

Media Contact:

Katie Gorscak, (202) 418-2156
katie.gorscak@fcc.gov

For Immediate Release

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, AND U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE TEAM UP FOR RURAL TELEHEALTH INITIATIVE

Agencies Sign Memorandum of Understanding to Collaborate on Efforts to Keep Rural Americans Connected to Vital Health Services

WASHINGTON, September 1, 2020—The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) today announced that they have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work together on the Rural Telehealth Initiative, a joint effort to collaborate and share information to address health disparities, resolve service provider challenges, and promote broadband services and technology to rural areas in America. This action delivers on President Trump’s recently signed Executive Order on Improving Rural Health and Telehealth Access. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of telehealth in delivering quality healthcare to rural Americans.

Rural Americans are acutely affected by gaps in the healthcare system, from hospital closures to a lack of specialty care. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, rural Americans, who make up more than 15% of the U.S. population, face numerous health disparities compared with their urban counterparts. Rural Americans are more likely to die from heart disease, cancer, unintentional injury, chronic lower respiratory disease, and strokes than their urban counterparts. Telemedicine plays an increasingly critical part in treating patients, improving health outcomes, lowering costs, and helping health care providers maximize their impact on their communities, especially in rural areas of the United States.

“From the beginning of my tenure at the FCC, I’ve heard and shared the view that telemedicine is a game-changer for rural America. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the rural healthcare challenge even more serious and has complicated healthcare providers’ efforts to serve rural Americans,” said FCC Chairman Ajit Pai. “More than ever, these areas of the country need enhanced connectivity to provide vital health services to residents. With the adoption of the \$200 million COVID-19 Telehealth Program, the FCC acted quickly to approve 539 funding applications for a wide array of health care providers, including community health centers, mental health clinics, and non-profit hospital systems in both rural and urban areas of the country. This effort allowed for more patients to be treated at home, freeing up valuable hospital beds for those who most need them, and reducing the risk of exposure to the virus. By joining forces with HHS and USDA, the FCC is extending its commitment to connect rural Americans to telehealth services—today and into the future.”

“This Trump Administration-wide partnership will help more Americans in rural areas get access to the care they need. Better access to telehealth in rural America means better health for

some of our most vulnerable and greater resilience at times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic,” said HHS Secretary Alex Azar. “President Trump has made rural health a priority throughout his time in office, making payment reforms to help rural hospitals and establishing a Rural Health Task Force at HHS. We look forward to working with our colleagues at the FCC and USDA to expand access through telehealth to quality, affordable care for the 57 million Americans living in rural areas.”

“USDA is tasked with the noble goal of increasing prosperity in rural America. Increasing access to quality tele-health services is a critical part of this goal, especially now that the coronavirus has presented new challenges to rural healthcare,” said U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue. “USDA has been working to expand broadband availability in rural areas so our citizens can utilize services like telehealth. USDA’s Rural Broadband ReConnect program is delivering nearly \$650 million in loans, grants, and loan-grant combinations to deploy high-speed broadband internet to rural communities who do not have access. Everyone needs access to this critical infrastructure and we need to do more to ensure rural communities are connected.”

As part of this Memorandum of Understanding, the agencies intend to establish an interagency Rural Telehealth Initiative Task Force comprised of representatives from each agency. This Task Force will regularly meet to consider future recommendations or guidelines for this effort and exchange agency expertise, scientific and technical information, data, and publications.

To read the Memorandum of Understanding visit <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/rural-telehealth-mou-hhs-usda-fcc.pdf>.

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Media Relations: (202) 418-0500 / ASL: (844) 432-2275 / Twitter: @FCC / www.fcc.gov

This is an unofficial announcement of Commission action. Release of the full text of a Commission order constitutes official action. See MCI v. FCC, 515 F.2d 385 (D.C. Cir. 1974).