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Broadband Expansion in Rural Areas Seen as Boon for Health Care

by George Lauer, iHealthBeat Features Editor

Languages keep up with culture by creating new terms to fit new situations. Other times, the term is static and the definition changes. The term "digital divide" works both ways.

When the term first arrived in common usage a dozen or 15 years ago, it referred to the cultural differences between those who owned computers and used the Internet and those who didn't. Over the next decade, the divide was defined and measured by income, race, age, gender and geography ... sometimes separately, sometimes all together.

Congress is attacking the geographic divide with \$7.2 billion in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The money will support broadband deployment in rural parts of the country, which are less likely to have high-speed Internet service than urban areas. The goal is to give rural Americans access to the same sorts of high-speed services and opportunities suburbanites and city dwellers take for granted.

As health care moves into the digital age, high-speed access to the Internet will become increasingly important for both health care providers and patients. The broadband effort goes hand-in-hand with the Obama administration's push for health reform and expanded use of health IT.

"We're happy when any attention is paid to rural health issues and we're even more pleased when any dollars are attached to it," said Brock Slabach, senior vice president of the National Rural Health Association.

"In this regard, the interest in broadband is definitely welcome. We'll have to wait and see how far this effort goes, literally and figuratively," Slabach said, adding, "It's always the last mile that's the most expensive when you talk about broadband -- especially high-density broadband, the fiber optics that build the information superhighway."

Recommendations for Spreading Broadband

Last week, a federal advisory committee heard testimony about the health benefits of broadband.

Jay Maxwell, CEO of Pixius Communications, told the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services that telemedicine and remote home-based disease management tools could improve rural patients' access to quality care and reduce the country's health care burden.

A newly formed coalition of health care providers, schools and libraries is pushing for high-speed connections wherever possible. The Schools, Health and Libraries Broadband Coalition, whose 28 members include the American Hospital Association, the New America Foundation, the American Library Association and Microsoft, will lobby for health care and educational considerations as the government formulates broadband deployment plans.

The Department of Agriculture and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration are the two federal agencies most directly involved with spending the rural broadband stimulus. Other federal agencies, including HHS and the Department of Education, also will be involved

Robert Atkinson, president of the Information Technology & Innovation Foundation, recommends federal policymakers keep two things in mind:

"First, they should concentrate their efforts on supporting high-speed connectivity at institutions like libraries,

hospitals, clinics, potentially community centers and schools," Atkinson said.

"And second, they should avoid spending a lot of money to get high-speed broadband to a lot of homes in rural areas. There's a trade-off in money and speed, and the number of homes you can serve at high speeds goes way down. There should be some effort at compromise between speed, cost and the number of homes you can reach," he said.

Atkinson said focusing high-speed efforts on rural health centers and hospitals could certainly enable more telemedicine. Rural institutions would be able to connect to urban health centers and rural homes, connected at slower speeds, would still be able to participate.

"You can get pretty good non-jerky video conferencing at relatively slow speeds," Atkinson said.

"But telemedicine is not all video," Atkinson said, adding, "For monitoring feeds, you need broadband but you can also enable a lot of those kinds of connections at slow speeds, especially with new compression technology."

Mixed Predictions for Federal Effort

The U.S. is a day late and a dollar short arriving at broadband expansion, according to Atkinson.

"The Swedes did this in 2002, and they did it in a more comprehensive way than we're talking about," Atkinson said, adding, "If you use a per capita formula, we'd need to spend about \$32 billion to match how much the Swedes spent. We'll definitely get further along than we are now with that \$7.2 billion, but that's not that much when you look at the whole picture."

Slabach notes that this is not the first federal effort to expand access to high-speed Internet connections.

"We see this as an augmentation of earlier efforts, but this time there's serious money attached and that may make a difference," Slabach said.

"I hope things are done in a way that's not as fragmented as previous efforts," Slabach added.

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