

HHS Secretary, FCC Chairman Discuss Deployment of Telehealth Networks in Rural Communities

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Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Kevin J. Martin today announced a comprehensive proposal to fund a \$400 million Rural Health Care Pilot Program (RHCPP) that would expand access to health care to America's rural and underserved communities through the creation of broadband telehealth networks in 42 states and three U.S. territories.

As part of today's announcement, Chairman Martin joined U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Michael O. Leavitt at a meeting of the American Health Information Community in Chicago to highlight key points of his rural health care proposal. Under this initiative, broadband deployment will support the efficient delivery of health care to patients through telemedicine. Facilitating telemedicine programs can reduce costs and travel time for consumers, help decrease medical errors, and enable health care providers to quickly share critical patient-care information electronically.

"With this pilot program, the commission will be taking a major step toward the goal of connecting health care facilities across the nation with one another through broadband telehealth networks for the benefit of patients," Martin said. "We look forward to working with Secretary Leavitt and HHS to advance initiatives that improve access to health care for patients through telemedicine and support the creation of a national system for interoperable electronic health records well into the future."

"I applaud the FCC's efforts to advance availability of broadband services in rural and underserved communities, especially among health care providers," said Leavitt. "By advancing the broadband infrastructure needed to support health information technology, the FCC is moving us toward the President's goal of ensuring most Americans have access to interoperable electronic health records by 2014."

The health care facilities qualified to participate in this pilot program would utilize funding to leverage existing telehealth networks or build-out new, comprehensive systems for telehealth projects. RHCPP participants would be eligible for universal service funding to support up to 85 percent of the costs associated with the design, engineering and construction of innovative and highly efficient broadband systems.

Participants deploying dedicated broadband health care networks would also have the option of connecting those systems to the public Internet as well as to one of the Nation's dedicated Internet backbones. In addition, health care providers participating in the pilot program would be strongly encouraged to coordinate in the use of their telehealth

networks with HHS and, in particular, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in instances of national, regional or local public health emergencies (e.g., bioterrorism events, pandemics or disease-related outbreaks). In such public health emergencies, selected participants would provide access to their supported networks to public health officials so that they could share critical, time-sensitive information and risk management guidance as part of a comprehensive response effort.