

# COVID-19 and Connectivity

## Special Focus on Telehealth Initiatives

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MARIA ROYLE

VERMONT LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

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# Overview

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Telehealth and Connectivity

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Congressional action

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FCC action

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Vermont regulatory action

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Pre-COVID-19 Connectivity Programs and Initiatives

Federal

Vermont

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Vermont Connectivity Data

# Telehealth and Connectivity

## Telehealth – as defined by the VT Depart. of Health Access

- Telehealth means methods for healthcare services delivery using telecommunications technologies
- Telehealth includes telemedicine, store and forward, and telemonitoring
- Term is used more generally to describe electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support long-distance clinical healthcare, as well as patient and professional health-related education, public health, and health administration

## Telemedicine – as defined in 8 V.S.A. § 4100k(h)(7)

- “Telemedicine” means the delivery of health care services such as diagnosis, consultation, or treatment through the use of live interactive audio and video over a secure connection that complies with the requirements of HIPAA

# Telehealth and Connectivity

## Telehealth – as defined by the FCC

- A broad range of health care-related applications that depend upon broadband connectivity, including telemedicine; exchange of electronic health records; collection of data through Health Information Exchanges and other entities; exchange of large image files; and the use of real-time and delayed video conferencing for a wide range of telemedicine, consultation, training, and other health care purposes.

## Connected Care Services – as defined by the FCC

- A subset of telehealth that uses broadband Internet access service-enabled technologies to deliver remote medical, diagnostic, patient-centered, and treatment-related services directly to patients outside of traditional brick and mortar medical facilities – including specifically to patients at their mobile location or residence. It includes patient monitoring; patient health education; store and forward services, and video consultations

Not Covered in  
this  
Presentation

## Telehealth issues related to:

- Privacy
- Insurance/reimbursement
- Licensing
- Medical equipment/functionality
- Electronic medical records

Federal telehealth programs not  
created or expanded by the CARES Act

# Congressional Action – Three Phases to Date

March 6

- **Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act**, Pub. Law 116-123 (H.R. 6074)
- Includes about \$8 billion for public health, including vaccine research and development

March 18

- **Families First Coronavirus Response Act**, Pub. Law 116-127 (H.R. 6201)
- Includes a \$104 billion package. Addresses unemployment insurance; paid sick and family leave; nutrition assistance; diagnostic testing costs; tax credits; Medicaid funding

March 27

- **The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act**, Pub. Law 116-136 (H.R. 748)
- Estimated \$2.2 trillion economic stimulus package related to social distancing measures

# CARES ACT – Connectivity by Subject

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**TELEHEALTH**



**DISTANCE  
LEARNING**



**TELECOMMUTING**



**DIGITAL  
INCLUSION**

# CARES Act – Division B (key telehealth/connectivity appropriations)

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## Emergency Appropriations for Coronavirus Health Response and Agency Operations, include:

\$180 million to the **Health Resources  
and Services Administration**,  
Department of HHS:

- To expand services and capacity for rural hospitals, including telehealth

\$2.15 billion to the **Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

- To support IT for telework and telehealth, and broadband for veterans to provide telemental health care

\$25 million to the **Distance Learning,  
Telemedicine, and Broadband  
Program**, USDA/RUS

- Grants to support rural communities access to telecommunications-enabled information, audio, and video equipment, as well as related advanced technologies for students, teachers, and medical professionals



# CARES Act – Division B (COVID-19 Telehealth Program)

## \$200 million to the FCC's new **COVID-19 Telehealth Program**

- Program adopted April 2, 2020
- Funds will help health care providers provide connected care services to patients at their homes or mobile locations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Health care providers will receive reimbursement for eligible expenses and services purchased in response to COVID-19 pandemic on or after March 13, 2020
- Application window opened on April 13. Funding decisions will be made on a rolling basis until funding is exhausted or pandemic has ended
- Eligible health care providers include nonprofit and public eligible health care providers such as: (1) post-secondary educational institutions offering health care instruction, teaching hospitals, and medical schools; (2) community health centers or health centers providing health care to migrants; (3) local health departments or agencies; (4) community mental health centers; (5) nonprofit hospitals; (6) rural health clinics; (7) skilled nursing facilities; or (8) consortia of providers comprised of one or more of the above
- Program will fully fund telecommunications services, information services, and devices necessary to provide critical connected care services, such as:
  - Telecommunications services and broadband connectivity services: voice services, and Internet connectivity services for health care providers or their patients
  - Information services: remote patient monitoring platforms and services; patient reported outcome platforms; store and forward services, such as asynchronous transfer of patient images and data for interpretation by a physician; platforms and services to provide synchronous video consultation
  - Internet Connected devices/equipment: tablets, smart phones, or connected devices to receive connected care services at home (e.g., broadband-enabled blood pressure monitors; pulse oximetry monitors) for patient or provider use; or telemedicine kiosks/carts for health care provider sites

# FCC Regulatory Actions (not an exhaustive list)

## Connected Care Pilot Program

- New program funded by \$100 million from the USF for a limited number of pilot projects
- To defray costs of providing connected care services, with particular emphasis on services for low-income persons and veterans
- 3-year program to help assess how the USF can support telehealth over the long-term
- Goals and metrics: improved health outcomes; reduced health care costs; broad adoption

## Rural Health Care (RHC) Program

- Existing program with two components:
  - *Telecom Program* – Provides discounts for services to ensure rural health care providers pay no more than their urban counterparts
  - *Healthcare Connect Fund Program* – provides a 65% discount on the cost of broadband connectivity to eligible health care providers to encourage state and regional telehealth networks
- All eligible RHC Program funding requests filed during the FY'19 application window fully funded

## E-Rate (Schools and Libraries) and Rural Health Care Programs

- Gift rules waived temporarily
- Schools, libraries, and healthcare providers permitted to accept free or discounted services for improved capacity, Wi-Fi hotspots, networking gear, or other equipment or services

## Lifeline Program

- Recertification, reverification, and usage requirements waived temporarily to prevent current subscribers from being de-enrolled

## Spectrum

- Additional spectrum temporarily granted to wireless providers to support increased broadband usage

# Actions Encouraged by the FCC

## Keep Americans Connected Initiative

- Companies pledge for 60 days to:
  - Not terminate service to residential and small business customers because of an inability to pay caused by the coronavirus pandemic
  - Waive late fees for residential and small business customers incurred because of their economic circumstances related to the coronavirus pandemic
  - Open Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs them
- Over 700 companies and trade associations have signed the pledge

## Low-income Broadband Programs

- Companies urged to expand and improve existing programs or adopt new programs

## Data caps

- Companies called on to relax their data usage limits

# Vermont PUC and DPS Action

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## PUC Moratorium

- Applies to involuntary natural gas, electric, and telecommunications service disconnections
- Expanded to include non-residential (i.e., commercial and industrial) ratepayers and certain water companies
- In effect until April 30, 2020

## DPS Resources

- Map of Wi-Fi hotspots (libraries, local and state buildings, and schools)
- Itemization of services offered by VT communications providers during COVID-19 emergency

# Pre-COVID-19 Federal Connectivity Programs and Initiatives

## ReConnect Program (RUS/USDA)

- A pilot program that provides loans and grants to provide funds for the costs of construction, improvement, or acquisition of facilities and equipment needed to provide broadband service in eligible rural areas
- Assists areas that do not have access to 10/1 Mbps. Minimum buildout requirement is 25/3 Mbps

## Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (FCC)

- \$20.4 billion for rural broadband
- Phase I (\$16 billion reverse auction starts in October) targeting census blocks wholly unserved by 25/3 Mbps service
- Phase II (\$4.4 billion reverse auction) would fill remaining coverage gaps by supporting networks in partially unserved census blocks, based on new data from the Digital Opportunity Data Collection
- Excludes areas funded by ReConnect Program or State broadband program

## Wireless Connectivity

- 5G Fund for Rural America (vote April 23)
- 5G Fast Plan (spectrum; deployment polices and regulations)
- Spectrum Proceedings (5G; unlicensed use; WISPs; LEO satellite)

Pre-COVID-19  
Vermont  
Broadband  
Initiatives

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Broadband Investment

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Broadband Facilitation

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Digital Inclusion

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Public Health and Safety

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Data Collection and Planning

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Consumer Protection

# Broadband Investment

## Connectivity Initiative

- Awards grants to ISPs for broadband buildout (minimum of 25/3 Mbps) in unserved and underserved areas

## High-Cost Program

- Subsidizes ILEC capital improvements supporting voice and broadband service (minimum of 25/3 Mbps) in high-cost areas

## Broadband Innovation Grant Program

- Grants (up to \$60K) for feasibility studies related to broadband deployment (minimum 25/3 Mbps)
- Up to 2 electric distribution utilities may receive a grant

# Broadband Facilitation

## Broadband Expansion Loan Program

- Loans through VEDA up to \$4 million to assist ISPs with broadband buildout in unserved and underserved locations
- Projects must provide minimum speed of 100/100 Mbps

## Communications Union Districts

- Municipal organizations that deploy broadband in unserved areas through revenue bonds, loans, and grants

## Rural Economic Development Infrastructure Districts

## Public-private Partnerships

- Municipalities and ISPs

## 248a Siting and Pole Attachment Rules (OTMR)



# VT Initiatives (cont'd.)

## Digital Inclusion

- VT Lifeline – voice supplement to federal Lifeline
- Telecommunications Relay Service

## Data Collection and Planning

- Telecommunications Plan
- Mapping

## Consumer Protection

- ISPs must comply with net neutrality rules to receive government contracts for BIAS (stayed)
- AGO monitors ISP compliance with net neutrality rules

# Vermont Initiatives (cont'd.)

## **Public Health and Safety**

### **E911**

- Outages (reporting; FCC backup power obligations)
- CARE Program (Citizens Assistance Registry for Emergencies Program)
  - Elderly, people with limited mobility, or those who require specialized medical equipment may register
  - First responders can provide special assistance during an outage, disaster, or evacuation

### **FirstNet (First Responder Network Authority)**

- Federal agency within Department of Commerce responsible for building a nationwide broadband network dedicated to public safety
  - 25-year contract awarded to AT&T
- VT FirstNet is housed within the Radio Technology Services unit of the VT Department of Public Safety
- AT&T is building the radio access (RAN) for VT
  - First responders will have prioritized and preemptive coverage
  - Excess capacity may be used commercially
- AT&T is committed to building 36 new sites in VT over 5 years (2018-2022)
  - 1 new site operational in 2019 (cell tower in Townshend); 16 new sites (towers/antenna) forecasted for 2020

# Connectivity Data for Consideration

VT has a population  
of **623,989**

VT has **308,082** E911  
addresses

The FCC defines  
broadband as at  
least **25/3 Mbps**

- **23 percent** of addresses (70,000 locations) lack access to 25/3 Mbps
- (Average cost to provide FTTP to these locations is about **\$5,000.00** per premise, per DPS/Magellan December 2019 Feasibility Study)
- The cost to provide 100/100 to every address lacking access to 25/3 Mbps = **\$350M**

VT's connectivity  
goal is **100/100**  
Mbps to every  
address by 2024

- **82 percent** of addresses (254,000 locations) lack access to 100/100 Mbps
- The cost to provide 100/100 to every address lacking access to 100/100 Mbps = **\$1B**