

May 14, 2018

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

Dear Chairman Pai,

We write in reference to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) adopted Notice of Proposed Rulemaking and Order (NPRM and Order) seeking comment on how to strengthen the Rural Health Care (RHC) Program. This program has grown in importance since its inception and we urge the FCC to sufficiently increase the current funding cap to account for the current demand and future growth of the program's recipients.

The RHC program has been improving the quality of health care available to patients in rural areas since 1997. The FCC initially established the Telecommunications Program to ensure that rural hospitals and health care providers did not pay more for telecommunications services than their urban counterparts. Since then, the program has grown to include the Healthcare Connect Fund, which provides financial support to consortia that build out broadband networks to connect rural and urban health care providers. In 2016, Congress added skilled nursing facilities to the list of eligible entities and according to the Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition, the estimated total number of eligible institutions has more than doubled since the program was created. Yet the program's \$400 million annual cap has remained the same for over 20 years.

In 2016, for the first time ever, the demand for RHC funding exceeded the cap and funding to recipients was reduced by 7.5 percent. Further, it was recently announced that RHC applicants will suffer a devastating cutback in funding of 16 to 26 percent in funding year 2017 because of continued growth in demand. Unless the spending cap is raised appropriately to account for current needs and future growth, health care providers in rural areas will encounter severe rate increases for their broadband services, making it even harder for rural health care practitioners to engage in life-saving telemedicine. A recent survey done by the Journal of Rural Health shows that 59 percent of non-metro health clinics have less than a 10 megabit per second connection, which is one percent of the gigabit capacity recommended by the National Broadband Plan. This shortage of broadband connectivity highlights the amount of work still to be done to support and connect rural health care providers to 21st century technologies.

We applaud the FCC for taking the preliminary steps to seek comment on how to strengthen the RHC program and improve access to telehealth in rural America. As you move toward a final decision in this proceeding, we urge you to sufficiently increase the current funding cap to account for the current demand and future growth of the program's recipients. Thank you for your consideration.


Sincerely,



Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senator



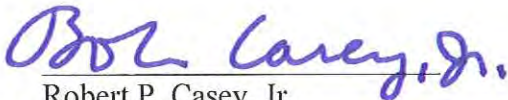
John Hoeven
United States Senator




Mazie Hirono
United States Senator



Dan Sullivan
United States Senator



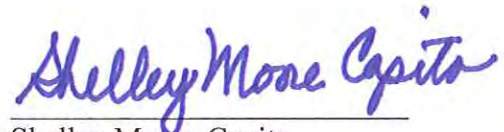
Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



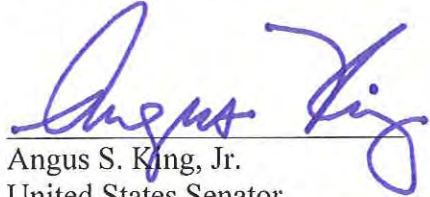
Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



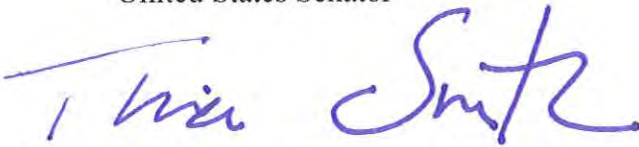
Shelley Moore Capito
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator




Susan Collins
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Roy Blunt
United States Senator



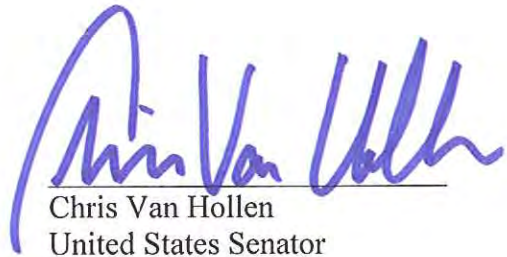
Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



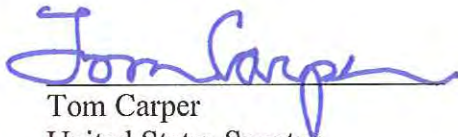
Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



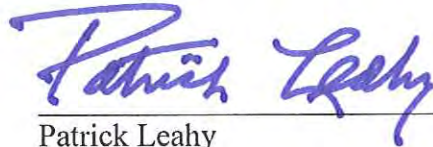
Claire McCaskill
United States Senator



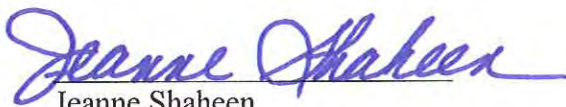
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



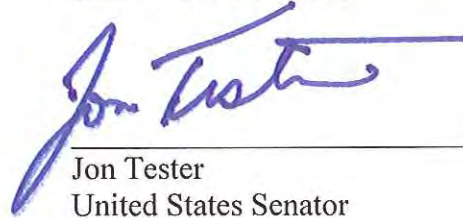
Tom Carper
United States Senator



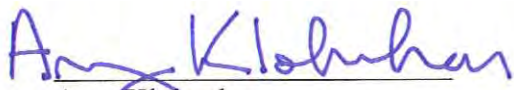
Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Jon Tester
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



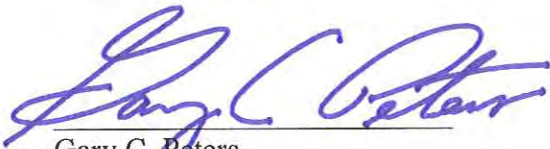
Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



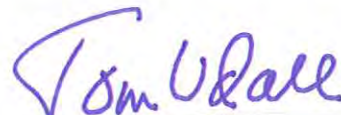
Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



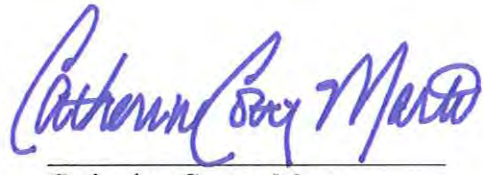
Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



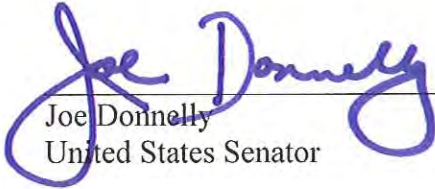
Tom Udall
United States Senator



Doug Jones
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Joe Donnelly
United States Senator

Cc:
Commissioner Mike O'Rielly
Commissioner Mignon Clyburn
Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel
Commissioner Brendan Carr