

April 13, 2020

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

Re: *Promoting Telehealth and Telemedicine in Rural America*,  
WC Docket No. 17-310

Dear Chairman Pai:

COVID-19 is challenging our nation's healthcare infrastructure at every level. Our nation's rural healthcare providers are under particular strain. If history is any guide, independent healthcare clinics serving our most vulnerable populations in rural and remote parts of the nation will be hard-pressed to meet the needs of their constituents. The FCC's rural health care (RHC) universal service support program, which already was essential to rural America, is even more critical for access to the advanced tele-health capabilities needed in this time of crisis.

In rural Alaska, healthcare providers have experienced significant increases in demand, even several times their normal patient contacts, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet at present there is no mechanism for them to request additional support and modify their supported telecommunications services for the remainder of Funding Year 2019 (until June 30, 2020).

Moreover, healthcare providers and service providers are struggling to prepare to comply with a completely new set of urban and rural rate rules under the Commission's revamping of the Rural Health Care (RHC) program last August.<sup>1</sup> While the Commission found the old Program rules to be outdated, it is critical that the new rules make tele-health services *more* accessible for rural America, *not less*. And, we believe transparency about how the new rules are being implemented is imperative to Program participants and service providers alike.

We appreciate the steps you have taken in recent days to facilitate rural healthcare providers' access to much-needed services and reduce administrative complexity, but there is more work to be done, especially to enhance telehealth services needed by our most vulnerable populations.

Therefore, and especially given the vulnerability of our national healthcare infrastructure during the immediate crisis, we ask that you take administrative action necessary to:

1. Provide immediate additional support for expanded bandwidth between now and June 30, 2020. Open a new application filing window for Funding Year (FY) 2019 funding requests and waive competitive

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<sup>1</sup> *Promoting Telehealth in Rural America*, WC Docket No. 17-310, Report & Order, FCC No. 19-78, (rel. Aug. 20, 2019), 84 Fed. Reg. 54,952 (Oct. 11, 2019) (the "*August Report and Order*").

bidding requirements as well as the FY 2019 rural health care support mechanism funding cap, to allow rural healthcare providers (HCPs) that currently participate in the program to immediately increase their bandwidth by up to 50%, and provide a corresponding increase in the associated support, under existing contracts, for the remaining months of FY 2019, without requiring additional approval from USAC or competitive bidding. Disburse this additional support within 30 days.

2. Free up liquidity to address COVID-19. Direct USAC to disburse payments within 30 days for all outstanding funding requests for FY 2017, FY 2018, and FY 2019. For those funding requests that are undergoing a review of the rural rate, direct USAC to disburse interim payments based on the most recent approved rural rate for a similar service, subject to a true-up following the completion of the rural rate review.
3. Provide additional support for care into FY2020. Waive or significantly increase the rural health care support mechanism funding cap for FY 2020.
4. Allow healthcare and telecommunications providers to focus for the next year on delivering essential services. Pause the transition to the new rules for the RHC Telecommunications Program, postponing the effective date of the new urban and rural rate methodologies under Sections 54.604(a) and 54.605(a), as adopted in the *August Report and Order*, until Funding Year 2022.
5. Postpone administrative paperwork. To the extent not already addressed by the Wireline Competition Bureau,<sup>2</sup> suspend or postpone audit fieldwork and deadlines for responding to document or information requests from USAC auditors, in order to allow healthcare providers and service providers to devote all available resources to the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

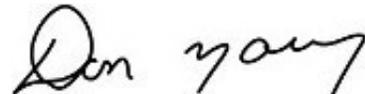
Sincerely,



LISA MURKOWSKI  
United States Senator



DAN SULLIVAN  
United States Senator



DON YOUNG  
Congressman for All Alaska

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

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<sup>2</sup> *Rural Health Care Support Mechanism*, WC Docket No. 02-60, Order, DA 20-345 (rel. Mar. 26, 2020), at ¶ 9 (extending time to respond to “information requests from USAC”).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., 47 CFR §54.631.