

United States Senate

July 31, 2018

604

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

The Honorable Michael O’Rielly
Commissioner
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

The Honorable Brendan Carr
Commissioner
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

The Honorable Jessica Rosenworcel
Commissioner
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Pai and Commissioners O’Rielly, Carr, and Rosenworcel:

I write ahead of the vote the Federal Communications Commission (FCC or the “Commission”) will take at the August meeting regarding the recent Notice of Inquiry issued by the Commission and the “Connected Care Pilot Program” the notice proposes to establish. I believe strongly that everyone deserves access to quality health care they can afford, which is why I commend the Commission in its effort to invest more resources in telehealth. These investments could help communities—particularly in rural areas—improve care and eliminate barriers that prevent families from getting the health care they need.

Minnesota is a rural state and, like much of the country, there are disparities between the health of people who live in rural and urban areas. People in rural areas tend to have a greater need for health care services. Well over 40 percent of rural Minnesotans are over the age of 50. And people in rural communities are more likely than people in other areas to die from all of the top five causes of death in my state, including cancer, heart disease, and accidental injury.¹

Despite this need for care, there is a significant shortage of providers—while roughly half of the people in my state live in rural communities, only about one in every eight of our physicians practice there.² Health care workforce shortages—along with unreliable funding, lack of transportation, and other challenges—make it more difficult for people in rural areas to get the health care they need.

¹ Minnesota Office of Rural Health and Primary Care, “Snapshot of Health in Rural Minnesota 2017,” *Minnesota Department of Health* (2017) (Online at: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/pubs/rhac/2017snapshot.pdf>)

² Minnesota Office of Rural Health and Primary Care, “Overview of the Physician Workforce 2017,” *Minnesota Department of Health* (October 2017) (Online at: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/workforce/phy/2017pchartbook.pdf>)

Experts in Minnesota have determined that telehealth initiatives help increase access to services, particularly for mental health, enhance coordination among providers, and lead to earlier intervention and improved outcomes.³ And there is promising work already happening in communities across my state.

For example, professionals at Essentia Health have been using telehealth to monitor patients who are recovering from heart failure, leading to a readmission rate of only 2 percent, over 10 times below the national average.⁴ And the Arrowhead Telehealth Alliance—which serves a region that covers 23 percent of Minnesota, but contains only 6 percent of our residents—is stretching scarce mental health resources by using technology to integrate mental health and primary care.⁵ Finally, Minnesota VA hospitals in St. Cloud and Bemidji are using telehealth to help the 1 in 4 veterans who live in rural areas get care in their homes and avoid unnecessary trips to the hospital.⁶

As you consider the proposal to create the Connected Care Pilot Program, I welcome the opportunity to work with the Commission to support the expansion of broadband and telehealth services in Minnesota. This will allow health care leaders in Minnesota to continue their efforts to mitigate health disparities between rural and urban communities and ensure that every family, no matter where they live, can access the care they need.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to working with you to expand investment in broadband and support telehealth initiatives in Minnesota.

Sincerely,



U.S. Senator Tina Smith

³ Rural Health Advisory Committee, “Telemental Health in Rural Minnesota,” *Minnesota Department of Health* (July 2010) (Online at: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/pubs/rhac/tmh.pdf>)

⁴ Bill Siwicki, “essential Health slashes readmissions with population health initiative, telehealth,” *Healthcare IT News* (March 2016) (Online at: <https://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/essentia-health-slashes-readmissions-population-health-initiative-telehealth>)

⁵ Steven Ross Johnson, “Minnesota deploys telehealth to expand mental health access to rural areas,” *Modern Healthcare* (May 2017) (Online at: <http://www.modernhealthcare.com/article/20170527/MAGAZINE/170529922>).

⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “St. Cloud VA Health Care System,” *VA.gov*. (June 2018) (Online at: <https://www.stcloud.va.gov/services/>); Tribune News Service, “For rural veterans, new approaches to health care,” *Bemidji Pioneer* (August 2017) (Online at: <http://www.bemidjipioneer.com/news/4309359-rural-veterans-new-approaches-health-care>).