

Rural Health Groups to Get Millions From FCC

Money to Provide Broadband Access To Isolated Clinics

By Kim Hart
November 20, 2007

The Federal Communications Commission announced \$417 million in grants yesterday to help rural health-care groups build high-speed Internet networks to connect isolated clinics to sophisticated medical resources in urban areas.

The three-year pilot program aims to help extend broadband lines to about 6,000 hospitals, research centers, universities and clinics in hard-to-reach regions, many of which still rely on dial-up Internet service. The faster connection could be used to upload patient records or for sending videos and pictures to diagnose the illness of someone hundreds of miles away.

The program will “play a critical role in the way technology will transform health care,” FCC Chairman Kevin J. Martin said yesterday in an interview. “Not only will a telehealth network connect doctors to patients who have never had access to medical treatment, but they can have access to the top resources on the other side of the country.”

The FCC has been under pressure from members of Congress and consumer advocates to more quickly deploy broadband networks in underserved areas. The program will be paid for with money from the universal service fund, a fee collected from long-distance and wireless subscribers that subsidizes phone and Internet service to schools and libraries as well as low-income populations and rural areas. The funds allocated to telehealth services have been underemployed, prompting the FCC to start the pilot program, Martin said.

People living in rural areas typically have reduced access to high-speed Internet because most service providers find it too expensive to build networks in sparsely populated areas. The FCC program will reimburse 69 organizations for what they spend to put the infrastructure in place.

The network could also help reduce health-care costs by letting doctors and nurses monitor patients with such chronic conditions as diabetes or heart disease from a distance, preventing expensive hospital visits, Martin said.

Robert M. Kolodner, national coordinator for health information technology at the Department of Health and Human Services, said the gap in the level of health care received in rural areas compared with urban areas is exacerbated by the lack of high-speed lines. He hopes the program will help speed up the use of electronic records, which a slow adoption rate nationwide.

“Trying to do this on dial-up would be essentially impossible,” he said. “The key is to take away that barrier.”

The West Virginia Telehealth Alliance, which services West Virginia, Virginia and Ohio, will receive \$8.4 million over the next three years to connect 450 facilities. The Virginia Acute Stroke Telehealth Network will use \$2.7 million to provide live video consultation and remote monitoring in 48 locations.