

FCC seeks to boost rural health care program use

July 15 2010, By JOELLE TESSLER , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- Federal regulators are proposing changes to expand use of the \$400 million government program that subsidizes Internet services at hospitals, clinics and other health care facilities in rural areas.

The [Federal Communications Commission](#) voted unanimously Thursday to consider changes to its rural health care program, one of four programs paid for by the \$8 billion federal fund that subsidizes telecommunications services in poor and rural areas.

The FCC said that despite great need for high-speed Internet connections at rural health care facilities, it believes the rural health care program is underused because it has not reached its annual spending cap in the past.

The agency is proposing to leave the \$400 million funding cap in place, but allow the program to pay for 50 percent of monthly broadband access charges at eligible health care facilities - up from 25 percent now.

The FCC also wants to use the program to subsidize the construction of broadband networks. And it is seeking to expand the range of health care facilities that can qualify for funding to include acute-care facilities such as renal dialysis centers, administrative offices and [health care](#) data centers.

The FCC's national broadband plan calls for overhauling the federal Universal Service Fund, and the proposed changes to the [health care](#)

[program](#) are part of that. The agency wants to use that fund, established to subsidize [telephone service](#) in underserved communities, to bring high-speed Internet connections to even the most remote corners of the country.

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