

Federal Communications Commission Rural Broadband Pilot Project Grant

Florida was recently awarded a \$9.1 million grant by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to establish high speed broadband services for electronic healthcare communications in rural areas. The FCC grant application was a collaborative effort by the Agency for Health Care Administration, Big Bend Regional Health Information Organization (Big Bend RHIO), the Department of Health, Florida LambdaRail, Florida Hospital Association, Governor's Rural Economic Development Initiative program, Florida State University College of Medicine, and other rural partners to improve the access of rural healthcare providers to the high speed communications infrastructure in Florida.

The FCC grant will provide the infrastructure needed to allow rural hospitals and other healthcare providers in rural Panhandle communities to participate in the exchange of electronic health information with those urban referral hospitals and specialty physician services throughout the region, state, and country that are also connected to the broadband network. The grant will also establish wireless access to the broadband network for healthcare providers and businesses in rural communities and provide opportunities for continuing education that are currently unavailable.

The increase in connectivity by rural communities to services in urban centers is expected to improve access, coordination, and quality of patient care available to rural residents; reduce the isolation of and enhance the knowledge and skills of rural healthcare providers; and improve the financial sustainability of rural hospitals.

The specific details of the grant are as follows.

Year 1 – Construct a cable network to connect nine hospitals in eight rural counties (Madison, Taylor, Franklin, Gadsden, Calhoun, Gulf, Jackson, Holmes) in the Panhandle and Big Bend regions of north Florida to the Florida LambdaRail Network. Health information exchange services provided by the Big Bend Big Bend RHIO in Tallahassee and the Escambia Health Information Network in Pensacola will then be used to link the urban hospitals in Tallahassee and Pensacola to the rural hospitals. The nine rural hospitals will also have access to pediatric telehealth services from Children's Medical Services in the Florida Department of Health (DOH) and from the Nemours children's medical system. Continuing education services from the Florida State University (FSU) College of Medicine can also be offered to rural physicians.

Year 2 - A broadband wireless network will be installed in each rural county to provide broadband connectivity to each of the community health centers, not-for-profit clinics, and other healthcare providers in each county. The health information exchange services of the Big Bend RHIO will be extended to these clinics.