



Pennsylvania Department of Health
Senate of Pennsylvania
Senate Communications and Technology Committee
Rachel Levine, MD, Secretary
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Good afternoon, I am pleased to present before the Senate Communications and Technology Committee to discuss improving access to high-speed broadband internet. First, I would like to thank Chairman Philips-Hill, and Chairman Santarsiero as well as members of the Senate Communications and Technology Committee and the staff for the invitation to present before this Committee.

A Penn State study (Dec. 2018) found a severe lack of connectivity to high-speed broadband internet for much of Pennsylvania. Using data self-reported from internet providers, the Federal Communications Commission estimates about 800,000 Pennsylvanians lack access to broadband, which is about 6 percent of the state's population.

Many Pennsylvanians live in areas that lack adequate access to health care providers. Fourteen percent of Pennsylvania's population reside in an area designated as a health professional shortage area (HPSA) and 14 percent of the state's population reside in areas designated as a medically underserved area (MUA). In total, 22 percent of the state's population live in an area designated as either a HPSA or a MUA. Residents of an area of underservice are more likely to be in rural geographies, of minority status, undereducated, living in poverty, and to have limited access to transportation.

In areas underserved by health care professionals often the issue is either the lack of availability of broadband in general or the "last mile" access to the facility. This impacts the facility's ability to fully utilize telehealth and to have the speeds necessary to upload and download patient and service data for reimbursement.

According to the PA Rural Health Association (2016), without high speed Internet access, people living in rural areas, rural health care providers, and rural businesses will be at a disadvantage—

- a disadvantage in adopting and implementing electronic health records and other new technologies,
- a disadvantage in attracting and retaining quality health care practitioners,
- a disadvantage in having access to the latest research, and

- a disadvantage in engaging patients as partners to promote health and control chronic illness.

Hospitals participating in the Pennsylvania Rural Health Model are at the forefront of delivering exceptional care in their communities. Some hospitals are interested in pursuing Remote Patient Monitoring (RPM) – the ability to monitor a patient’s key vitals from a central, remote location and escalate to a provider if a patient falls out of normal parameters. This is a clinically proven intervention to reduce readmissions, improve patient outcomes, and patient satisfaction for several chronic diseases. Without access to reliable, high-speed internet in patient’s homes, though, providers and patients are forced to use landlines to transmit data, which is slower, or some decide to forego the opportunity all together. Reliable access to high-speed broadband would be instrumental in many hospitals implementing RPM, which could help hospitals to succeed within the Model and patients to improve outcomes.

Focusing not only on the hospital, but the patient at home is important. People spend most of their time outside of the hospital setting, so it is not always an issue of the hospital having broadband, but folks living in rural communities who do not have access to broadband in their homes.

The Department of Health’s partner academic health systems have specifically stated they view lack of access to high speed broadband as a major challenge for telehealth and telemedicine services. Lack of high-speed broadband is one of the leading causes of patient-provider video call disruptions and a primary reason that patients may not be able to take advantage of a virtual service from a rural or remote area.

For these reasons, the Department of Health supports Governor Wolf’s Restore Pennsylvania initiative, which will bridge the digital divide in every community in Pennsylvania, making Pennsylvania a better place to work, do business, and live.

Thank you again for your time today. I look forward to continuing to work with you on these important health matters and would be happy to take any questions at this time.