Rural Health Care Program

The Rural Health Care Program ensures that rural health care providers (HCPs) can obtain telecommunications and Internet services at rates comparable to urban providers and, through the Rural Health Care Pilot Program, it facilitates the creation of broadband networks dedicated to healthcare.

The Rural Health Care Program deployed a new online application management system in early 2012. Built entirely by USAC staff, this new system allows program participants to file forms online, upload and store supporting documentation, and receive automated alerts related to their forms. Automation of processing tasks allows for improved accuracy and better internal controls to mitigate potential waste, fraud, and abuse of universal service support.

The new system, called My Portal, was rolled out in phases during 2012 to support program cycles for receiving, reviewing, and approving forms. Applicants in April when the funding window opened, and USAC implemented functionality for the FCC Forms 466 and 466-A in July, to coincide with the start of FY2012. In 2012, USAC received 5,042 requests for services and 3,709 funding requests in the Rural Health Care Program for FY2012.

In the Pilot Program, USAC implemented a July FCC order that allowed Pilot projects to obtain additional support while the FCC considered long-term changes to the Rural Health Care Program. USAC helped the FCC evaluate the Pilot Program by submitting observations based on its experience and data collected for the Pilot Program.

**USAC INNOVATION**

**THERE’S A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING**

**CHALLENGE**
Managing forms was a challenge for applicants because of high staff turnover. New employees often had no knowledge of their company’s history with the program. If the paperwork isn’t all there, they may have to give back money.

**SOLUTION**
We built My Portal — a secure, one-stop shop where applicants can seamlessly manage paperwork year after year.

**IMPACT**
Applicants keep their records in one location so documents never get lost. They stay organized and can upload missing documentation or respond to program requests for clarification quickly and easily.
For the Pilot Program through December 31, 2012, USAC posted 170 FCC Form 465 packages for 55 projects; issued 434 funding commitments totaling $363 million to 50 projects; and disbursed $144 million in support to 45 projects. Ten site visits were conducted in 2012 to learn how participants use support and to assess program compliance.

In 2012, Rural Health Care Program staff exhibited or presented at the Georgia Partnership for Telehealth conference, the Oklahoma Telemedicine conference, and the National Rural Health Association Critical Access Hospitals conference, among others. USAC continued developing webinars, new web-based tools, and video tutorials to train HCPs about program rules and the application process.

The FCC established the new Healthcare Connect Fund as part of a reform effort in December. This fund will help expand HCP access to the high-bandwidth connections needed for modern telemedicine and foster the development of HCP broadband networks. USAC is working with FCC staff to implement the new program.

HELPING KEEP AMERICANS HEALTHY

CHALLENGE
Rural health care providers face the challenge of providing critical health services to their patients. Many HCPs are unaware that funds are available to support the cost of their communications needs through universal service.

SOLUTION
We designed an outreach program to grow awareness about available funds. We met with applicants where they live to give them the information they need.

IMPACT
More applicants know about universal service and receive funding. Last year, the Rural Health Care Program experienced its highest growth since 1998. Applications increased by 27 percent, and disbursements exceeded $100 million.