

Background

The Rural Health Care program ensures that health care providers serving rural communities pay no more than their urban counterparts for telecommunications services necessary for the provision of health care. Congress mandated in 1996 that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) implement a Universal Service Fund to provide support to telephone companies that serve eligible rural health care providers. Congress also directed the FCC to enhance access to advanced telecommunications and information services for health care providers. The Rural Health Care program is part of the FCC's federal Universal Service Fund. Below are frequently asked questions about the Rural Health Care program.

What Benefits Are Available Under the Rural Health Care Program?

- Public and non-profit health care providers rural areas can receive discounts on monthly telecommunications charges, installation charges, and long distance Internet connection charges.
- Rural health care providers are using funds from this program for a variety of patient services, such as transmitting x-ray from remote areas to be read by health care professionals and experts in urban areas.
- Eligible entities include:
 - Post-secondary educational institutions offering health care instruction, including teaching hospitals and medical schools;
 - Community health centers or health centers providing health care to migrants;
 - Community mental health centers;
 - Not-for-profit hospitals;
 - Dedicated emergency departments in for-profit hospitals;
 - Rural health care clinics; and
 - Consortia of health care providers consisting of one or more entities described above.

How Does the Rural Health Care Program Work?

- The rural health care provider must submit a form requesting services to the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC). USAC will post the form on its Web site, seeking carriers to provide the requested services.
- After the rural health care provider selects a telecommunications carrier, services may be ordered.
- Using Universal Service funds, the carrier provides the telecommunications services to the rural health care provider at discounted prices.

Who Pays for the Rural Health Care Program?

- The Rural Health Care program is part of the FCC's federal Universal Service fund. All telecommunications carriers that provide service between states and internationally pay contributions into the Fund. The FCC makes payments from this central fund to support the Rural Health Care program, as well as three other Universal Service programs (Low-Income, High-Cost, and Schools and Libraries).

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Who Pays for the Rural Health Care Program? (Cont'd.)

- Some consumers may notice a “Universal Service” line item on their telephone bills. This occurs when a telephone company chooses to recover its contributions directly from its customers through a line-item charge on telephone bills. The FCC does not require companies to pass on their costs to their customers. Each company makes a business decision about whether and how to recover Universal Service costs from its customers.

Can I Find Out How Rural Health Care Providers in My Area are Benefiting from the Rural Health Care Program?

- You can visit the Web site of the Universal Service Administrative Company to find out Rural Health Care funding information specific to your state. Go to www.rhc.universalservice.org and follow the easy prompts to “Funding Commitments.”

For more information on FCC’s Universal Service Programs, go to www.fcc.gov/cgb or call us at 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322).

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