

National Health Network Briefing Paper

The purpose of this briefing paper is to describe an opportunity to further advance the healthcare environment in the United States by embracing and expanding the goals and scope of the current Federal Communications Commission Rural Healthcare Pilot Program (RHCPP). The network envisioned by the RHCPP awards begins at the local and regional level and merges into a nationwide network. [For program details, see <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/rural/rhcp.html> and <http://www.usac.org/rhc-pilot-program/>]

Value of the FCC Rural Health Care Pilot Program (RHCPP)

“By connecting to this dedicated national backbone, health care providers at the state and local levels will have the opportunity to benefit from advanced applications in continuing education and research. In addition, a ubiquitous nationwide broadband network dedicated to health care will enhance the health care community’s ability to provide a rapid and coordinated response in the event of a national crisis.”

- Federal Communications Commission, FCC 06-144, September 26, 2006

A ubiquitous, nationwide broadband health care network would significantly improve health care by:

- Improving access to medical specialists and improving the coordination of care for patients.
- Dramatically increasing the efficiency of health care by improving the ability of the U.S. health care community to allocate and share both expertise and resources
- Preserving access to health care in the event of a natural disaster or terrorist attack
- Strengthening and integrating the network capabilities of participating rural health consortiums
- Supports a national telehealth and telemedicine capability that can rapidly respond to the nations healthcare needs.

The current healthcare environment requires that patients travel to a specialist or a source of expertise and sophisticated health care resources. The unfortunate outcome is that rural patients who are unable to travel miss out on the benefits of advanced health care resources and worse, are not able to take advantage of the world-class medical expertise available nationwide. *The RHCPP program enables access by rural caregivers and patients to the clinical, educational and research capabilities available at Academic Medical Centers and large urban health settings through telemedicine, health information exchange, increased capacity and speed for transferring large digital imaging files and distance education.*

A new community of health care stakeholders was created as a direct result of the Rural Health Pilot Program, a community created with optimism and great promise. This community now finds its activities limited by the RHCPP’s narrow perspective and strict focus on telecommunications infrastructure, without regard for administrative or broader technical considerations. The goals of the program need to be fully embraced by the new Administration and the program’s vision expanded beyond the limits set by the Federal Communications Commission.

We propose that the following goals should be championed by the new Administration:

- To improve access to health care in non-urban areas by leveraging the speed and connectivity of broadband telecommunications.

- To allow and encourage urban and for-profit health care providers and institutions to participate in the rural broadband network to help achieve universal healthcare quality.
- To use broadband connectivity to:
 - Provide access to specialty care as well as specialized health care resources and expertise;
 - Encourage and enable collaboration among medical centers and community-based providers;
 - Provide better educational opportunities for rural physicians;
 - Facilitate participation in research activities, such as clinical trials.

Recommendations

The members of the RHCPP community encourage an extension and broadening of the RHCPP program by:

- Reconfirming the value of the program goals of better use of health care expertise and resources irrespective of their location.
 - Incorporate the goals of the FCC's Rural Healthcare Pilot Program into all of the FCC's Rural Health programs.
 - Build on the investments being made by the FCC Rural Health Pilot Program to integrate the RHCPP with other federal agency health information technology investments outside of the FCC.
 - Refocusing the administration of the program from an emphasis on sustainability to an emphasis on experimentation and discovery, i.e., *learning from the pilot program*
- Encouraging partnerships with related federal programs such as the Nationwide Health Information Network proposed by the Office of the National Coordinator of Health Information Technology, the biosurveillance program in the Center for Disease Control, and other programs from Health Resources and Services Administration, Agency for Health Research and Quality, the Indian Health Service, the Department of Veteran's Affairs and the Department of Defense.
- Facilitating the integration of RHCPP infrastructure with other similarly focused programs, such as the FCC's own eRate program for schools

We strongly recommend that the new Administration build upon the intention of the original FCC Order establishing the Rural Health Care Pilot Program. This is consistent with President-elect Obama's goals:

"In addition to connecting our libraries and schools to the Internet, we must also ensure that our hospitals are connected to each other through the Internet. That is why the economic recovery plan I'm proposing will help modernize our health care system – and that won't just save jobs, it will save lives. We will make sure that every doctor's office and hospital in this country is using cutting edge technology and electronic medical records so that we can cut red tape, prevent medical mistakes, and help save billions of dollars each year." President-elect Obama's Saturday radio address December 6, 2008

The Administration has the ability to use existing funding available through the Universal Service Fund as well as dedicated funding at agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration, Health and Human Services, etc. to provide a *coordinated strategy* to improve health care in the United States. We can think of very few national goals of greater importance than expanding networked broadband services for the improved delivery of telemedicine and health care services to rural America.