

## The Power of Broadband Networks for the Delivery of Health Care Services

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To an ever-increasing degree, the delivery of health care services requires an advanced communications component linking providers to their patients and other health care professionals, as well as to the outside world, such as National Institute of Health databases. Unfortunately, many of the communications links currently used by providers are antiquated and fail to serve the growing needs of the health care community.

Broadband technology has brought with it the capability of designing, constructing, operating, and maintaining communications networks that can address the specialized requirements of health care providers. One example is the Rural Healthcare Pilot Program initiated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which enabled providers to tap into the \$400 million Universal Service Fund dedicated to health care communications. The FCC is proposing to convert the program into a permanent funding vehicle dubbed the Health Infrastructure Program.

Aside from government funds, alternative mechanisms exist that may allow health care providers to achieve the same end. For example, the Rural Nebraska Healthcare Network (RNHN) is constructing a network that will connect eight Critical Access Hospitals, as well as a regional medical center. To partially fund the construction, the RNHN pre-sold excess capacity on the network. These funds will not only enable the Nebraska participants to build a network, they will establish an income stream that should allow the network to be economically sustainable for years to come.

The strength and capabilities of broadband networks are substantial. Health care providers can use them to enhance all aspects of their communications systems, from electronic medical records (EMRs) to distance learning to the transmission of high-resolution images to access to rich databases. While broadband technology is not new, providers now have the ability to take control of it and use it in ways that can be very significant in furthering their goals. However, health care providers generally do not have significant experience or expertise in this arena, which can be a barrier to developing a broadband network.

Given the benefits of a network and its ability to support the current and anticipated communication and connectivity needs of the health care community, our health care and communications lawyers are increasingly helping providers such as the RNHN to navigate their way through the regulatory requirements and to identify and secure government and other sources of funding.

In sum, the growing imperative for providers to collaborate and integrate is also prompting health care organizations to use broadband networks to facilitate cross-communications and selective networking among affiliated, but separate, organizations as part of their overall competitive strategies. Although few things are certain in this world, as competitive pressures and health care reform initiatives accelerate, it is clear that broadband technology will be increasingly important to the health care industry.

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