ratepayers, the honest caveat is that steady demand growth does not automatically raise everyone's bills, and in some cases spreading fixed costs over more usage lowers them; the real problem is the speed and scale of these loads and a cost-allocation model that lets them shift costs onto households, so the fix is targeted cost-causation, not a blanket claim that computing gouges the public. And worker protection has to be funded rather than promised, because a transition fund that exists only on paper is not protection at all.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on returns, access, and fairness.

- Public returns generated from publicly funded innovation, and the size of the citizens' dividend or reinvestment they support.
- Prices and access for medicines developed with public funding, measured against what the public spent to develop them.
- The share of new energy and infrastructure costs from large computing loads borne by those loads rather than by ordinary ratepayers, and the direction of residential bills in data-center regions.
- Worker outcomes in automating sectors: retraining, redeployment, and wages relative to the productivity gains.
- Competition and patent-quality measures, and the rate of new entrants in innovative markets.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say public-return conditions will strangle innovation and chase investment away. The conditions apply only where public money did the early work, and they scale to that contribution. Asking a fair return on the public's own investment is what any investor would do, and a public that shares the gains funds more research, not less. The country already attaches strings to its money everywhere else; it simply forgets to when the upside is largest.

Some will say this is the government picking winners. It is the reverse. The government is already funding the research and buying the first products. This asks for a return on investments it already makes, rather than handing the entire upside away by default. Picking winners would be new. Getting paid for the bets we already place is just prudence.

Some will say AI rules will leave America behind. The rules target who pays for the build-out and how high-stakes systems treat people, not whether the country innovates. Protecting ratepayers and workers and keeping consequential decisions accountable is how you build the public support that sustains a technology over the long run.

Some will say drug-pricing conditions will end medical research. Most of the basic science already runs on public funding, for essentially every recent drug, and asking fair prices on what the public paid to develop strengthens the case for that funding rather than weakening it. The pharmaceutical industry is right that its applied development and its patents are real and necessary; the answer is a proportionate return, not a claim that industry does nothing.

Some will say the public didn't really build all this. The record says otherwise on the foundations, from the internet and GPS to the biology behind modern medicine, and it is documented down to the agency and the grant. The honest claim is not that the public invents everything, but that it funds the risky foundation and deserves a share of what gets built on it.

## What Would Change Our Position

The public-return agenda could over-reach, and the falsifier is the pipeline: if attaching returns to public funding measurably chilled drug development or commercialization in early implementations, companies declining public money and patients losing therapies, the terms were priced wrong and get lightened toward the tools with the least drag. If cost-causation rates pushed compute loads offshore while ratepayers saved nothing, the rate design failed its own test. The platform's bet is that the public can be a demanding investor without being a destructive one; where a specific term breaks that balance, the term goes, not the principle.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. The internet, GPS, the touchscreen in your pocket, the science behind your medicine, all of it was built with public money. You took the risk. You rarely got the reward. That should change. When your taxes fund the breakthrough, you should share in what it earns, through a dividend, through lower drug prices, or through investment in the next discovery. And as AI arrives, it should make your life easier and your work better, not stick you with the power bill for a data center and take your job. Innovate boldly. Share the gains.

## Footnotes

1. Peer-reviewed analysis of public funding behind smartphone core technologies (the agency-by-agency lineage documented in the entrepreneurial-state literature) ↩
2. IEEFA on PJM capacity-auction increases attributed to data-center growth ↩

PILLAR 7 · ECONOMY

# Reward Contribution. Stop Extraction.

Markets that reward the people who build, work, invent, and serve, not the ones who hoard, corner, squeeze, or dump their costs on everyone else.

## Summary

This project is not anti-market. It is anti-extraction. Markets are extraordinary at organizing effort and rewarding the people who build, work, invent, and serve. The problem is that too much of our economy has stopped rewarding contribution and started rewarding extraction: hoarding what others need, cornering a market, charging for access to things people cannot do without, using political power to lock in advantage, and quietly dumping costs onto neighbors, workers, and the future. The numbers are not close. Average markups over cost in American firms rose from 21 percent in 1980 to 61 percent in 2016. The Treasury Department estimates that employer power in concentrated labor markets holds wages roughly 20 percent below what workers would earn under real competition. And some industries impose more damage on the public through pollution than the entire value they add to the economy.

The fix is not to replace markets but to make them fair again, so that the people who actually create value get the gains and the people who merely extract it do not. This brief proposes rebuilding worker power, broadening ownership, creating public options where private markets fail people, making taxation honest through a Tax Code Public Value Test and a fix to the regressive Social Security cap, and reining in the extraction economy of junk fees, surveillance pricing, noncompetes, and financial stripping. It then goes one level deeper, to the two forms of extraction our bookkeeping hides: prices that do not include the damage a product does, and a growth statistic that counts the damage as gain. Make prices tell the truth. Count what matters. Reward contribution. Stop extraction.

## The Principle

A market economy is supposed to reward contribution. You make something people want, you do work others value, you invent or build or serve, and you are paid for it. That is the deal, and when it holds, markets are one of the best tools we have. Extraction breaks the deal. It is income that comes not from contributing but from controlling: owning a scarce necessity and charging for access, buying up competitors to raise prices, burying fees in the fine print, or capturing the rules so the game tilts permanently in your favor.

The principle has an affirmative half, and it is the heart of this pillar. A society reveals what it values by what it pays, and by that measure America has stopped valuing the work it cannot live without. Teachers now earn 26.9 percent less than similarly educated professionals, a record gap, and they are paid less than their peers in every single state. The people who care for children and elders earn a median of $17.36 an hour. The plumber, the nurse, the firefighter, the line worker, the engineer who keeps the bridge standing: these are the people whose work makes everything else possible, and the market's signal to all of them, for three decades, has been that they chose wrong. Meanwhile the culture's picture of making it has quietly inverted: the celebrated endgame is no longer to build or serve but to assemble enough assets, rents, and yields that you never have to work again, withdraw behind the gates, and stop participating. To be clear about what this is not: it is not a judgment of anyone's choices, and this platform does not police how people earn a living. People respond to the prices a society sets. When flipping assets pays several times what teaching pays, that is not a failure of anyone's character. It is a price signal, and we are the ones who set it. Commerce and government are both instruments for resetting it: invest in the people who produce what we need rather than only in the assets that extract what we have, so that the work a community depends on pays enough to anchor a dignified life, a job is a source of purpose and standing rather than something to escape, and contribution, not exit, is what this economy celebrates.

There is a second kind of extraction, older and larger, that rarely gets named. When a firm profits by pushing its real costs onto other people, the asthma downwind of a smokestack, the flooded town downstream of a warming climate, the unpaid family member who provides the care the market never priced, that is extraction too. Economists call these externalities. A plainer word is cost-shifting. A price that leaves out the damage is not a market price. It is a hidden subsidy, paid by whoever gets hurt. The test for any policy here is simple. Does it reward people for contributing, or does it let them take from everyone else, whether through the fine print or through the air? We are pro-market precisely because we are anti-extraction, since extraction is what corrupts a market and turns it against the people it should serve.

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## The System Failure

For decades, the gains of a growing economy have flowed away from the people who produce them. This is measurable. Economists Jan De Loecker, Jan Eeckhout, and Gabriel Unger, studying six decades of firm data, found that average markups charged by American firms rose from 21 percent above cost in 1980 to 61 percent by 2016, while average profit rates rose from 1 percent to 8 percent of sales.[1] That gap is market power, and it helps explain why the labor share of income has fallen. On the other side of the ledger, the Treasury Department concluded in 2022 that weak competition among employers, concentration plus practices like noncompete clauses and misclassification, holds American wages roughly 20 percent below the competitive level.[2] The Federal Trade Commission found that about 18 percent of American workers, roughly 30 million people, were bound by noncompete clauses, and estimated that ending them would raise earnings by 400 to 488 billion dollars over a decade. Its 2024 rule doing exactly that was blocked in court, which is why the job now belongs to Congress and the states.

Extraction also reaches into daily life. Before regulators forced changes, credit card late fees alone cost families more than 14 billion dollars a year, and overdraft fees took another 12.6 billion at their peak. Companies experiment with surveillance pricing that charges each customer the most an algorithm thinks they will pay. Corporate investors have bought up large shares of the housing in some markets and turned shelter into a yield. And the tax code rewards wealth over work while hundreds of billions in tax preferences are never asked to prove they serve any public purpose.

Then there is the extraction our accounting hides entirely. In a landmark study in the American Economic Review, economists Nicholas Muller, Robert Mendelsohn, and William Nordhaus added up the air-pollution damage caused by each American industry and compared it to the value each industry adds. For several industries, the damage exceeded the value added. Coal-fired electricity was the largest single offender: its air-pollution damages ran from 0.8 to 5.6 times everything the industry contributes to the economy. The Environmental Protection Agency's own estimate puts the damage from a single ton of carbon dioxide at about 190 dollars, yet most emissions in America carry a price of zero. Globally, the International Monetary Fund counts 7 trillion dollars a year in fossil fuel subsidies, and 82 percent of that is not checks written to companies but implicit subsidy, the unpriced damage of pollution and warming that the public absorbs.

Our national scoreboard cannot see any of this. Gross domestic product counts the coal burned, the cleanup afterward, and the hospital admissions in between, all as growth. It counts a ton of carbon at zero and a trillion dollars of family caregiving at nothing. Simon Kuznets, the economist who built the national income accounts in the 1930s, warned Congress at the time that the welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income. We built the scoreboard anyway, and then we started coaching to it.

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## The Proposal

1. **Rebuild worker power.** Protect and strengthen the right to organize, make it real rather than a paper right routinely violated, and move toward sectoral bargaining so standards are set across whole industries instead of firm by firm. Raise the wage floor to something a person can live on, give workers a genuine voice in the decisions that affect them, and make benefits portable so they follow the worker rather than locking people into a single job. The Treasury's 20 percent figure is the size of the prize: a fair market needs workers strong enough to claim their share of what they help produce.
2. **Broaden who owns the economy.** Support cooperatives, employee ownership, and broad-based ownership models, so that more people hold a real stake in the businesses they work in and the wealth an economy generates is held more widely rather than concentrated at the very top.

3. **Create public options where markets fail.** Where private markets reliably fail people, build public options that set a floor and discipline private actors, including public and postal banking so that everyone has access to basic financial services without being preyed upon, alongside the public options described in the healthcare and housing agendas. A public option is competition, not a takeover, and Chattanooga proved it. In 2010 the city's public electric utility, EPB, built America's first citywide gigabit fiber network for about $220 million; an independent decade study found $2.69 billion in community benefit and more than 9,500 jobs supported,[3] and the FCC's own record shows the private incumbents, Comcast and AT&T, sharply improved their speeds in EPB's territory after the public competitor arrived. The incumbents' response is just as instructive: rather than compete statewide, the industry lobbied for a Tennessee law confining EPB to its electric footprint, sued alongside the state to overturn the FCC's attempt to lift that cap, and won in court in 2016, so EPB's neighbors still cannot buy the country's best-value internet. Missouri shows the same play run to completion: a 1997 law, credited to Southwestern Bell's lobbying, bars cities from offering broadband at all, and telecom-backed bills have kept reinforcing it. When an industry's answer to a public option is to make it illegal, it has conceded that the public option wins on the merits.
4. **Make taxation honest.** Apply a Tax Code Public Value Test to every major deduction, credit, preferential rate, and carveout, asking what public value it creates and reforming or ending the ones that mainly reward those who can afford to find them. Tax work no harder than wealth, and fix the regressive cap that lets the highest earners stop contributing to Social Security partway through the year while a nurse or a mechanic pays on every dollar. Honest taxation is itself an anti-extraction policy.
5. **Rein in extractive finance.** Put real oversight on the financial maneuvers that strip value from working companies, including the leveraged buyouts that load firms with debt and sell them for parts, and limit the stock buybacks that funnel cash to shareholders instead of into wages, investment, and the business itself. Finance should fund building, not dismantling.
6. **End the extraction economy in everyday life.** Ban the junk fees buried in the fine print, prohibit surveillance and algorithmic pricing that charges people the most a model thinks they will tolerate, scrutinize and limit the corporate consolidation of housing, and pass the noncompete ban through statute now that the regulatory route has been closed off. These are the places where extraction touches people most directly, and where stopping it is most popular and most overdue.

7. **Make prices tell the truth.** Phase in a price on climate and air pollution anchored to the government's own damage estimates, with the EPA's roughly 190 dollars per ton of carbon dioxide as the honest benchmark even if the starting price is lower, and return the revenue to households as a dividend so the policy raises the cost of pollution without raising the cost of living for ordinary families. Apply the same cost-causation logic this platform already uses elsewhere: the methane fee in the climate agenda, and grid pricing that charges data centers the costs they create rather than spreading them across everyone's electric bill. When prices tell the truth, markets do the work of a thousand regulations, and they do it without a bureaucracy.
8. **Count what matters.** Finish putting nature and unpaid work on the nation's books. The United States adopted a national strategy in January 2023 to build natural capital accounts, official statistics that track the condition and value of the land, water, and air the economy depends on, with the Bureau of Economic Analysis running pilot accounts now and full implementation planned through 2036. Fund it, protect it from political interference, and publish alongside GDP a small dashboard of what the growth number misses: net gains after pollution damage, the value of unpaid care, and whether the country's natural assets are growing or being drawn down. This is the direction the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi commission, convened after the 2008 crisis to fix exactly this measurement problem, recommended: not replacing GDP, but refusing to let one number that ignores costs masquerade as the national report card. Growth that survives honest accounting is real. Growth that does not was extraction all along.

## Spend for Capacity, Tax Like We Mean It, Break the Chokepoints

The macroeconomic doctrine behind this pillar, stated plainly. First, this platform is not afraid of public investment: money moving through an economy, wages spent in communities, capacity built and used, is what prosperity is, and the American record is consistent with confidence rather than fear; across the postwar era the economy has grown about 1.8 percentage points faster per year under Democratic administrations, with more jobs and higher investment,[4] a peer-reviewed finding carried here with its authors' own honest caveat that the causes trace substantially to oil shocks, productivity, and international conditions rather than provably to policy alone. Second, taxation returns to postwar-era progressivity at the top: the high top marginal rates of the early 1950s coexisted with the strongest broadly shared growth in American history, and while the exact modern schedule is a matter for scoring, not slogans, the direction is a commitment, wealth and the highest incomes carrying shares they have not carried in two generations. Third, break the chokepoints: aggressive antitrust where a handful of firms own an essential layer, broadband being the canonical case, where regional duopolies suppress the competition Chattanooga proved possible, and where this brief's public-option and noncompete planks already aim. The regulatory honesty cuts both ways, per the Voice-Not-Veto Test: small businesses get simpler rules and real access, because the goal is competition that lets builders build, not paperwork that only incumbents can afford.

## Implementation Pathway

Labor law reform, sectoral bargaining, the wage floor, and the noncompete ban run through federal statute and enforcement. The noncompete ban now depends mainly on federal legislation and the states, many of which have already acted, since the Federal Trade Commission's 2024 rule against noncompetes was blocked in court and later abandoned on appeal. Cooperative and employee-ownership support runs through federal and state programs and the tax code. Public and postal banking can build on infrastructure the country already has. The Tax Code Public Value Test and the Social Security cap fix are federal tax legislation, and they pair directly with the same test in the Government That Works agenda. Financial oversight and buyback limits run through securities and banking regulation, and the consumer-protection agenda runs through federal regulators and antitrust enforcement, reinforced by the states.

Truthful pricing runs through fee-and-dividend legislation, the existing methane fee, and utility rate cases where cost-causation is already the law's own stated principle. Truthful counting runs through appropriations: the natural capital accounting strategy already exists and the Bureau of Economic Analysis pilots are already running, so the near-term ask is simply to fund the work, codify it so a hostile administration cannot quietly delete the accounts, and add the dashboard to the government's regular statistical releases. This pairs with the keep-the-count plank in the Government That Works agenda, because a country that stops measuring hunger or pollution has not solved either.

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## Funding and Public-Value Logic

Much of this agenda raises revenue or costs little. The Tax Code Public Value Test is designed to recover money lost to preferences that serve no purpose, though The Ledger scores it honestly as not yet scoreable, since a review process has no price tag until specific preferences are named; it is a direction of travel, not a booked number. Fixing the Social Security cap strengthens the program's own finances, dedicated trust-fund revenue rather than general funds, while asking the highest earners to contribute on the same terms as everyone else. Pollution pricing raises substantial revenue even at prices well below the EPA's damage estimate, and the dividend design returns it to households, most of which come out ahead because pollution-intensive consumption is concentrated at the top. Statistical accounts cost almost nothing; the entire natural capital program is a rounding error against the 7 trillion dollars a year the IMF says unpriced pollution already costs the world. Worker power, fair wages, and broad ownership move income toward the people most likely to spend it in their communities. The public value is an economy that grows by rewarding the people who build it, measured by a scoreboard that can tell the difference between building and burning.

## Risks and Guardrails

The guardrail throughout is to stay anti-extraction without becoming anti-market. The goal is competition and contribution, not central control, which is why the emphasis falls on worker power, open markets, public options as competition, and honest rules rather than on government ownership of industry. Reforms have to be designed not to crush small businesses, which are often themselves squeezed by the same consolidation this agenda targets, so the burden falls on concentrated power, not on the corner store.

Truthful pricing carries a real regressivity risk: a flat price on pollution takes a bigger bite from a small paycheck. The dividend is not decoration; it is the guardrail, and any pricing bill without household rebates or equivalent protection fails this platform’s own test. Truthful counting carries the opposite risk, that a dashboard becomes a substitute for delivery. The dashboard exists to catch fake growth, not to excuse slow building; this platform’s abundance agenda, building homes, clean power, and transmission faster, does not get suspended while statisticians deliberate. And none of this agenda is a case against growth. Prosperity that survives honest accounting is the goal, and most of what this platform proposes to build, clean energy, housing, care, and cures, shows up as growth on any honest ledger.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on wages, ownership, concentration, extraction, and honesty of the ledger. • Wages relative to productivity and to the cost of living, and the share of income going to labor. • Union density and the share of workers covered by strong bargaining, plus the spread of cooperative and employee ownership. • Aggregate markups and market concentration in key industries, and the prevalence of junk fees, surveillance pricing, and noncompetes. • The corporate-owned share of housing in affected markets. • Revenue recovered through the Tax Code Public Value Test and the long-term solvency of Social Security after the cap fix. • The share of American emissions carrying a real price, and pollution damage per dollar of output falling. • Natural capital accounts funded, codified, and published on schedule, with a beyond-GDP dashboard released alongside the quarterly numbers. • Essential-profession pay closing its gap against similarly educated peers, starting with the teacher pay penalty falling from its record 26.9 percent.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will call this anti-business or socialism. It is the opposite. This agenda defends markets from the extraction that corrupts them, and most of its targets, junk fees, surveillance pricing, noncompetes, and financial stripping, are not the free market working but the free market being rigged. Some will say worker power and higher wages kill jobs. The Treasury's finding is that wages are being held roughly 20 percent below the competitive level; stronger bargaining corrects a distortion, it does not create one. Some will say pollution pricing is a tax grab that punishes the poor. Designed with dividends, most families receive more than they pay, and the alternative is not a free lunch: the public already pays the full cost of pollution in hospital bills and disaster losses, just invisibly and unfairly. The 190 dollar figure is not an activist number; it is the EPA's own damage estimate, built on methods recommended by the National Academies, and the underlying framework earned William Nordhaus a Nobel Prize. Some will say beyond-GDP measurement is a stalking horse for degrowth. It is bookkeeping, not ideology. The inventor of GDP himself warned against using it as a welfare measure, the commission that proposed the dashboard was led by mainstream economists, and the natural capital strategy was written by career statisticians. Counting the costs is not a plan to shrink the economy. It is a plan to stop lying to ourselves about which parts of it are actually paying their way. And some will say public options are a government takeover. A public option is one more competitor that sets a floor and disciplines private actors, and people remain free to choose private alternatives. Chattanooga is the existence proof: the city's public fiber network returned $2.69 billion on a $220 million build, the private incumbents responded by upgrading their own service, and nobody was taken over. The takeover ran the other direction, when the industry lobbied statehouses in Tennessee and Missouri to outlaw the competition instead of matching it.

## What Would Change Our Position

Several planks here have named falsifiers. If states that banned noncompetes showed the wage and training declines employers predict, rather than the gains the FTC record documents, the ban's design would need work. If the markup and labor-market-power literature this brief leans on were overturned methodologically, the extraction diagnosis would need re-grounding. If public options underperformed, if the pattern were municipal networks failing while private service improved, rather than Chattanooga's record, the public-option plank would narrow to the conditions where it works. And if a pollution price with dividends still left most low-income families worse off in practice, the design failed its own guardrail and gets rebuilt before it scales.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. We are not against markets. We are against getting ripped off, and against an economy that tells the teacher, the nurse, and the plumber they chose wrong while it celebrates never working again as the dream. The people who produce what we all need should be the best deal in America, not the cautionary tale. Markets are supposed to reward the people who build things, do the work, and serve their neighbors, not the ones who hoard what you need, hide fees in the fine print, buy up the houses, trap you in a job with a noncompete, or make their profit by dumping their costs on your lungs and your kids' future. So give workers the power to claim their fair share, spread ownership wider, make every tax break prove it earns its keep, make polluters pay what the damage actually costs and send the money back to families, and fix the national scoreboard so it stops counting the damage as growth. Reward contribution. Stop extraction.

## Footnotes

1. De Loecker, Eeckhout & Unger, "The Rise of Market Power and the Macroeconomic Implications," Quarterly Journal of Economics (2020) ↩
2. U.S. Treasury, "The State of Labor Market Competition" (2022) ↩
3. EPB announcement of the university decade study of Chattanooga's fiber network (the network operator publishing its own commissioned study; flagged as an interested source) ↩

4. Blinder & Watson, “Presidents and the US Economy: An Econometric Exploration,” American Economic Review (2016) ↩

# Cruelty Is Not Order, and Chaos Is Not Compassion

Safety and justice systems that reduce harm, uphold the rule of law, and treat people with dignity. Immigration gets its own brief: Build the Front Door.

## Summary

We are usually offered two bad answers on safety, justice, and immigration. One says the way to look strong is to be harsh: lock more people up, treat enforcement as cruelty, and call the result order. The other flinches from enforcement altogether and calls the resulting disorder compassion. Both fail the people they claim to serve. Cruelty is not order, and chaos is not compassion. The goal of these systems is straightforward. Reduce real harm, uphold the rule of law, and treat people with dignity, and earn the public's trust by actually doing those things rather than performing toughness or performing leniency.

This brief carries the safety and justice halves of the pillar: a public-safety agenda built on preventing harm, on the protective factors that hold up mental health and hold down crime, and on police who are well trained, accountable, and focused on serious crime; a safe-city agenda that removes the measured environmental drivers of crime, lead, blight, and darkness, ends impunity where violence concentrates, and gives teenagers summers with stakes; and a justice system that decides who is held by risk and due process rather than by who can pay, that stops criminalizing addiction and mental illness, that makes restorative justice a real path, and that helps people return and stay out. The immigration half of the pillar, a system that is lawful, fast, humane, and capable, is built in its own companion brief, Build the Front Door. The standard throughout is the same. Less harm, more legitimacy.

## The Principle

Public systems that use force and power in the public's name carry a double obligation. They have to reduce harm, and they have to earn legitimacy, because authority that is not trusted does not actually keep people safe; it just frightens them. A justice system loses legitimacy when it jails people for being poor, criminalizes illness, and breaks the people it processes. An immigration system loses it when it is so slow and broken that following the law becomes nearly impossible, and when enforcement turns to cruelty. The answer is not to abandon enforcement or the rule of law. It is to make these systems effective, accountable, and humane at the same time, because those qualities reinforce one another rather than trading off.

And the reason prevention works is not a mystery. Criminology has been writing it down for a century, under three names. Strain theory: people under crushing pressure, poverty, humiliation, blocked paths, commit more crime, so easing the strain prevents it. Social attachment: people bonded to family, school, work, and community have too much to lose, so building those bonds prevents it. Differential association: people learn from the people around them, so who surrounds a kid matters more than any lecture. Three names for one observation. The protective factors that hold up a person's mental health, stability, belonging, purpose, are the same ones that hold down crime. That is why this brief treats mental-health care and community-building as public safety itself, not as something softer than it.

## The System Failure

On safety, we have leaned almost entirely on punishment after the fact while underinvesting in what actually prevents harm. We ask police to handle homelessness, addiction, and mental-health crises they were never trained or equipped for, then act surprised when those encounters go wrong, and the resulting distrust makes everyone less safe, including officers. On justice, cash bail jails people not because they are dangerous but because they are poor, holding them while wealthier people charged with the same thing go home, and decades of mass incarceration have broken families and communities without making us safer, while addiction and mental illness are still met with a cell instead of care.

And some of what perpetuates crime sits outside the justice system entirely, in the physical environment, and the data on this has become hard to argue with. A child poisoned by lead is measurably more likely, years later, to be suspended, detained, and arrested. A blighted vacant lot raises the violence around it. A dark street invites what a lit one deters. An unsolved shooting teaches a neighborhood that violence is free and that protection must be arranged privately. An idle, broke summer in a hard place is a risk factor with a calendar. None of these is a metaphor. Each is a measured driver of crime, each has been tested against a fix in randomized or rigorously controlled city-level trials, and the fixes worked where they were tried. Honesty about scale: a trial that worked in Philadelphia or Chicago proves the mechanism, not a guarantee that a national version performs identically, which is why every safe-city plank below pairs the intervention with continued evaluation as it scales. That is what the agenda is built from.

Immigration fails in its own compounding ways, and the diagnosis and the full rebuild live in the companion brief, Build the Front Door: a legal system buried under backlogs, enforcement that lurches between neglect and cruelty, and millions of long-settled people left in permanent limbo. None of this is order, and none of it is compassion. It is a set of systems failing on their own terms.

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## The Proposal

### Safety That Reduces Harm

1. **Invest in what actually prevents crime.** Fund the things that stop harm before it happens: violence-interruption programs, addiction and mental-health treatment, and investment in the neighborhoods where concentrated disadvantage drives crime. Prevention is both more humane and more effective than waiting for harm and then punishing it.

2. **Send the right responder, and use police for what police are for.** A large share of what we ask police to handle is not crime at all. It is mental-health crisis, homelessness, addiction, and welfare checks, and sending an armed officer to those calls too often turns a health emergency into a tragedy. The fix is concrete and already proven. For nonviolent crisis calls, send a trained civilian response, a mental-health worker paired with a medic, with police available as backup when there is a real threat. Eugene, Oregon ran exactly this model, CAHOOTS, for more than thirty years; a national study found it reduced arrests and saved money,[1] and the program handled thousands of calls a year while needing police backup only a tiny fraction of the time. The original Eugene program lost its city funding and wound down in 2025, which is its own lesson about giving these services stable footing, but it continues in neighboring Springfield and the evidence it produced still stands. Denver's STAR program, evaluated by Stanford researchers, cut low-level crime by about a third in the areas it covered, at several times lower cost than a police response, without any increase in violent crime. This is the standard: match the responder to the situation, and stop using armed officers as the default answer to every kind of human distress.
3. **Train and use police as guardians first.** Where police are the right responders, they should be trained accordingly. At minimum, officers should be trained first in de-escalation, mental health, and community service and only second in the use of force, the reverse of how much American training is weighted today, and a co-responder model that pairs an officer with a mental-health worker should be standard for calls that may need both. Support police who are well resourced, held accountable for misconduct, and focused on serious crime rather than on the low-level enforcement that erodes trust. Accountability and effective policing are partners, not opposites, because a department the public trusts solves more crime.

4. **Remove the poisons and repair the places that produce crime.** Some of what drives crime is not in anyone's character. It is in the ground, the buildings, and the dark. Childhood lead exposure raises later suspension, detention, and arrest, and the phase-out of leaded gasoline is credited by some studies with a large share of the great crime decline of the 1990s, so finishing lead abatement, in pipes, paint, and soil, is crime prevention with a decades-long payoff. A citywide randomized trial in Philadelphia found that simply cleaning and greening blighted vacant lots cut gun violence nearby by about 29 percent. Streetlights randomly assigned to New York public housing developments cut nighttime outdoor crime by at least 36 percent. These are among the cheapest, best-proven safety interventions ever measured, and they require no one to be arrested. Fix the places: get the lead out, remediate the vacant land, light the streets, and treat the built environment as the crime policy it measurably is.

5. **End impunity where violence concentrates.** Violence is not everywhere. It concentrates, in a few places and among a small number of people and groups, and it feeds on impunity. So concentrate back. Raise clearance rates for shootings and homicides by funding the investigative capacity that solves them, because solving crimes is the deterrent that actually deters and the legitimacy that lasts. And use focused deterrence, the strategy that identifies the few driving the violence and delivers one message with two hands: real help, services, jobs, a way out, and certain, swift consequences for continued shooting. A Campbell systematic review of twenty-four evaluations found significant crime reductions, with gun violence down about 26 percent across thirteen studies, and the honest caveat comes with it: effects shrink in the most rigorous designs, so this is a strong tool rather than a silver bullet, and it only works paired with the legitimacy agenda in the rest of this brief.

   The counterexample for what happens without certainty is running right now in Bogota. The city's own police chief reports that of roughly 33,000 people arrested in 2025, fewer than 10 percent ended up in jail, with officers describing catching the same offender twenty times; nationally, fewer than one in six arrested Colombians is ever imprisoned. The result is not leniency or toughness. It is a churn that deters no one, exhausts police, feeds vigilantism, and teaches the same lesson as an unsolved shooting in an American neighborhood: consequences are a lottery. Mass arrests with no follow-through is the worst of both worlds, all the harm of aggressive enforcement with none of the deterrence of certainty. Certainty, not severity or volume, is the active ingredient, which is exactly what the clearance-rate and focused-deterrence agenda funds.

6. **Give every teenager a summer with stakes.** In a randomized trial of 1,634 Chicago high schoolers, eight weeks of a summer job cut violent-crime arrests by 43 percent over the following sixteen months, with most of the effect arriving after the job ended. Cognitive behavioral programs like Becoming a Man cut violent-crime arrests by 45 to 50 percent during the program year in two large randomized trials. Fund summer jobs and these programs at the scale of the need, tie them to the tutoring corps and service pathways in the education and civic pillars, and keep struggling kids in school rather than pushing them out, because a suspension that puts a teenager on the street transfers him to the riskiest classroom there is. This is the strain, attachment, and learning logic of this brief made concrete: a job eases the strain, a mentor changes who a kid learns from, and both give him something to lose.

## Justice That Earns Legitimacy

7. **Decide custody by risk and due process, not by cash.** Reform cash bail so that whether a person is held before trial turns on genuine risk and on due process, not on the size of their bank account. This is bail reform, not the abolition of pretrial detention: people who pose a real danger can still be held, but no one should sit in jail simply because they are poor.
8. **End the worst of mass incarceration and treat illness as illness.** Roll back the policies that drove mass incarceration without improving safety, and treat addiction and mental illness as the health problems they are, through treatment and diversion rather than cells. The measure of a justice system is whether it reduces harm, not how many people it holds.
9. **Make restorative justice a real path, not a boutique.** Where the victim chooses it and the case fits, bring victim and offender face to face to account for the harm and agree on how to repair it, alongside or in place of standard prosecution, and make it the default gateway for youth cases. This is not leniency, and the evidence is unusually rigorous: a Campbell systematic review of ten randomized trials found offenders who went through face-to-face restorative conferences committed significantly less repeat crime[2] than those routed through standard prosecution, with the largest effects on violent crime, while victims reported higher satisfaction, apologies they rated as sincere, less desire for revenge, and fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms. A process that leaves victims more whole and produces less reoffending is not an alternative to accountability. It is accountability that works.

10. **Make reentry work.** Help people leaving the system find housing, work, and care, because reentry that fails produces more crime and reentry that works prevents it. A system that releases people set up to fail is choosing its own next case.

## Immigration: Build the Front Door

11. **See the companion brief.** The immigration half of this pillar, an earned path to status, wide legal channels, a restructured civil enforcement agency, a border managed by capacity rather than cruelty, and service-to-citizenship, is built in full in Build the Front Door, with its evidence, its sequencing arc, and its polling ground. The two briefs share one standard: lawful, fast, humane, and capable, with enforcement that is accountable rather than cruel.

## Firearms: License the Purchase, Train the Owner

The platform's firearm position follows its evidence rules rather than either side's catechism, and the strongest evidence points somewhere specific: permits. Connecticut required a permit, contingent on a background check and safety training, to buy a handgun; researchers found the law associated with a 40 percent drop in firearm homicides.[3] Missouri repealed its similar law and firearm homicides rose 25 percent, with later analyses finding larger effects and a rise in firearm suicides. That is the platform's favorite shape of evidence, a policy tested in both directions, and it sets the lead plank: a permit to purchase, requiring a completed safety course and background check, the same basic logic as a driver's license, paired with safe-storage requirements, extreme-risk protection orders, and universal background checks that command near-universal public support. What this position does not lead with is as deliberate as what it does: the measures above have the strongest causal evidence, they respect lawful ownership, and they aim at the certainty-and-friction margins where the safe-city planks in this brief already work.

## Equal Under the Law: LGBTQ+ Civil Rights

The position is simple, and the platform states it without hedging: LGBTQ+ Americans are entitled to the same protection from discrimination in work, housing, credit, education, and public life that civil rights law extends to everyone else. The vehicle is the Equality Act, which writes sexual orientation and gender identity into the nation's existing nondiscrimination framework, and which has passed the House twice before. This is also one of the least divided questions in American life: 72 percent of Americans support nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ+ people, including a majority of Republicans, a consensus that has held for a decade even as the political noise around it has grown louder.[4] Marriage equality is settled law twice over, in the courts and in the Respect for Marriage Act that Congress passed with votes from both parties in 2022, and this platform treats it as settled. The stakes are not abstract: the largest annual survey of LGBTQ+ youth, run by a suicide-prevention nonprofit and read with that provenance in mind, finds that young people in accepting communities attempt suicide at less than half the rate of those in unaccepting ones.[5] Acceptance is not a favor. It is protective, at the level where protection is measured in lives.

Where questions get genuinely contested, the platform does what it does everywhere else: it follows the evidence and says so out loud. On clinical questions in transgender medicine, especially for minors, the position is evidence-based medicine, not politics-based medicine, in either direction. That means decisions made by families with their doctors under clinical guidelines; it means funding the rigorous long-term research that everyone on every side of this debate claims to want, because the honest reading is that several European health systems reviewed the same evidence base and urged more caution while major American medical associations support access to care, and a dispute among clinicians is a reason for better evidence, not for legislatures to practice medicine. And it means opposing blanket political bans that override every family and every clinician categorically, because a categorical ban is not caution. The test is the same one this platform applies to itself: positions move when evidence moves, and the people closest to the decision, with the most information, decide.

## End the Drug War Where It Failed: Decriminalize, Divert, Legalize Cannabis Honestly

Fifty years of criminalizing addiction has produced neither less addiction nor safer communities, and the platform's position follows what the evidence supports: treat drug use as a health problem, reserve the criminal law for trafficking and harm to others, and be honest about each substance on its own terms. The anchor case is Portugal, which decriminalized personal possession in 2001 and routed people to health services instead of jail: new HIV diagnoses among people who inject drugs fell from over 1,000 a year to under 20, and its drug-death rate is now among the lowest in Europe.[6] Decriminalization there was never legalization and never neglect; it was a health system showing up where a courtroom used to be. The domestic version already has American evidence: Seattle's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program, which hands low-level drug cases to case managers instead of prosecutors, cut participants' odds of rearrest by roughly 58 percent in its peer-reviewed evaluation,[7] and versions of it now operate in dozens of jurisdictions. The platform's plank is national: decriminalize personal possession, fund diversion and treatment at the scale of the problem, and measure the system on deaths, disease, and recovery rather than arrests.

Cannabis gets its own honest paragraph, in both directions. Legalize it federally: 24 states have already done so, about two-thirds of Americans support it, prohibition's enforcement fell overwhelmingly on Black Americans despite equal usage rates, and the MORE Act, the leading vehicle, pairs descheduling with expungement of the records the drug war left behind. And tell the truth about the drug at the same time, because a platform that only recites the case for legal cannabis is marketing, not policy. The strongest long-run study we have, following a birth cohort to age 38, found that persistent cannabis use begun in adolescence was associated with an average 8-point IQ decline that did not fully recover after quitting,[8] a finding whose critics argue part of the effect may be confounded, and the debate is carried here rather than hidden. Heavy use, high-potency products, and adolescent use carry real cognitive and psychiatric risks. Legalization done right looks like alcohol and tobacco regulation at its best, not its worst: age limits enforced, potency labeled, marketing restrained, revenue funding prevention and treatment, and public-health surveillance that would catch it if legalization starts moving adolescent use in the wrong direction, which is a named tripwire in this platform's what-would-change-our-position test.

## Implementation Pathway

Prevention, crisis response, and policing standards run through a mix of federal funding and state and local practice, since most policing is local; the federal role is to fund what works and set standards for accountability. Bail and sentencing reform are largely state matters, with the federal government able to lead by example and by conditioning grants. Treating addiction and mental illness as health connects directly to the healthcare pillar. Immigration is the most federal of these, and its pathway, first-term competence through appropriations and executive action, then the decade legislation, is laid out in Build the Front Door.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

Prevention is cheaper than punishment. Violence interruption, crisis response, treatment, and reentry cost a fraction of what incarceration costs and prevent more harm per dollar, and holding people in jail before trial simply because they cannot pay is both unjust and expensive. A functioning legal immigration system reduces the enormous costs of a broken one, in detention, in court backlogs, and in the economic loss of pushing willing workers and taxpayers into the shadows. The public value is safety that is real rather than performed, justice that people trust, and an immigration system that is orderly because it works, not because it is cruel.

## Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is being misread as soft on crime or open-borders, which is why the framing has to stay precise: this is prevention plus accountable policing, bail reform rather than the end of pretrial detention, and restructured rather than abolished immigration enforcement. The rule of law and real enforcement remain, made humane and effective rather than discarded. The second risk is that prevention and reform are promised but underfunded, leaving only the cuts, so the investments have to be real and come first. And the guardrail on enforcement is accountability and due process, the things that keep effective enforcement from sliding into the cruelty this brief is named against.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on harm, fairness, and function.

- Rates of serious violent crime, and the outcomes of crisis calls handled by trained responders.
- Pretrial detention driven by risk rather than inability to pay, and jail populations held for poverty alone.
- Incarceration rates alongside recidivism, and the share of addiction and mental-health cases met with treatment rather than jail.
- The safe-city drivers, tracked directly: childhood blood lead levels toward zero, vacant lots remediated and streets lit in the highest-violence neighborhoods, clearance rates for homicides and shootings rising, and youth summer employment in those same neighborhoods.
- Perceived safety, measured alongside victimization, because the two can diverge dramatically: in Bogota's 2025 city survey, about 15 percent of residents reported being victimized while 66 percent believed insecurity was rising. Perception is a political fact with real consequences, it drives flight, vigilantism, and the demand for performed toughness, and a safety agenda that cannot make people feel the improvement will be replaced by one that performs cruelty instead. So this platform counts both numbers and answers both.
- The share of eligible cases, especially youth cases, resolved restoratively, with reoffending and victim satisfaction tracked against standard prosecution.
- For the immigration half, the metrics live with the companion brief: processing times, backlogs, and enforcement measured by lawfulness and public trust.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say this is soft on crime. It is the opposite of soft; it is serious about what actually reduces crime. Prevention, accountable policing focused on serious harm, and reentry that works prevent more crime than punishment after the fact, and bail reform still allows dangerous people to be held. What it ends is jailing people for being poor and criminalizing illness, which never made anyone safer.

Some will say restructuring immigration enforcement means open borders. It is the reverse, and Build the Front Door makes the full case: an orderly, lawful, humane border and a legal system that actually functions is what real order requires. Enforcement remains; it is made accountable and humane rather than chaotic and cruel. Open borders and cruelty are both failures, and this platform rejects both.

Some will say restorative justice is a slap on the wrist. Ask the victims: in the randomized trials they came out more satisfied, less afraid, and less traumatized than victims routed through standard prosecution, and the offenders reoffended less, with the biggest gains on violent crime. A wrist-slap does none of that. And what restorative justice asks of an offender, sitting across from the person you harmed and answering for it, is harder than sitting silent behind a lawyer.

Some will say prevention does not work. The evidence says otherwise: violence interruption, crisis response, and treatment have track records of reducing harm at lower cost than incarceration. And the mechanism is a century old: ease the strain on people's lives, build the bonds that give them something to lose, and change who a kid learns from, and crime falls. Protective factors are prevention.

Some will say lead pipes, vacant lots, and streetlights are not crime policy. The randomized trials say they are: greening blighted lots cut nearby gun violence by about 29 percent, lights cut nighttime crime by at least 36 percent, and a summer job cut violent-crime arrests among the highest-risk teenagers by 43 percent. These are some of the largest, cheapest, best-proven effects in the entire field, and not one of them requires putting a person in a cell. Refusing to use them is not toughness. It is choosing more crime.

## What Would Change Our Position

This brief already concedes that focused-deterrence effects shrink in the most rigorous designs; that concession is the template. If the safe-city interventions fail to replicate as they scale, the platform treats the scale-up evaluations as binding, funds what survives them, and drops what does not. If restorative justice in new trials showed higher reoffending or victims reporting worse experiences, its role would narrow to the case types where the evidence holds. If clearance-rate investment showed no deterrent return, the money moves to what does. And if serious violence rose in adopting cities, the response this platform owes is investigation and revision, not denial, because communities do not owe a theory their safety.

The new planks carry their own tripwires. On firearms, if permit-to-purchase states stopped outperforming on firearm mortality in the ongoing evidence, the plank's design would be rebuilt around whatever the evidence then favored. On drug policy, the cannabis tripwire is adolescent use: if public-health surveillance showed legalization pushing adolescent use or cannabis-related psychiatric admissions materially upward, the platform would tighten the regulatory design, potency limits, marketing rules, and enforcement of age limits, before it defended the plank. Decriminalization is held to Portugal's own test: deaths, disease, and treatment uptake, not arrests. And on LGBTQ+ civil rights, the civil-rights baseline is not evidence-contingent, but every clinical position is: as the long-term research this platform funds comes in, the position follows it, in whichever direction it points.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. We keep getting offered a false choice: be cruel and call it order, or look away and call it compassion. Neither keeps anyone safe. Real safety means preventing harm, police you can trust who focus on serious crime, and a justice system that holds the dangerous, not just the broke, and gives victims a real say in how the harm gets repaired. And it means fixing what the data says actually produces crime: get the lead out of the water, clean the vacant lots, light the streets, solve the shootings, and give every kid a summer job and someone worth learning from. Every one of those fixes has been tested in real cities, and every one worked where it was tried; we will keep testing as we scale. Real order on immigration means a legal system that actually works, and that is a big enough job that it gets its own plan: Build the Front Door. Cruelty is not order. Chaos is not compassion. We can do better than both.

## Footnotes

1. NBER working paper on civilian crisis response (CAHOOTS model) effects ↩
2. Strang et al., Campbell systematic review of restorative justice conferencing (ten randomized trials) ↩
3. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Connecticut permit-to-purchase study (Rudolph et al., AJPH 2015) ↩
4. PRRI, 2025 American Values Atlas: LGBTQ rights across the 50 states ↩
5. The Trevor Project, 2024 National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health (advocacy-run survey; provenance noted on the Evidence page) ↩
6. Transform Drug Policy Foundation case study of Portugal, built on EU monitoring data (advocacy source; official data underneath) ↩
7. Collins, Lonczak & Clifasefi, “Seattle’s Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD): program effects on recidivism outcomes,” Evaluation and Program Planning (2017) ↩
8. Meier et al., “Persistent cannabis users show neuropsychological decline from childhood to midlife,” PNAS (2012) ↩

PILLAR 8 · IMMIGRATION

# Build the Front Door

A legal system so fast, generous, and functional that walking through it beats going around it, paired with a border that can actually do its job.

## Summary

No person is illegal, and a country still needs a working front door. Those two ideas are not in tension. They only seem to be because we have spent decades treating the border as a moral wall to either defend or tear down, when the honest way to think about it is a door. The question is not whether the door should exist. The question is whether it works, and right now it does not: the legal way in is so slow, so arbitrary, and so expensive that doing it the right way can take a decade or more, which pushes people toward the only options left and then punishes them for taking them.

This brief proposes seven planks that build a working front door: legalize the people already here, because the evidence from 1986 says it lifts wages rather than lowering them; open the legal channels wide and clear the backlog; de-indenture guest work instead of just opposing it; check illegal hiring in a way that routes people to the legal door; restructure enforcement into an accountable civil agency; manage the border by capacity, not cruelty; and open national service as a route to citizenship. It stages the work honestly across a first term, a decade, and an end state, and it is built where the public actually is: bipartisan majorities in every swing state favor the whole package[1] at once.

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## The Principle

Start with the thing most immigration arguments refuse to say plainly. No person is illegal, and a country still needs a working front door. Those two ideas are not in tension. They only seem to be because we have spent decades treating the border as a moral wall to either defend or tear down, when the honest way to think about it is a door. The question is not whether the door should exist. The question is whether it works.

Right now it does not. The legal way in is so slow, so arbitrary, and so expensive that doing it the right way can take a decade or more, which pushes people toward the only options left and then punishes them for taking them. So the standard this project holds is simple. Immigration should be lawful, fast, humane, and capable. Make the legal door work so well that walking through it is easier than going around it, and the border stops being a cruel bottleneck and becomes what it should be, an ordinary formality that almost everyone can satisfy.

That is the whole move. Inclusion delivered through a system that works, not inclusion won by abolishing the system. Cruelty is not order. Chaos is not compassion. And rights require delivery systems, which means a right to come here legally requires a system that can process a human being in months, not a decade.

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## The System Failure

The legal system fails coming and going. It is buried first: more than three million cases sit in immigration court,[2] and roughly eleven million applications are pending at the processing agency[3], with people waiting years just to be told their paperwork was received. On top of the backlog sits a set of caps written for a country that no longer exists. Employment green cards are held at 140,000 a year[4], a number set decades ago, and a per-country rule limiting any single nation to about seven percent of green cards forces applicants from high-demand countries like India, Mexico, and the Philippines to wait a decade or more even after they qualify. This is manufactured scarcity, the same artificial shortage this platform takes apart in housing, written into immigration law.

Enforcement fails the other direction. It lurches between neglect and cruelty, with raids and detention that traumatize families and communities and offend basic decency, often without making the country any safer or the system any more orderly. And underneath all of it, the exploitation vector almost no one names: the deportable worker. An unauthorized worker carries a wage penalty of roughly 14 to 24 percent compared to a legal worker doing the same job, because a person who can be turned in can be underpaid, and an employer who can threaten deportation can hold the whole floor down, for citizens and immigrants alike. The wage pressure people blame on immigrants is mostly a product of illegality, not of the person.

None of this is order, and none of it is compassion. It is a system failing on its own terms.

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## The Proposal

The destination is a working front door. Seven planks build it.

1. **Legalize the people already here, and go big, because the evidence says it lifts wages rather than lowering them.** When the 1986 reform legalized roughly 2.7 million people[5], the studies that followed found the effect ran the direction restrictionists deny: legalization raised wages, both for the legalized[6] and by removing the deportability discount that dragged down everyone competing at that level. The legalized themselves saw real gains, moved out of poverty, finished school, and bought homes. Do it again through an earned path: time in the country, work, taxes, a clean record, plus updating the decades-frozen registry already in immigration law and protecting people brought here as children. A permanent shadow population that works and pays taxes but cannot belong serves no one.
2. **Open the legal channels wide, and clear the backlog that strangles them.** Raise the employment caps to match real labor demand, reform or end the per-country limits, and build legal pathways for the work the economy actually needs. Fund and staff the courts and the processing agency to clear the backlog, set firm timelines, and modernize the systems, so that doing it the right way is possible in months instead of years. Every improvement to the legal door reduces the pressure on the border, because the more the front door works, the less anyone has reason to go around it.
3. **De-indenture guest work instead of just opposing it.** The old labor objection to guest-worker programs has a real grievance underneath it, but it aims at the wrong target. The exploitation is not the temporary worker. It is the tie: a visa bound to a single employer strips a worker of the power to walk, which lets wages get undercut. So the fix is not to shrink the channel, it is to make it portable and rights-bearing. Let guest workers change employers, set a real wage floor, and give them the right to organize. That answers the labor concern honestly without the protectionism that just raises costs and pushes hiring back into the shadows.

4. **Check illegal hiring in a way that routes people to the legal door rather than deeper into the dark.** The public wants a demand-side check, and they are right that one belongs in any working system. But design matters, because a hiring check imposed on its own tends to push wages down and can invite discrimination against anyone who looks or sounds foreign. So this check only works married to the rest of the plan. When the legal door is wide and fast, a hiring verification system stops trapping people and starts routing them, pushing demand toward legal workers and legal channels instead of the underground. Pair it with real enforcement of labor law, wage theft, safety, and the right to organize, aimed at exploitative employers rather than at workers. That is how you attack wage suppression at its actual source.
5. **Restructure enforcement into an accountable civil agency.** Replace immigration enforcement as it is currently structured with a civil compliance and processing agency built around the rule of law, due process, and oversight, rather than the chaotic apparatus we have now. This is not radical. The system was already reorganized once, in 2003. Enforcement is part of any working system. It does not have to be inhumane to be effective.
6. **Manage the border by capacity, not cruelty.** Staff the border with enough asylum officers and judges to adjudicate claims quickly and fairly, modernize the ports of entry, and address the conditions that drive migration, rather than relying on deterrence through suffering. A country is allowed to decide who comes in. It is not allowed to do it by manufacturing misery. Keep the ability to say no at the edges, and make the process fast and fair enough that most people never need to hear it.
7. **Open national service as a route to citizenship.** Just as military service has long been an earned path to naturalization, a completed term of civilian national service should open one too, tying this pillar to the civic-life agenda in Pillar 9.

Underneath all seven runs the connection to Pillar 7. The one real downside of a more open legal system, pressure on the workers at the very bottom and on the immigrants who arrived just before, is neutralized structurally, not wished away. Sectoral bargaining and a living wage floor mean the gains from immigration cannot be captured by employers at workers’ expense. The fear is that expansion happens without worker power. Give workers the power and the fear loses its basis.

## Implementation Pathway

The heavy lift, legalization and the expansion of legal channels, runs through Congress, which means the real obstacle is the Senate filibuster, not public opinion. That is the honest bottleneck, and filibuster reform and patient coalition-building are part of the work rather than a footnote. But the planks that buy credibility fastest do not require new law at all. Funding the courts and the processing agency to clear the backlog, restructuring enforcement toward due process, and shifting workplace enforcement onto exploitative employers move through appropriations and executive action and can begin almost immediately.

So the sequence is deliberate. Lead with competence. Clear the backlog, make the system visibly work, restore order to enforcement, and demonstrate that a generous position can be a disciplined one. Bank the public trust that competence earns. Then spend it on the big inclusion bill. Generosity that looks like chaos loses. Generosity that looks like a system working is durable.

## The Sequencing Arc

This is a ten-to-twenty-year build, not a first-year bill, and it is honest about that. The trap in immigration is promising the whole thing at once and delivering none of it, so the plan is staged. Each stage earns the next. The point of naming the stages is discipline: you do not skip to the hard part before the ground can hold it, and you do not water down the end state to make it easier to start.

**First term: prove the system works.** Almost all of this moves through appropriations and executive authority, so none of it waits on sixty Senate votes. Fund and staff the immigration courts and the processing agency and start visibly cutting the backlog. Set firm decision timelines. Begin restructuring enforcement toward a civil, due-process model with real oversight. Shift workplace enforcement onto exploitative employers and stand up serious labor-standards enforcement decoupled from a worker’s papers. Protect the people brought here as children administratively while the permanent fix is built. The goal of this term is not the moral victory. It is the credibility. You are proving that a humane position can run an orderly system, because that proof is the currency you spend on everything after it.

**Within a decade: pass the legalization and open the legal door.** This is the heavy legislative lift, and it needs a rebuilt majority and, realistically, filibuster reform. Enact the earned path to status for the long-settled, updating the frozen registry and making protection for childhood arrivals permanent in law rather than by executive grace. Raise the employment caps, reform or end the per-country limits, and de-indenture guest work by making visas portable and rights-bearing. Pair the wider door with the demand-side hiring check, which only becomes fair once the legal channel is actually wide enough to walk through. Tie national service to a path to citizenship. This is the stage where the front door gets built, and it is timed for when the coalition and the credibility exist to carry it, not before.

**End state: a working front door, permanently.** The standard the whole pillar drives toward. Legal entry is fast and fair enough that going around it makes no sense for almost anyone. No permanent shadow population. No deportable underclass that employers can exploit to hold wages down. A border managed by capacity rather than cruelty, with the routine ability to decide who enters because the system is trusted to be fair. Immigration status is no longer the thing that determines whether a person can be paid a decent wage or treated with dignity. The door is open, the rules are clear, and the system works. That is the finish line, and every stage before it is chosen because it moves the country closer to it.

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## Funding and Public-Value Logic

Most of this pays for itself or costs little. Legalization turns off-the-books workers into on-the-books taxpayers, which brings in revenue rather than spending it. The expansion tilted toward higher-skill and permanent immigration is a net fiscal gain, since those immigrants contribute more in taxes than they use in services and their children are among the strongest fiscal contributors in the country. A functioning legal system reduces the enormous costs of a broken one, in detention, in court backlogs, and in the economic loss of pushing willing workers into the shadows.

The one real fiscal cost is honest and worth naming: lower-skill immigration presses on state and local budgets for a long time, mostly through the cost of educating children, before it turns net positive. The answer is not to deny it. It is to offset those costs federally, since the federal government captures most of the tax gains while states and localities carry the near-term expense. A cost acknowledged and shared is a cost you can defend. A cost denied is one your opponents will use against you.

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## Where the Public Actually Is

This position is not a stretch against public opinion. It is close to the center of it, once you set aside the shouting.

Support for a path to citizenship over mass deportation runs as a solid-to-super majority across essentially every major pollster. In 2025 Quinnipiac measured it 64 to 31, Pew 65 to 34, Fox 59 to 29, and Gallup put support for citizenship for undocumented immigrants at 78 percent. Protecting people brought here as children is close to consensus: Gallup found 85 percent support, including 71 percent of Republicans. Gallup also recorded immigration viewed as a good thing for the country at a record 79 percent, and the share of Americans wanting immigration reduced fell from 55 percent in 2024 to 30 percent in 2025. Mass deportation, meanwhile, is underwater, with majorities saying enforcement has gone too far and opposing the detention of longtime residents who have committed no crime.

The most important finding is that the public does not experience these as trade-offs. In a swing-state study by the Program for Public Consultation, where respondents were briefed with arguments on both sides, bipartisan majorities favored the whole package at once: a path to citizenship over mass deportation, a stronger and more capable border, a check on illegal hiring, and more legal work visas where employers can show real demand. That is the front-door position, and it commands majorities in every swing state, among Republicans and Democrats alike. People are not asking to choose between order and generosity. They are asking for a system that delivers both.

One caution keeps this honest. Part of the recent surge in pro-legalization sentiment is a reaction against heavy-handed enforcement, so some of it will soften as the context shifts. The durable floor is the path-to-citizenship and Dreamer support, which has held for over a decade, and the package finding. Build on those, not on the peak.

## Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is being misread as open borders, which is why the front-door frame has to stay explicit: a wide legal door and a border that still works, not the absence of a border. The second is the wage pressure on the bottom, answered by the Pillar 7 labor floor rather than ignored. The third is the state-and-local fiscal cost of lower-skill immigration, answered by federal offset rather than denial. The fourth is that a hiring check, badly designed, backfires into lower wages and discrimination, which is why it is bound to a wide legal channel and to labor-standards enforcement rather than deployed on its own.

The place this position consciously departs from the standard left is guest work and visa expansion. The instinct on the left is to oppose both as wage-suppressing. This brief does not. The evidence says the problem is the employer tie, not the worker, and that permanent, rights-bearing immigration is pro-worker because a legal resident cannot be held over a barrel. That is a considered break, made in the open, not an oversight.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on function, fairness, and outcomes. Legal processing times and the size of the court and application backlogs, tracked toward months rather than years. The share of the long-settled undocumented population moving onto a legal path. Wage outcomes for the legalized and for the lowest-paid workers who compete with new arrivals. Enforcement measured by lawfulness, due process, and public trust rather than by raids and arrests. The number of exploitative-employer labor-law actions, as the real front in wage protection. And the balance of legal-channel capacity against demonstrated labor demand, so the front door is sized to the country’s actual needs.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say this is open borders. It is the reverse. This brief calls for a border that works, enforcement that follows the law, a hiring check, and a system fast and fair enough that legal entry beats illegal entry. Open borders and enforcement-by-cruelty are both failures, and this rejects both.

Some will say amnesty just draws more illegal immigration. The historical record says otherwise. The 1986 legalization was followed by a short-run decline in illegal crossings, not a surge, because people who could cross legally stopped sneaking back and forth. And a 2025 study found that reform did not set off runaway chain migration: each legalized person was responsible, in total, for the later legal admission of about one relative, mostly immediate family. The talking point is not supported by the data.

Some will say immigration depresses wages, so legalizing people hurts workers. The wage penalty is a function of illegality, and legalizing people removes it, which lifts the floor. Any downward pressure from new supply is small at the aggregate level, concentrated at the very bottom, and answered directly by the labor-power agenda in Pillar 7. The way to protect workers is legal status plus bargaining power, not a deportable underclass that employers can exploit.

Some will say more visas will undercut American workers. Not if the channel is permanent and rights-bearing and the wage floor holds. The exploitation comes from tying a worker to one employer, not from the worker's presence. De-indenture the visa and it becomes what it should be, a legal worker with full rights, which is the opposite of a wage weapon.

Some will say we are soft on the border. The border in this plan is more capable than the one we have, with enough officers and judges to decide claims quickly, modern ports of entry, and a retained ability to say no. What it abandons is deterrence through suffering, which is cruelty that does not even deliver order.

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## What Would Change Our Position

The front door rests on a bet that enforcement aimed at the wage floor protects everyone; if expanded legal channels produced measurable wage depression for American workers despite that enforcement, channel sizing and labor standards would tighten, because the coalition for a working system collapses the moment it becomes a subsidy for cheap labor. If surge funding for the courts failed to cut the backlog, the fix is deeper than dockets and the plank would say so. And the split-the-package question is a standing falsifier: if the package framing repeatedly fails politically while its pieces poll and pass separately, the platform re-sequences rather than riding the package down.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. No person is illegal, and a country still needs a working front door. Right now that door is broken. The legal way in can take a decade, which pushes people to go around it, and then we punish them for going around it. So build the door. Make it fast, make it fair, and make it wide enough that almost everyone can walk through it legally. Give the people who have already built their lives here a way to earn their place, because legalizing them lifts wages and brings them out of the shadows. Go after the bosses who exploit deportable workers, not the workers. And keep a border that can do its job, managed by competence instead of cruelty. Cruelty is not order. Chaos is not compassion. We can build a front door good enough to be both generous and orderly, and most Americans already want us to.

## Footnotes

1. UMD Program for Public Consultation, six-swing-state immigration survey ↩

2. TRAC (Syracuse University), Immigration Court Backlog Tool ↩

3. American Immigration Council on USCIS backlogs and processing times (advocacy source; figures from agency data) ↩

4. State Department Visa Bulletin: statutory employment-based caps and per-country limits ↩

5. Library of Congress research guide on the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act ↩

6. Kossoudji & Cobb-Clark, wage effects of IRCA legalization, Journal of Labor Economics (2002) ↩

PILLAR 9 · SERVICE

# A Way to Contribute

Universal national service to meet real need, rebuild belonging, and prepare a generation for the age of AI.

## Summary

People need more than an income. They need purpose, dignity, belonging, and a way to contribute something that matters, and a country that offers only a paycheck and a screen has not met those needs. That gap is about to get wider. The International Monetary Fund estimates that about 40 percent of jobs worldwide, and roughly 60 percent in advanced economies like ours, are exposed to artificial intelligence, and the World Economic Forum projects tens of millions of roles displaced within the decade even as new ones are created. The country is also lonelier and more disconnected than it has been in generations, and trust in one another and in shared institutions has frayed. We need a way to give people structure, skills, and a place in something larger, and to point a generation's talent toward real human need rather than toward whatever the attention economy happens to reward.

This brief proposes universal national service, a universal expectation of a service term for every young American, backed by substantial incentives and honestly named as exactly that, modeled on a program this country has already run successfully. Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps put nearly three million young Americans to work in less than a decade, planting some three billion trees and building hundreds of state parks, and it was among the most popular programs of its era, supported across party lines. The proposal here updates that idea for today: an obligation to serve, with a wide menu of civilian options as well as military service, paid, and rewarded with education benefits and a path to citizenship in return. It builds on living models like AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps, though it can take the form of a new program built for the scale of the moment. And it treats strong local communities not as nostalgia but as survival infrastructure worth rebuilding.

## The Principle

People need a way to contribute. Work, service, and membership in something larger are not luxuries layered on top of survival; they are part of what makes a life feel worth living, and a society that strips them away produces the isolation, despair, and resentment we now see. Two commitments follow. First, service should be a shared obligation that asks something of everyone and invests in everyone in return, because a duty shared across class, region, and background is one of the few things that still binds a country together, and because there is real work that needs doing. We already accept that citizenship carries obligations, jury duty among them; a term of service is one more, and a more meaningful one. Second, the human-scale institutions where belonging actually happens deserve to be treated as essential infrastructure rather than left to wither. This is not a sentimental throwback. It is how a country holds together and how it survives a shock.

## The System Failure

Civic life has been hollowed out from several directions at once. Work for many people has become less secure and less meaningful, the institutions that used to knit people together have thinned, and daily life has moved onto screens that simulate connection without delivering it. The result is measurable. The Surgeon General declared loneliness an epidemic in 2023: about half of American adults report experiencing it, and social isolation raises the risk of premature death by 29 percent, an effect comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[1] The social trust a democracy runs on has fallen with it. The share of Americans who say most people can be trusted has dropped from 46 percent in 1972 to 34 percent today, and trust in the federal government to do the right thing has collapsed from 77 percent six decades ago to 22 percent. Now a technological shock is arriving on top of that. The displacement AI is bringing will hit hardest at exactly the entry-level and routine work that has long been how young people get a start, and we have no system in place to channel that disruption, to retrain people, or to direct human effort toward the enormous amount of care, building, and stewardship the country actually needs done.

Underneath it is a strategic blind spot. We spent decades centralizing and professionalizing the systems people depend on while letting local, human-scale capacity erode, and then we are surprised when communities cannot care for themselves in a crisis. When disaster hits, the places that hold together are the ones with dense local networks: neighbors who know each other, institutions that can mobilize, people organized to help. We have treated those networks as nice-to-haves rather than as the survival infrastructure they are, and the gap shows up every time the larger systems fail.

## The Proposal

### Universal National Service

1. **Make a term of national service a universal expectation.** Establish a service term as the national default for every young American, written into law and backed by substantial incentives, with a genuine choice of how to serve. The honest name matters: because refusal carries no fine and no criminal record, only the loss of the attached benefits, this is not a mandate in the conscription sense, and the platform does not pretend otherwise. It is a universal expectation, the way the norm of finishing high school is universal without being criminally enforced. A term of service, paid, with a broad menu of options, gives people structure, skills, and a stake in their communities, and creates a shared experience that crosses the lines of class, region, and background that otherwise divide us. The honest sequencing matters: if the full expectation cannot be written into law at once, the path to it runs through serious incentives and a hard nudge, tying significant education benefits, hiring preference, and other real advantages to service, strong enough that opting out costs something, until the expectation becomes universal in practice and then in law. The model, stated once and completely: registration at eighteen, universal accommodations, an appeals process before any consequence attaches, and a cost of refusal that is exactly the attached benefits, the education award, hiring preferences, and related advantages, never a fine and never a criminal record. And the equity risk of incentive-backed universality is named rather than hidden: benefit-linked pressure lands hardest on young people who need the education award most, while the affluent can shrug it off, so the design answers with benefits that bind at every income (hiring preference across federal employment and major federal contractors is worth something to a rich kid too), participation tracked and published by income band, and a falsifiability tooth: if participation skews by class, the incentive design changes before the expectation expands, and if the design cannot sustain near-universal participation at all, that is evidence against the expectation, not a reason to reach for compulsion. The Civilian Conservation Corps showed this can be done at scale[2] and stay broadly popular, and a number of democracies already require a term of national service of their young people. The obligation is shared; the path is chosen.

2. **Build the tracks around what the country actually needs.** Anchor service in real work across many disciplines, not one: rebuilding infrastructure, care for children and elders, teaching and tutoring, conservation and climate resilience, public health, building housing, disaster preparedness and response, food and agriculture, and the digital and civic capacity communities lack. Military service is one track among many, not the default. AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps are proof these pathways can work, and the causal evidence is strongest exactly where the need is greatest: in a randomized trial across ten sites, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program for young people out of school and out of work raised earnings 20 percent and diploma or GED attainment 22 percentage points three years later.[3] Structured, paid service changes trajectories. Stated with the platform's usual care: that trial covered disconnected youth in a specific, intensive program, so it proves the mechanism, not that a universal program performs identically for every young American, which is one more reason the sequencing below scales through evaluated expansion rather than a single leap to universality. The program can expand what exists or stand up something new built for this scale. The point is to match a generation's effort to genuine human need at the very moment AI is poised to displace so much routine work.
3. **Invest in the people who serve, and open a path to citizenship through service.** Make service a two-way deal. In return, offer substantial education benefits along the lines of the G.I. Bill, support for tuition or student debt, and pathways into careers in the fields where people served. And recognize national service as an earned route to citizenship, extending to civilian service the logic the country already applies to military service, where serving has long been a path to naturalization. Service should ask something of people, and invest in them in return.

## Communities as Survival Infrastructure

The second half of this pillar treats strong local communities as a matter of national strength, and invests in them directly.

4. **Rebuild the institutions where belonging happens.** Invest in the human-scale institutions that hold communities together and let them help themselves: libraries and community centers, local service corps, cooperatives, community health workers, local food systems, and the broad ecosystem of unions, congregations, neighborhood groups, and mutual-aid networks. These are where people find connection, where help is organized, and where a community's capacity to weather hard times actually lives.

5. **Strengthen the local layer of national resilience.** Recognize, in funding and in policy, that local capacity is part of how the country survives shocks, and support it as such: local emergency and mutual-aid networks, distributed local systems, and the community institutions that do the first and most important work when larger systems fail. This connects directly to the resilience agenda in the climate and security pillars, where strong communities are the foundation that federal coordination is meant to protect, not replace.

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## The Operational Design

Outside reviewers correctly said the hard parameters were missing, so here they are, stated as the platform's proposal and revisable by the same evidence rules as everything else.

**Who and when:** every young American at eighteen through twenty-four, with a completion window to twenty-six so that education, apprenticeship, caregiving, or work can come first; the obligation flexes around a life, not the reverse. **How long:** a twelve-month standard term, with a six-month option for documented hardship, caregiving, or disability-adjusted service, and part-time equivalents that sum to the same service. **What it pays:** full pay at no less than the local minimum wage, housing or a housing allowance and meals where the placement requires relocation, health coverage during service, and a $10,000 education award per completed year usable for tuition, training, or student-debt repayment. Service should never cost a participant money, and a participant supporting a family should be able to serve without falling behind.

**Exemptions and accommodation, written broadly:** conscientious objection honored with civilian-only tracks; disability accommodated with adapted placements, never exclusion; primary caregivers, including young parents, offered local, flexible, or deferred service; genuine hardship deferred without penalty; and an appeals process with due process before any consequence attaches. **What refusal costs, exactly:** the attached benefits and nothing more, the education award, hiring preferences, and related advantages, as the stress-test page already commits: no criminal penalty, no civil fine, no one jailed, ever, and if the program cannot be administered on those terms it stays voluntary. **Worker protections:** placements cannot supplant existing paid positions, host organizations certify non-displacement subject to audit, unions are consulted where placements touch organized workplaces, and participants get workplace-safety and anti-harassment protections with an independent reporting channel. **Immigration:** service is open to citizens and lawful residents alike, and civilian service earns the same expedited citizenship path military service already does.

**Scale and cost, honestly:** roughly four million Americans turn eighteen each year, so a universal program at maturity is millions of participants and real money, and the honest arithmetic is stated rather than rounded down: at the stipend and award levels above, four million participants means roughly $60 billion a year in wage-floor stipends and $40 billion in education awards before a dollar of health coverage, housing, or administration, so the mature program is at least $100 billion annually and plausibly well above it, which is why The Ledger lists it as not yet scored and why the build-out is staged: capacity is proven at each expansion stage, the evaluations are binding, and the expectation becomes law only when a real, funded place exists for everyone who would be asked.

## Implementation Pathway

Universal service requires federal legislation and sustained funding, and it can be built up from the service programs that already exist, scaled deliberately rather than created overnight. The sequencing is the realistic part. Start by expanding paid slots and the menu of tracks and attaching serious benefits to service, so that participation climbs toward universal even before the expectation is law, then write the expectation into statute once the capacity to place everyone exists, since an obligation without enough real, funded options would be an empty one. The community-institution investments run across all three levels of government and often work best as support for what local groups are already doing. Much of this is a consistent decision to value, fund, and rebuild the human-scale layer of American life that has been allowed to decay.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

Evaluated service programs have produced substantial modeled social returns, and the claim is carried at exactly that strength: those findings do not establish the return of a universal program at four-million-person scale, which is precisely what the staged expansion exists to test.[4] Participants do real work the country needs, in infrastructure, care, conservation, education, and disaster preparedness, and they come out with skills, direction, and a stake in their communities, while the education benefits are an investment in people that returns over a lifetime, exactly as the G.I. Bill did. The quantified evidence points the same direction. An independent benefit-cost analysis commissioned by a service coalition put the return on AmeriCorps and Senior Corps at $17.30 per federal dollar, and two limits travel with that number: it monetizes benefits to society, participants, and governments combined, not federal budget savings, and it measures selected existing programs with working placement pipelines, not universal enrollment; AmeriCorps' own program-level studies, including roughly $12 returned per dollar in disaster response, land in the same range. The randomized ChalleNGe results show where the returns come from: higher earnings and credentials for the young people least likely to get either otherwise. The Civilian Conservation Corps was judged at the time to have returned more in value than it cost, even before counting the gains to the workers themselves. Set against the alternative, the honest version of which is rapid occupational churn rather than mass displacement, the WEF projects roughly 92 million jobs displaced and 170 million created this decade,[5] and the IMF finds about 60 percent of advanced-economy jobs exposed to AI, with roughly half of those complemented rather than replaced[6], the case is that a generation entering a labor market being redrawn under it needs structure, skills, and a first rung, and the cost of leaving them without one is higher than the cost of the program. The deepest return is hard to put on a balance sheet but real: people with purpose and belonging are healthier, more resilient, and better citizens.

## Risks and Guardrails

A universal expectation has to be built so that it expands opportunity rather than coercing labor, which means real, paid, accessible options for everyone, a genuine choice of track including non-military service, and clear accommodation for conscientious objection, disability, and individual circumstance. It cannot become a track that only the already-comfortable can navigate or a source of cheap labor that displaces paid workers; service should complement the workforce, not undercut it, and participants should be paid and protected. The honest tension in any universal expectation is liberty, and the answer is that this is a defined, paid civic duty with broad choice and real investment in return, much closer to jury duty than to conscription, not an open-ended claim on anyone's life. Investment in community institutions should support what communities are already building rather than impose a model from Washington. And this pillar complements the material foundations in the rest of the platform rather than substituting for them; belonging is not a replacement for healthcare or housing, it is the layer that sits alongside them.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on participation, skills, connection, and resilience.

- The share of young people completing a term of service, and the breadth of participation across class, region, and background.
- Education benefits delivered, and the jobs and further service participants move into, especially in AI-exposed fields.
- Measures of social connection, loneliness, and trust in communities and institutions over time.
- Real national needs met by service: housing built, acres restored, students tutored, elders cared for, communities prepared.
- Local resilience capacity, and how communities fare when larger systems are disrupted.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say universal service is forced labor or a backdoor draft. It is a paid civic duty with a wide choice of civilian tracks, real education benefits, a path to citizenship, and accommodation for conscientious objection and individual circumstance, far closer to jury duty than to conscription. The country already accepts that citizenship carries obligations, and the historical model this draws on, the Civilian Conservation Corps, was paid and one of the most popular government programs we have ever run.

Some will say it is too expensive or too soft to be a priority. The disconnection it addresses is not soft; the Surgeon General's own advisory puts the mortality effect of isolation on par with smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and it drives measurable costs in health, addiction, and social breakdown. And the timing makes it urgent rather than optional: with AI poised to displace a large share of routine and entry-level work, a structure that retrains people and channels their effort toward real need is among the most practical things government can build. Some will say government cannot create community. It cannot manufacture belonging by decree, which is exactly why this pillar funds and strengthens the local institutions where belonging actually forms rather than trying to run them from above. And some will call the focus on community nostalgic. It is the opposite of nostalgic; it is a hard-headed recognition that local capacity is survival infrastructure, the thing that determines whether a community makes it through the next crisis.

## What Would Change Our Position

The expectation is explicitly conditional, which makes this the platform's most falsifiable plank by design: it becomes law only if the voluntary build-out proves the model at scale. If expanded paid service showed outcomes far below the ChalleNGe results, the mechanism does not generalize and the expectation step dies, leaving a strong voluntary system. If service placements displaced paid workers, the labor protections failed and expansion pauses. If per-participant costs at scale swamped the measured benefits, the program shrinks to the tracks that pay their way. A duty this large has to earn itself with evidence at every stage, and the sequencing exists so that it must.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. People need more than a paycheck. They need a purpose, a place, and a way to be useful to something bigger than themselves, and that need is about to get sharper as AI reshapes the world of work. So ask it of everyone: a real, paid term of service, rebuilding infrastructure, caring for kids and elders, restoring the land, teaching, preparing communities for disaster, and invest in them in return with help paying for their education and a path to citizenship for those who serve. We have done this before. Roosevelt's Tree Army planted three billion trees and gave a lost generation a start. We can do it again, for this generation, in this moment.

## Footnotes

1. U.S. Surgeon General advisory on the epidemic of loneliness and isolation (2023) ↩
2. National Park Service, the Civilian Conservation Corps: ~3 million enrolled ↩
3. MDRC, "Staying the Course": randomized evaluation of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program ↩
4. Voices for National Service, independent benefit-cost analysis of national-service programs (service-advocacy coalition publishing an independent analysis; flagged accordingly) ↩
5. World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025: ~92 million jobs displaced, ~170 million created by 2030 ↩
6. IMF: about 60% of advanced-economy jobs exposed to AI, roughly half potentially complemented ↩

# Security Is Resilience

Real security is the ability to withstand and recover from shocks, not military strength alone. And the adversaries already agree.

## Summary

Security is resilience. A country is safe not only when it can project force but when it can take a punch and keep functioning: when its supply of essentials does not hang on a single point of failure, when its grid and networks can absorb an attack, when it can detect and contain a disease before it becomes a catastrophe, and when its communities can care for themselves through the first hours of a crisis. Here is the part that has changed: our principal adversary now agrees. CISA, the NSA, and the FBI jointly assess that Chinese state-sponsored actors known as Volt Typhoon have pre-positioned inside American water, power, communications, and transportation systems, not to spy, but to be able to disrupt them in a crisis.

This brief proposes seven planks at home: secure the supply chains we cannot live without at the layer where the dependence actually lives, build energy independence and a grid that can take a hit, defend the lifelines and fund the defenders, rebuild biological defense, sustain alliances and defend democratic institutions, treat local resilience as national security, and exercise the whole system. Abroad, three principles: secure our own people first, no unconditional aid and one standard for every ally under the Leahy Law, and force as a last resort, for moral ends, decided in the open.

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## The Principle

Security is resilience. A country is safe not only when it can project force but when it can take a punch and keep functioning: when its supply of essentials does not hang on a single point of failure, when its grid and networks can absorb an attack, when it can detect and contain a disease before it becomes a catastrophe, when its institutions can resist subversion, and when its communities can care for themselves through the first hours of a crisis. The most secure country is not merely the most heavily armed. It is the most resilient, the hardest to disrupt and the fastest to recover.

Here is the part that has changed since this argument was first made: our principal adversary now agrees with it. The documented posture of Chinese state cyber operations against the United States is not aimed at our military. It is aimed at our lifelines, the water, power, communications, and transportation systems civilians depend on, precisely because disrupting civilian resilience is how you paralyze a modern country without firing a shot. When the other side has reorganized its strategy around attacking your resilience, treating resilience as the core of your defense stops being a reframe. It is just an accurate reading of the battlefield.

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## The System Failure

We have spent enormous sums on military hardware while underinvesting in the resilience that determines whether people are actually safe, and the evidence of the gap is no longer hypothetical. It is documented, attributed, and sitting inside the walls.

Start with the intrusion. CISA, the NSA, and the FBI jointly assess, with high confidence, that Chinese state-sponsored actors known as Volt Typhoon have compromised the networks of American critical infrastructure organizations across communications, energy, transportation, and water systems, in the continental United States and in Guam. The agencies are explicit that this is not espionage. The pattern is pre-positioning: quiet, long-term persistence inside operational systems, using legitimate administrative tools to avoid detection, so that in a crisis or a conflict the intruder can disrupt the water, the power, and the ports at a time of its choosing. The FBI's director called it the defining threat of our generation. These actors have held footholds for years, they have regained access after being evicted, and a parallel campaign, Salt Typhoon, burrowed into the major telecommunications carriers deeply enough to reach call records and the government's own lawful-intercept systems.

Now notice where they went, because it vindicates this platform's least glamorous argument. One documented Volt Typhoon intrusion sat for nearly a year inside a small municipal light and water department in Massachusetts, mapping how the local grid works. The adversary is not only targeting the marquee systems. It is targeting the small, local, under-defended utilities where the seams are, the exact layer of American infrastructure this platform has argued we starve. And the exposure is compounding: utilities absorbed over eleven hundred cyberattacks in a single recent year, up 75 percent year over year, while the grid's own reliability authority warns that its points of susceptibility grow by roughly sixty a day as digitization outruns defense.[1] Russia showed the world what the end state looks like when it turned off power to hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians in 2015 and 2016. Meanwhile the civilian agency built to defend all of this has been cut, not grown, in the middle of the campaign against it. Weakening your own defender while the intruder is inside the house is not a policy disagreement. It is negligence with a signature on it.

The supply-chain exposure is the same failure in a different domain, and the concentration is stark. Taiwan accounts for more than 60 percent of global foundry revenue and over 90 percent of leading-edge chip manufacturing,[2] with a single company producing as many wafers a year as the entire United States. Everything advanced in the American economy and military runs through a strait the adversary has publicly committed to crossing. Medicine tells the same story with a subtler twist that honest policy has to respect: America's dependence on China runs deepest not in finished drugs but in the earliest, least-regulated stages of ingredient production, which means onshoring the final pill accomplishes little if the raw materials underneath it are still single-sourced abroad. The pandemic already gave the country a live demonstration of what these dependencies cost when they snap, and drug shortages have stayed severe by historical standards since, peaking at a record 323 active shortages in early 2024 and still running above 200. And beneath all of it sits the brittleness this platform names everywhere: we centralized and globalized the systems people depend on, let local capacity wither, and left too little underneath to catch the fall.

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## The Proposal

Seven planks at home, three principles abroad.

1. **Secure the supply chains we cannot live without, at the layer where the dependence actually lives.** Identify the essentials the country cannot lose access to, medicine and its raw ingredients, semiconductors, critical minerals, key elements of the food supply, and build secure sources through domestic production and trusted allies, with strategic reserves where they make sense. Follow the dependence to its real depth: for medicine that means the raw materials and early chemistry, not just the finished drug, because onshoring the label while importing the substance is security theater. For chips it means sustaining the domestic fabrication build-out already underway and pairing it with the packaging, materials, and talent that make a fab more than a building. Diversification and trusted sourcing, not autarky.
2. **Build energy independence and a grid that can take a hit.** Treat clean, domestic energy as the security asset it is, and harden the grid against weather, physical attack, and cyber intrusion, with the redundancy and distributed generation that let parts of the system fail without taking down the whole. Energy a country produces itself, on a grid that can absorb a blow, is far harder to hold hostage, and a distributed grid is a harder target than a centralized one by design.
3. **Defend the lifelines, and fund the defenders.** Make the cyber defense of water, power, communications, and transportation a first-order national defense mission, funded like one. That means restoring and growing the civilian cyber defense agency rather than cutting it mid-campaign, mandatory baseline security standards for lifeline utilities with federal help to meet them, because a small municipal water department cannot out-spend a state intelligence service alone, and sustained threat-hunting that treats eviction as a process rather than a press release, since these actors demonstrably come back. Pair defense with consequence: attribution, indictment, and sanction, jointly with allies, so intruding on American lifelines carries a price.
4. **Rebuild biological defense before the next test.** The pandemic was a national-security failure no weapons system could have prevented, and the preparedness it exposed as thin has been allowed to thin further. Fund the disease surveillance, public-health workforce, and medical countermeasure capacity to detect and contain outbreaks, natural or engineered, before they become catastrophes, and connect it to the public-health infrastructure the foundations pillar rebuilds. Biological threats are among the most likely and most dangerous the country faces, and among the most neglected relative to their risk.

5. **Sustain alliances and defend democratic institutions as security assets.** Alliances multiply national strength, and the integrity of elections and public trust is a security perimeter in its own right, under documented attack from foreign interference and domestic subversion alike. Defend both, within the law and with full respect for civil liberties, because security measures that erode the freedoms they protect defeat their own purpose.
6. **Treat local resilience as national security, because the adversary already does.** A country whose communities can absorb shocks locally is fundamentally harder to destabilize, and the intrusion record shows the adversary probing exactly that local layer. Invest in it as defense: local emergency and public-health capacity, distributed energy and microgrids, local food systems, and the community institutions and mutual-aid networks that do the first work in any crisis. The resilience lives locally. The financing, standards, and coordination that get it to scale are the federal job.
7. **Exercise the whole system.** In emergency management, a plan that has never been exercised is a rumor. Run national-scale exercises that stress the seams these threats actually target, a grid-down week, a port disruption, a supply-chain snap, an outbreak, with states, localities, utilities, and communities in the room, and fix what the exercises find. The cheapest disaster is the one we prevent, and the second cheapest is the one we rehearsed.

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## Allies, Aid, and the Use of Force

Security is also how the country carries its weight in the world, and that requires a consistent posture rather than improvisation. Three principles govern it.

**Secure our own people first.** On an airplane you secure your own oxygen mask before helping the person next to you, and the same logic applies to a country. There is nothing wrong with helping our neighbors, and a strong America should. But we should not fund abroad what we refuse to fund at home, and foreign commitments should be weighed honestly against unmet needs here. Helping our own people is not isolationism. It is the foundation that makes a credible role abroad possible.

**No unconditional aid, and one standard for every ally.** Aid and support come with clear, consistent expectations. Not micromanagement of every operational decision, but a firm line: when a partner uses American weapons and resources to commit atrocities or target civilians, we stop, and the rule applies to every ally without exception. This is not a new idea but an old law we fail to enforce. The Leahy Law already bars assistance to foreign units credibly implicated in gross human-rights violations[3], and it has been applied unevenly, with documented double standards for favored partners.[4] Enforce it consistently, for everyone, because a standard that bends for friends is not a standard at all.

**Force as a last resort, for moral ends, decided in the open.** As the strongest military power in the world, the United States can sometimes be the difference between a massacre stopped and a massacre completed, and it should be willing to stand against the gravest crimes: genocide, ethnic cleansing, mass atrocity. That is the core of the Responsibility to Protect, grounded in the older just-war tradition. But the bar stays high and the rules strict: authorized democratically, not launched on one person's say-so; specific objectives and a defined horizon, not open-ended occupation; and the people being helped taking part in their own liberation, with America providing support, training, and protection rather than fighting in their place. We should be willing to stand against slaughter. We should never again drift into open-ended wars without clear ends, public consent, or a moral purpose that survives daylight.

## Harden the Systems That Keep People Alive

The Volt Typhoon finding earlier in this brief has an unfinished implication: adversaries prepositioned in civilian infrastructure attack water systems, hospitals, and utilities that mostly cannot defend themselves. The position: enforceable minimum cybersecurity standards for lifeline sectors, water, healthcare, energy, with federal technical and financial support for the thousands of small utilities that cannot hire a security team, a ransomware doctrine that pairs disruption of the criminal ecosystem with mandatory incident reporting, and cyber exercises folded into the resilience-exercise regime this brief already proposes. Resilience-first security means the water treatment plant, not just the aircraft carrier.

## Implementation Pathway

Supply-chain security runs through industrial policy, procurement, and coordination with allies, much of it begun and in need of follow-through that reaches the raw-material layer. Grid and energy resilience connect to the climate and build pillars through deployment, permitting, and standards. Lifeline cyber defense runs through the civilian cyber agency’s budget and authorities, through utility regulation at the state level, and through the federal standards and assistance that make small-utility defense possible. Biodefense runs through the public-health appropriations the foundations pillar carries. The Leahy enforcement commitment is executive-branch discipline under existing law, which is exactly why it is a test of seriousness: it requires no new statute, only the will to apply the one we have. The exercise regime runs through the emergency-management machinery the country already owns. The pattern throughout is the platform’s standard one: national coordination and financing supporting capacity that is often built and held locally.

## Funding and Public-Value Logic

Resilience is cheaper than catastrophe, and this pillar’s spending mostly does double duty. Clean energy lowers bills every day and hardens the country against coercion. Public-health capacity serves people in ordinary times and is the difference between an outbreak and a catastrophe. Local resilience investment pays out in every disaster, attack or storm alike, which is the quiet advantage of defending by resilience: the same dollar defends against the hurricane and the intrusion, because both are answered by communities and systems that can absorb a shock. Securing supply chains for essentials costs far less than losing access to them in a crisis, as the pandemic priced out in real time. And enforcing the Leahy Law costs nothing at all. It saves money, and something worth more than money.

## Risks and Guardrails

Reframing security as resilience is not retreat, and the alliance commitments exist precisely to say so; trusted partners are part of resilience, not an alternative to it. Supply-chain security means diversification, not autarky, because making everything at home is neither possible nor wise, and the honest nuance stays in: onshoring that ignores the raw-material layer is theater. Cyber standards for small utilities must arrive with federal money and help, or they become an unfunded mandate that closes the local water department instead of defending it. The defense of democratic institutions stays inside the rule of law and civil liberties, because a security state that eats the freedoms it guards has lost the war by winning it. And the use-of-force principles are guardrails on ourselves: the memory of open-ended wars is exactly why the bar is written high, in public, in advance.

## Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on dependence, hardness, and recovery.

- Dependence on single or untrusted sources for critical goods, tracked at the true depth of the chain, raw ingredients and materials included, and the adequacy of strategic reserves.
- Lifeline-sector intrusions detected, dwell time, and re-intrusion rates, alongside the funding and staffing of the civilian cyber defense mission.
- Grid reliability and resilience to weather, physical, and cyber threats, and the share of distributed and domestic generation.
- Public-health readiness: detection speed, surge capacity, and countermeasure stockpiles, exercised and scored.
- Leahy Law enforcement applied uniformly, measured by its exceptions, which should be zero.
- Local resilience capacity in place, and recovery time after real shocks and national exercises alike.

## Opposition and Responses

Some will say this weakens national defense by looking past military strength. It completes military strength. The documented adversary strategy is to paralyze America's civilian lifelines in a crisis, precisely to blunt its military response. A powerful force sitting on a fragile grid, intruded utilities, and snapped supply chains is not secure, and the joint assessment of our own security agencies says the enemy is already inside those systems. Closing that gap is defense.

Some will say securing supply chains is protectionism. The aim is not to wall the country off but to ensure it is not dependent on a single distant or untrusted supplier for things it cannot do without, through domestic production and trusted allies together. Ninety percent of leading-edge chips crossing one strait is not a market outcome to defend. It is a single point of failure to fix.

Some will say conditioning aid abandons our allies. Enforcing an existing American law, evenly, is not abandonment. It is the difference between an alliance and a blank check, and allies who do not commit atrocities with American weapons have nothing to fear from it.

Some will say the intervention principles tie America's hands. They tie America's hands against exactly one thing: drifting into open-ended wars without public consent or clear ends, which is the failure mode of the last quarter century. A high bar, set democratically, makes the credible threat of action stronger, not weaker, because it is believed.

Some will say local resilience is not national security. The adversary's own targeting says otherwise. When a foreign intelligence service spends a year inside a small-town water utility mapping the grid, the local layer has been designated a battlefield by the other side. Defending it is not sentiment. It is meeting the attack where it is aimed.

## What Would Change Our Position

Resilience-first is a testable doctrine. If exercises and real shocks showed the locally-anchored model failing where centralized response succeeded, the balance shifts back toward federal capacity, and honestly. If supply-chain diversification produced costs wildly out of proportion to the risk it insures against, the pace changes. If conditioning security assistance on conduct demonstrably weakened alliances without improving conduct, the tool would be reweighed against the alternatives. The commitment is that security decisions get made on evidence about what actually protects people, not on which posture performs strength best.

## Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. Security is not just about how big our military is. It is about whether we can take a hit and keep going, and our adversaries have already figured that out: they are inside our water systems and our grid right now, not to spy, but to be able to turn things off if a crisis comes. So defend the lifelines and fund the defenders. Secure the supplies we cannot live without, down to the raw ingredients, because 90 percent of the world's advanced chips coming from one island is a single point of failure with a flag on it. Build energy we control on a grid that can take a punch. Get ready for the next outbreak before it arrives. Hold every ally to one standard, the one already written in our law. Use force only as a last resort, for moral ends, decided in the open. And invest in communities that can look after themselves when the worst happens, because that is exactly the layer the other side is probing. Security is resilience. The cheapest disaster is the one we prevent.

## Footnotes

1. E&E News (POLITICO) reporting NERC's count of grid susceptibility points growing ~60/day ↩

2. U.S. International Trade Administration, Taiwan country commercial guide: semiconductors ↩

3. State Department, the Leahy Law ↩

4. Human Rights First on uneven Leahy Law application (advocacy source, flagged) ↩