

POSITION STATEMENT:

Retain and Enhance Efforts to Increase Broadband Internet Availability for Health Care Access in Rural Areas

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Protect and promote the National Broadband Plan (NBP) in order to ensure adequate and affordable internet services in rural areas.
- Appropriate budgeted funds to meet the internet access needs of vulnerable rural populations
- Support future supplemental funding opportunities for improved rural broadband infrastructure in the estimated amount of \$40 billion to deploy reliable internet to communities with limited access.



Rural residents are affected by inequitable access to internet and low broadband speeds. The National Broadband Plan (NBP) was enacted in 2010 as part of the National Recovery & Reinvestment Act. Goals of the plan included ensuring that 100 million US homes have affordable access to internet, with specified standards for upload and download speeds.¹ However, many individuals still lack adequate internet access.

- Overall, 6% of Americans lack internet access at minimum connection speeds. Up to 1/3 of the population in certain rural and tribal locations lacks appropriate internet access.²
- The “digital divide” prevents rural and tribal Americans from receiving the same benefits as those Americans who are connected. Using recent telehealth technologies, enhanced internet coverage could improve healthcare access for these high-risk rural communities, which are more likely to face a lack of healthcare providers and scarcity of healthcare services.³
- Repealing legislation designed to increase internet and broadband access will create even greater health disparities and mortality rates in rural locales.

THE POSSIBILITIES FOR TELEMEDICINE IN RURAL AMERICA

Increased internet access and appropriate bandwidth is imperative to treatment and prevention efforts that can be delivered via a variety of digital health platforms.

- For example, physicians and other healthcare providers can share digital images (e.g., scan results) and other healthcare information with referring physicians across many miles, allowing their patients to receive care from specialty providers.⁴ This type of evidence-based telemedicine can allow for timely diagnoses, follow-up, and provision of mental health services.
- Additionally, mHealth technology (e.g., healthcare services delivered via smart phones, tablets, and laptops) can be used for prevention and treatment adherence to improve outcomes and reduce health disparities.⁵
- A growing body of research indicates that telemedicine services are safe options for delivery of care, particularly in regard to self-management of chronic diseases such as heart failure and diabetes.⁶

CURRENT EFFORTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Despite the benefits provided by telemedicine and telehealth, efforts have been mixed in regard to how best to set access standards.

- In recent months, there was speculation that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was planning to decrease minimum upload and download speeds for broadband consumers, which would likely result in lowered access standards for many residents. A recent FCC fact sheet indicates that previous minimums will be maintained for the time being.⁷
- The FCC has also recently repealed net neutrality regulations, which require internet service providers to allow equal access to all internet content.⁸ This repeal may mean that rural consumers will have fewer options for internet service providers (ISPs) and may cause higher broadband prices for those who do have access to internet.

Across the board, greater funding and increased legislative efforts are needed to expand broadband internet access for individuals living in rural areas.

- The FCC has estimated minimum costs of \$40 billion to expand internet access to 98% of the current population.⁹ Recently, an executive order was signed to relax regulations limiting companies from accessing federal lands in remote areas, with an eye toward building rural internet infrastructure.¹⁰ However, there is little evidence to suggest that a change in this regulation will spur massive investment in rural infrastructure especially in frontier lands. Likewise, no funds have been allocated to realize this endeavor.⁹

Directed efforts are necessary to address the prohibitive costs of obtaining adequate internet access, which can disproportionately affect those residing in rural communities.

- Congress has budgeted for rural internet access projects via the current proposed infrastructure plan; however, this plan is not distinguishingly different than the previous administration's funding proposals. Another issue is that it is unclear how and when the budgeted funds will be appropriated to achieve rural internet access goals.

SUMMARY

The Society of Behavioral Medicine supports retaining and expanding the current policy, and appropriating funds to increase internet access for the most vulnerable rural populations in the United States.

ENDORSEMENTS



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