



Sponsor Statement

House Joint Resolution 14 FCC: Increase Rural Health Care Budget

HJR 14 supports an increase to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Rural Health Care Universal Service Support Budget in order to ensure Alaska can continue to expand access to affordable broadband telehealth services in rural communities.

The Rural Health Care Universal Services Support program enables healthcare providers in even the most remote corners of Alaska to offer telehealth services that dramatically improve access to care. These services can expand locally available treatment options, accelerate diagnosis and treatment, and help in avoiding unnecessary travel for care. Also through telehealth, local availability of mental and behavioral health care and substance abuse services has grown significantly in recent years.

The support budget that makes this possible has been capped at the same level since it was established in 1997. For most of its existence, the budget's \$400 million cap has been adequate to meet the demands of the program. However, following two decades of advances in technology, increases in demand, and the effects of inflation, the FCC expects that in 2017 demand may exceed the cap for the first time.

The State of Alaska has no funding obligation to the Rural Health Care Universal Service Support fund. The entirety of the program is funded through Universal Service charges.

HJR 14 urges the FCC to increase the Rural Health Care Universal Service Support Budget sufficiently to adjust for inflation, advances in technology and the services available with increased broadband, and the increase in demand for broadband-based services. Additionally, the resolution encourages the FCC to index the program budget for inflation and provide for any unused funds to be carried forward to future funding years. In doing so, the FCC will allow Alaska healthcare providers to continue improving access to care in rural parts of the state.