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Four years ago, President Bush articulated a national vision: universal, affordable access to broadband technology. The Department of Commerce released a report today finding that, as a result of the Administration's policies to help broadband flourish, Americans today enjoy an increasing array of broadband services as prices continue to fall.

Broadband is critical to the growth of telemedicine and to supporting robust health information technology (IT) systems. Several HHS programs and priorities benefit from broadband, and HHS is working to continue to improve community access to it.

HHS support for broadband access

In November, 2007, HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt and Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Kevin J. Martin announced a coordinated effort to deploy broadband access to rural and underserved communities with a particular focus on reaching health care providers.

The FCC has awarded over \$417 million for the construction of 69 statewide or regional broadband telehealth networks in 42 states and three U.S. territories. This Rural Health Care Pilot Program will support the connection of more than 6,000 public and non-profit health care providers nationwide to telehealth networks to improve patient care.

HHS health IT efforts rely on broadband

In 2004, President Bush set a goal for most Americans to have access to interoperable electronic health records by 2014. HHS is the lead agency responsible for meeting this goal and, since 2005, Secretary Leavitt has recognized 34 interoperability standards to streamline health information exchange. HHS has also helped to establish an independent certification commission that has tested and certified more than 75 percent of electronic health record (EHR) products installed in ambulatory health care settings and more than 25 percent of EHRs in inpatient settings.

These connected systems are the future of safer, more affordable health care in America, and they depend on broadband access. By enabling rapid exchange of large amounts of data, broadband has become a critical component of robust health (IT) systems. Information on HHS' health IT work is available here: www.hhs.gov/healthit.

HHS telemedicine efforts depend on the availability of broadband

Telemedicine, or Telehealth, programs improve patient access to care over great distances, which can reduce costs from unnecessary travel, enhance chronic illness management, and improve health outcomes by facilitating regular and preventive care.

HHS programs and priorities benefiting from broadband / health IT

HHS – Indian Health Service (IHS)

Health care is being improved in all 12 areas of the Indian Health Service (IHS). Leading clinical telehealth applications include: tele-radiology, tele-cardiology, tele-behavioral health, tele-dermatology, and tele-ophthalmology.

The IHS-JVN (Joslin Vision Network) Tele-ophthalmology Program demonstrates how broadband can be used to deliver innovative services.

- Patients in 57 Indian health facilities spanning 15 states currently receive comprehensive diabetic eye care services through the program.
- To date, the program has performed more than 21,000 remote interpretations from a distributed tele-ophthalmology reading center in Arizona.
- The IHS-JVN program demonstrates how telehealth-based services can help identify, manage, and prevent diabetic retinopathy — a leading cause of blindness for American Indian and Alaska Native people.

Broadband also enables critical capacity for health IT systems that support daily health service delivery across the Indian health system through the IHS Resource and Patient Management System, the IHS Electronic Health Record, the VA VistA Imaging program, and the Alaska Federal Health Care Access Network.

For information on the IHS' health IT work, visit: www.ihs.gov/CIO/ca/icare/index.asp.

HHS – The Health Research and Services Administration (HRSA)

HRSA works to increase and improve the use of health IT to meet the needs of underserved people, including those who are uninsured, isolated or medically vulnerable. Over the past 10 years, HRSA has invested more than \$100 million in health IT improvements in Community Health Centers to help improve patient care as well as the centers' financial and business operations.

In Fiscal Year 2007, HRSA awarded 63 new grants, valued at more than \$56 million, to advance health IT and telemedicine in health centers and Critical Access Hospitals in 35 states and the District of Columbia. These funds will support EHRs in more than 170 health centers representing over 900 sites and serving more than two million patients. The grants will also support the establishment of 16 regional health information exchange pilots that link primary, post-acute, acute, and tertiary care providers to improve coordination of care in these rural communities.

In addition, in FY 2007, HRSA provided over \$6.8 million dollars for specific grants and contracts to advance the use of telehealth services around the nation.

- Sixteen grants were awarded to assist communities in developing advanced telehealth networks in rural communities and to evaluate the use of home-telehealth services in rural communities;

- Two grants were awarded to overcome licensure barriers to the effective use of telehealth services; and
- Six grants funded centers of excellence to provide technical assistance to communities in developing telehealth services across the nation.

HHS – Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), along with HRSA, launched a health IT Community Web portal for safety-net providers. The portal provides a virtual meeting place for users who share documents and exchange tools and resources on designing, implementing, and using health IT. To date, about 2,000 health centers, primary care associations, and maternal and child health grantees are using the site. For more information, visit: <http://www.hrsa.gov/healthit/>

AHRQ's mission is to improve the quality, safety, efficiency and effectiveness of health care for all Americans. Since 2004, AHRQ has funded over 175 projects and demonstrations in the form of grants, contracts and cooperative agreements to advance health IT and telemedicine. These projects focus on the impact of health IT and telemedicine on the quality, safety, effectiveness and efficiency of health care and best practices that can improve quality of care. Funding for these projects totals \$216 million with projects in over 40 states and territories.

Outcomes from AHRQ-funded projects indicate improvements in patients' health status and experiences with the health care system.

- A project in Minnesota demonstrated that remote pharmacy services provided to rural hospitals during irregular hours can more effectively detect and prevent dangerous medication errors than traditional methods whereby pharmacists manually review “night and weekend” orders first thing in the morning before turning to day shift activities.
- A project in New York demonstrated that remote pediatric care can treat common childhood illnesses from schools and child care centers. This helped parents avoid missing work, and reduced unnecessary trips to the emergency room.
- A project in New Mexico demonstrated that telemedicine can effectively support rural primary-care clinicians in caring for patients with chronic, common, and complex diseases by delivering case-based information and support.
- A project in Oklahoma has helped patients in rural parts of the state receive better quality of care — including treatment for previously undetected diabetes and faster healing of wounds — when home health care workers were connected remotely with specialists, including certified wound care nurses and endocrinologists. A combination of images from digital cameras, video phone encounters, and access to electronic health records was used to improve care for home-bound and nursing home patients with wounds that are difficult to diagnose and treat.

AHRQ's telemedicine projects depend on quick and efficient access to critical health information for clinicians. This access to images, EHRs, and decision support is best facilitated by broadband connection to hospitals, physician offices, and public health

departments. This access can also reduce health care disparities by providing high-quality and safe health care services for patients who cannot always travel the great distances sometimes required to receive appropriate care.

Visit AHRQ's National Resource Center for Health Information Technology here:
www.healthit.ahrq.gov.