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Health Care Newsletter

Significant Additional Federal Investment in Telehealth

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The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is establishing the Connected Care Pilot Program, pumping \$100 million into a new telehealth pilot program.

Lack of access to modern, comprehensive medical care in rural areas is longstanding, particularly for specialized care. This lack of access is particularly harmful to elderly patients as 18% of America's elderly population lives in rural environments. Economic factors, differing cultural and social attitudes, lack of recognition by legislators and geographic isolation all aggregate to create health care disparities and thwart rural Americans in their efforts to lead normal, healthy lives.

Telehealth, and the innovation that stems from it, is universally recognized as one of the best solutions to this pervasive problem. The FCC considers telehealth as being similar, but distinct from telemedicine. Telehealth refers to remote healthcare outside the scope of the doctor patient relationship. These services include nurses, pharmacists, or social workers assisting patients with patient health education, social support, and medication adherence.

Investment in telehealth is particularly important as states expand the scope of practice for these non-physician healthcare professions to accommodate for provider shortages and efforts to embrace the coordinated care model of patient care.

Under initial plans for the program, the FCC would budget \$100 million to support a limited number of telehealth projects that promote healthcare services for low-income Americans and veterans in rural areas. Many of these places still lack the infrastructure to support affordable broadband internet, a necessary part of modern American life.

The FCC opened comments for public input on the plan, including advice for how to design the pilot program, recommendations on appropriate telehealth projects and suggestions on how to measure the effectiveness of the program.

Health care and broadband providers are urging the FCC to focus the program building on existing connections, as well as investing in internet-enabled applications and services, instead of using the program to build out new connections. Specifically, health care and broadband providers are recommending community telehealth kiosks in centralized community locations such as local libraries and shopping centers. This would provide patients a centralized access point to benefit from remote access to primary and specialty care without the infrastructure build required to touch patients' homes.

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Program implementation will begin in the next two to three years. As telehealth services expand throughout the healthcare industry, access to healthcare for rural residents remains a prime area for investment.



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