



May 13, 2020

The Honorable Roger Wicker, Chairman
The Honorable Maria Cantwell, Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
512 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Wicker and Ranking Member Cantwell:

The Healthcare Leadership Council (HLC) commends the Senate Commerce Committee for holding its hearing on, “The State of Broadband Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Members of HLC believe that it is critical to examine ongoing initiatives led by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to maintain high-speed and reliable broadband connections to all Americans during this national public health emergency. Addressing the digital divide during the COVID-19 outbreak could mean the difference between life and death for many Americans, particularly those who reside in rural and hard to reach areas of the country.

HLC is a coalition of chief executives from all disciplines within American healthcare. It is the exclusive forum for the nation’s healthcare leaders to jointly develop policies, plans, and programs to achieve their vision of a 21st century healthcare system that makes affordable high-quality care accessible to all Americans. Members of HLC – hospitals, academic health centers, health plans, pharmaceutical companies, medical device manufacturers, laboratories, biotech firms, health product distributors, post-acute care providers, home care providers, and information technology companies – advocate for measures to increase the quality and efficiency of healthcare through a patient centered approach.

Broadband connectivity as related to rural healthcare during the COVID-19 crisis is an urgent and critical issue. The 46 million Americans who live in rural areas often have trouble accessing care due to a shortage of healthcare workers and long distances to healthcare services that can be made more challenging by difficult terrain and severe weather. To assist these individuals and improve their access to care, particularly during the COVID-19 public health emergency, HLC offers the following input for the committee’s consideration.

Telehealth

HLC has been a longtime supporter of telehealth services, which improve access to care, increase quality of care and reduce costs by reducing readmissions and unnecessary emergency department visits for rural communities. HLC believes telemedicine offers rural providers a way to more efficiently serve their patients by reducing the time it takes patients to receive care—particularly in critically time-sensitive COVID-19 situations.

As you know, telehealth services depend on reliable broadband connectivity. HLC applauds the FCC’s \$200 million telehealth program to implement the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to support healthcare providers responding to the ongoing coronavirus

pandemic. Through the COVID-19 Telehealth Program, the FCC is helping healthcare providers purchase telecommunications, broadband connectivity, and devices necessary for providing telehealth services.

HLC is also pleased that the FCC adopted final rules to stand up a Connected Care Pilot Program. This three-year Pilot Program will provide up to \$100 million of support from the Universal Service Fund (USF) to help defray health care providers' costs of providing connected care services and to help assess how the USF can be used in the long-term to support telehealth.

These telehealth services are a critical component of health care providers' ability to reach more patients, many of whom are isolated and, in some cases, reluctant to seek care in-person due to fears about the contagious nature of COVID-19. HLC members encourage Congress and the Administration to make permanent the many temporary telehealth waivers and programs related to COVID-19. It is clear from our members that patients and providers are seeing tremendous benefit from wider accessibility to telehealth, which is dependent upon a robust broadband infrastructure.

As the committee moves forward on issues related to broadband, we encourage you to consider the vital role of telehealth in addressing the urgent needs of patients and the healthcare workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you for your efforts to meet the needs of rural healthcare during this crisis. HLC looks forward to continuing to collaborate with you on our shared priorities. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Tina Grande at tgrande@hlc.org

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary R. Grealy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and "G".

Mary R. Grealy
President