

United States Senate

May 8, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, and Leader McCarthy:

We write to express our support for dedicated funding for broadband for health care providers in any future coronavirus relief package Congress considers. The coronavirus pandemic has dramatically increased the need to expand telehealth so that health care providers can treat patients safely, without putting themselves or their patients at risk.¹ As a result, many health care providers are facing connectivity challenges in meeting this new demand for telehealth.² It is imperative that Congress act to ensure our front-line responders have the tools they need to combat this deadly virus.

The Rural Health Care (RHC) Program is the only federal program that supports broadband deployment at urban and rural health care provider 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.

Unfortunately, demand for the RHC Program has outpaced available funding over the last several years, and the COVID-19 pandemic impact will likely exacerbate this issue. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that 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

¹ Reed Abelson, "Doctors and Patients Turn to Telemedicine in the Coronavirus Outbreak," *New York Times*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/health/telemedicine-coronavirus.html>.

² Erin Brodwin & Casey Ross, "Surge in patients overwhelms telehealth services amid coronavirus pandemic," *STAT*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/17/telehealth-services-overwhelmed-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

Christina Farr, "Telemedicine companies are struggling to serve 'extreme volumes' of patients as coronavirus calls surge," *CNBC*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/16/telemedicine-companiesstruggling-to-meet-coronavirus-demand.html>.

necessary care without potentially exposing themselves by entering a hospital or physician's office. Congress's actions to waive restrictions on the use of telehealth in Medicare during the coronavirus outbreak in the *Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2020* and the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act* will also likely increase demands for telehealth and requests for support through the RHC Program.

Congress must do more for our health care providers so that they can meet telehealth needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. That is why we are writing you to request that Congress provide \$2 billion in additional support for the RHC Program in any future coronavirus response. This additional support would expand the reach of the RHC Program to enable health care providers at non-rural and mobile health care facilities to engage in telehealth, eliminate administrative red tape that slows down the ability of front-line providers to obtain broadband connectivity, and provide more resources to current health care providers in the RHC Program so they can increase their broadband capacity to effectively treat their patients.

The RHC 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 urge you to include support in coronavirus legislation to ensure that Americans can access vital care when they need it in a way that protects their health and the health of those around them. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



BRIAN SCHATZ
United States Senator



LISA MURKOWSKI
United States Senator



ANGUS S. KING, JR.
United States Senator



JOHN BOOZMAN
United States Senator

cc: The Honorable Roger Wicker, Chairman, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

The Honorable Maria Cantwell, Ranking Member, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Chairman, Energy and Commerce Committee

The Honorable Greg Walden, Ranking Member, Energy and Commerce Committee