



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF FAMILY PHYSICIANS

## News & Publications



### **Broadband Telehealth Networks Coming To Rural America**

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Thousands of rural family physicians and their patients may benefit from a recently announced Federal Communications Commission, or FCC, initiative aimed at increasing patient access to acute, primary and preventive health care.

The FCC announced in a Nov. 19 news release that it would allocate \$417 million for the construction of 69 statewide and regional broadband telehealth networks in 42 states and three U.S. territories under the Rural Health Care Pilot Program, or RHCPP.

According to the release, broadband deployment in rural America is one of the FCC's top priorities. The commission views the networks as a means to efficiently deliver health care services by enabling health care professionals to, among other things, share critical information. The networks also give patients in rural communities easy electronic access to subspecialists.

“Adoption of health IT will not be possible in communities that do not have access to broadband connectivity,” said HHS Secretary Michael Leavitt in a Nov. 13 news release. If the country is to meet President Bush's goal of making interoperable electronic health records available to most Americans by 2014, it's important to make sure that every community “has the hardwiring needed to support it,” he added.

In the same release, FCC Chairman Kevin Martin said that the initiative would facilitate connecting health care facilities across the nation and would bring the latest health information technology to rural America. “Broadband telemedicine programs can reduce costs and travel time for patients, help decrease medical errors and enable health care providers to quickly share critical patient-care information electronically,” he said.

The RHCPP, which was launched in 2006, supports connectivity for more than 6,000 health care professionals, according to the FCC. Some of those professionals are family physicians affiliated with hospitals, clinics, universities, community health centers and other health care facilities.

Among the participants and projects selected to take part in the RHCPP are

- the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, which largely consists of rural health care professionals, would receive approximately \$10.4 million and connect approximately 270 facilities throughout Alaska and the lower 48 states;
- the California Telehealth Network could receive just more than \$22 million and link about 300 rural California facilities, thus improving patient-physician interaction for a population that suffers disproportionately from depression, hypertension, asthma and cardiovascular disease;
- the Iowa Rural Health Telecommunications Program would use more than \$9.9 million to link nearly 100 facilities in Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota, helping solve the problems of geographical isolation and limited resources that constrain health care delivery in rural Iowa and surrounding regions;
- the University Health Systems of Eastern Carolina would use approximately \$960,000 to add 16 mostly rural health care facilities in 12 counties to an existing network to better serve a population suffering from a significantly higher incidence of chronic disease than the state and national averages; and
- the West Virginia Telehealth Alliance would use nearly \$8.4 million to connect 450 facilities and target regions of the state that have large populations of poor and elderly patients suffering from chronic medical conditions.

According to an FCC spokesperson, the RHCPP will reimburse contractors charged with designing, building and implementing regional networks for 85 percent of the costs they incur; applicants will pay contractors the remaining 15 percent. The Federal Office of Management and Budget will oversee the paperwork and applications. Funding is for three years, with the first funding year ending June 30, 2008.