

March 6, 2017

Statement for the Record

**Senate Commerce Committee Hearing
“Connecting America: Improving Access to
Infrastructure for Communities across the County”
March 1, 2017**

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Rural Health Telecom, a subsidiary of TeleQuality Communications, Inc., based in San Antonio, TX, and founded in 1999, is a telecommunications/telecom service provider to health care facilities in the predominantly rural areas of 30 states.

Our overarching concern, shared with rural telehealth providers, is a rapid and ubiquitous rollout of a robust and universal broadband infrastructure that will insure direct access to telehealth services. We appreciate the FCC effort to create funding that will meet its goal of broadband access to all Americans by 2020.

Ancillary concerns include removing regulatory burdens on infrastructure deployment that is critical to project initiation and success, and increased funding for Universal Service Fund (USF) projects, specifically the Rural Health Care (RHC) program.

USF has been widely regarded as a success since its creation under the Telecommunications Act of 1996. It remains vital to the expansion of broadband to unserved and underserved communities across the nation. Yet, overall funding of USF programs is insufficient.

This is particularly evident in the RHC Program, which is poised to see funding shortfalls for the first time due to the combination of a recent surge in funding applications, the addition of Skilled Nursing Facilities to the list of entities eligible to request funding, and the \$400 million funding cap that has never been increased, nor even allowed to grow at the pace of inflation. Immediate action is essential, including a funding cap increase, to avoid loss of critical service to rural healthcare providers.

With robust funding on the table, a commitment to a level playing field for competition and innovation is likewise imperative. Early signals from newly appointed FCC Chairman Ajit Pai indicate a likely reduction in unproductive regulations and an opening of competitive markets for the delivery of broadband services. Given increased funding and adoption of a “lighter touch” with respect to regulations, progress should be rapid.

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We urge the Committee to draft necessary legislation and build support and commitment among members of the Committee and the Senate at large on an urgent timeline in order to assure 56 million Americans who reside in rural areas, as well as all citizens, the benefits of cutting-edge telehealth services.

We should never forget the distinct difference with respect to health care needs and access in rural areas versus urban communities in the United States. Income generally is lower in rural communities. Health services may be hours away. Accidents on farms and country roads are higher than in urban areas. Families are larger. The population is older. And the quality of care is sparser and often less proficient.

We commend Chairman Thune and Ranking Member Nelson for their sagacious leadership in proposing and advancing legislation that will address the issues identified in this comment, and we stand ready and able, individually and in association with others, to support your urgent efforts to assure all Americans access to the best telehealth care and services in the world.



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