

The Expanding Capacity for Health Outcomes Act of 2019 (ECHO 2019 Act)

Introduced by Senators Schatz (D-HI), Kaine (D-VA), and Murkowski (R-AK)

Rural Health Challenges

Rural areas in the United States have many health care challenges, including access to care, especially specialty care, and higher rates of chronic diseases and potentially preventable deaths.¹

The ECHO 2019 Act increases access to health care services in rural areas and for medically underserved areas and populations through grants and technical assistance to evaluate, develop, and expand the use of technology-enabled collaborative learning and capacity building models.

Technology-enabled collaborative learning and capacity building models are distance health education models that connect specialists with other health care professionals through simultaneous interactive videoconferencing to facilitate case-based learning, disseminate best practices, and evaluate outcomes.

- These models have been shown to address important gaps in health care for underserved populations and improve health outcomes.²
- The original model of this type, Project ECHO (Project Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) began in 2003 at the University of New Mexico to expand access to care for hepatitis C in rural New Mexico using interactive videoconferencing to link specialist teams (“hubs”) with primary care providers (“spokes”) in rural and underserved areas.
- The Project ECHO model and similar models now are used for a wide variety of disease conditions, including substance use disorder and mental health, across the United States and other countries.

2016 ECHO Act

- The *Expanding Capacity for Health Outcomes (ECHO) Act* (P.L. 114-270), which became law in 2016, required the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to examine technology-enabled collaborative learning and capacity building models and deliver a report to Congress on the findings.
- The report to Congress found that the available evidence on such models is modest but consistently shows positive effects, and recommended expanding the evidence base, including by directly funding evaluation and technical assistance.

ECHO 2019 Act

- The *ECHO 2019 Act* builds on the findings of this report by providing grants and technical assistance to develop and evaluate technology-enabled collaborative learning and capacity building models. The grants will be used for:
 - Equipment to support the use and expansion of such models, including for the secure exchange of electronic health information;
 - Support for health care providers that provide or assist in the provision of services under such models;
 - Instructional programming and training for such models;
 - Information collection and evaluation activities to study the impact of such models; and
 - Other activities as determined by the Secretary of HHS

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2017/p0112-rural-death-risk.html>

² <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/260691/ECHOAct-ConsolidatedReportToCongress.pdf>