

United States Senate

March 18, 2020

The Honorable Ajit Pai
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

We write to urge the Federal Communications Commission to take immediate steps to ensure that our nation's health care providers have the resources they need during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 1997, the Commission has played an important role in expanding telehealth in the United States through the Rural Health Care Program. That is why we are writing to ask you to waive current FCC rules and help increase access to care by increasing subsidies for Rural Health Care Program participants in funding year 2019 during this crisis.

Telehealth allows providers to deliver health care to patients without putting themselves at risk or requiring vulnerable patients to travel to hospitals and waiting rooms during public health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is often cheaper and more efficient than traditional health care delivery methods, allowing health care providers to have a greater impact in their communities. For these reasons, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended health care providers use telehealth to direct patients to the right level of care for their health care needs, to conduct initial screenings of patients who may be infected with COVID-19, and to ensure that patients have access to necessary care without potentially exposing themselves by entering a hospital or physician's office. This is especially true for the approximately 45 million Americans age 65 and older who are at particular risk from the virus. Congress has also supported the use of telehealth during this public health emergency through the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2020, which waives restrictions on the use of telehealth in Medicare during the coronavirus outbreak, including allowing Medicare beneficiaries to receive telehealth services in their homes.

The Rural Health Care Program supports telehealth at urban and rural locations to improve patient care and reduce health care costs. The program is comprised of two parts, the Telecommunications Program, which subsidizes the difference between urban and rural rates for telecommunications services, and the Health Care Connect Fund, which provides health care providers a 65% discount on their telecommunications and broadband costs. Although the Rural Health Care Program has encouraged investment in telehealth across the country, it is not enough, as the COVID-19 pandemic has strained our nation's medical system and has created an

increased demand for remote patient care.¹ The Commission noted the challenge COVID-19 has imposed on health care providers when it announced last week that all eligible funding year 2019 requests would be fully funded using existing rollover funds.² Increasing the subsidies for the Rural Health Care Program participants for the 2019 funding year in a similar manner, and thus not impacting other universal service programs, would allow health care providers to increase the use of telehealth services and further protect the well-being of their patients and employees. The Commission should also extend the filing window for the 2020 funding year to June 30th, as it has already done for E-Rate program participants, so that the many health care providers that are currently on the front-lines of providing care to patients will not miss out on applying for next year's Rural Health Care Program funds.

The Commission's Rural Health Care Program has been a key aspect of increasing telehealth in the United States. In this time of crisis, it is imperative we do our part to ensure the safety and security of our health care providers and patients. We thank you for your attention to this matter and we urge you to take action as soon as possible. Due to the closure of many Senate offices during the coronavirus outbreak, physical signatures are unavailable. The listed senators have asked to be signatories to this letter.

Sincerely,

Senator Brian Schatz

Senator Michael F. Bennet

Senator Tammy Duckworth

Senator Tammy Baldwin

Senator Mazie Hirono

Senator Jeffrey A. Merkley

Senator Tim Kaine

Senator Lisa Murkowski

Senator Jeanne Shaheen

Senator Sherrod Brown

Senator Amy Klobuchar

Senator Kyrsten Sinema

Senator Richard Blumenthal

Senator Catherine Cortez Masto

Senator Edward J. Markey

Senator Bernard Sanders

Senator Chris Van Hollen

Senator Jacky Rosen

Senator Angus S. King, Jr.

Senator Ron Wyden

Senator Richard J. Durbin

Senator Margaret Wood Hassan

Senator Cory A. Booker

Senator Jon Tester

Senator Tom Udall

Senator Kamala D. Harris

¹ Melanie Evans, Anna Wilde Mathews, "US Hospitals Face Major Challenges as Coronavirus Spreads," *Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-hospitals-face-major-challenges-as-coronavirus-spreads-11584056336?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=4>.

² Ajit Pai, "Chairman Pai Welcomes Adoption of His Proposal to Increase Rural Health Care Funding," *FCC News*, March 13, 2020, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-363046A1.pdf>.

CC: The Honorable Michael O’Rielly, Commissioner,
The Honorable Brendan Carr, Commissioner
The Honorable Jessica Rosenworcel, Commissioner
The Honorable Geoffrey Starks, Commissioner