



A driving force for health equity

Submitted via electronic email

June 28, 2024

Honorable Ronny Jackson
446 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Honorable Derek Kilmer
1226 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Support for H.R. 4713: Rural Hospital Technical Assistance Program Act

Dear Representatives Jackson and Kilmer,

On behalf of OCHIN, I appreciate the opportunity to provide support for *H.R. 4713: Rural Hospital Technical Assistance Program Act*. OCHIN is a national nonprofit health information technology innovation and research network including **Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs), rural and frontier health clinics as well as federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) and local public health agencies** that serve over 2,000 community health care sites with more than 33,000 providers in 43 states, reaching more than 6.1 million patients. This legislation is essential to addressing some of the foundational challenges faced by rural providers by authorizing funding for technical assistance that will drive operational excellence and financial sustainability.

OCHIN: DRIVING INNOVATION, ACCESS, AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

For over two decades, OCHIN has advanced health care solutions by leveraging the strength of our network's unique data set and the practical experience of our members to drive technology innovation for patients and providers in rural and other underserved communities. OCHIN offers technology solutions, informatics, evidence-based research, workforce development and training in addition to policy insights. We provide the clinical insights and tailored technologies needed to expand patient access, connect care teams, and improve the health of rural and medically underserved communities. **With over 137 million clinical records exchanged last year, OCHIN puts "one patient, one record" at the heart of everything we do to connect and transform care delivery.** We ensure all health records flow seamlessly between patients and their many providers, giving clinicians greater insight into their patients' health and helping to complete the circle of care in rural communities. We also drive interoperability on a national scale through our growing health information network and automated electronic case reporting for public health. In addition, OCHIN maintains a broadband consortium network to support rural health care providers access Federal Communications Commission (FCC) subsidies.

THE CHALLENGE

In rural communities across the nation, the infrastructure, workforce, and sustainable funding needed to keep the doors open among Critical Access Hospitals and community clinics simply do not exist. In a recent analysis, half of rural hospitals could not cover their costs, up from 43% the previous year and 418 rural hospitals across the U.S. are "vulnerable to closure."¹ Approximately one in five Americans live in

rural areas where they serve as the backbone of the country, cultivating and providing crucial sources of water, food, energy, and recreation for all Americans. Despite Rural America’s contributions, federal policy has left many hardworking rural communities behind leaving them to adapt to and overcome challenges impact their access to health care such as crumbling infrastructure, endemic and clinician shortages, and lack of broadband alone. **Innovative and fundamental investments are needed to reinvest in the strength and resiliency of Rural America—communities that serve as the bedrock of America’s independence and self-sufficiency.**

KEY SOLUTION

Currently, too many rural providers have not received their fair share of funding to modernize their health IT systems which is essential to: expanding access to care through telehealth and other virtual services; optimizing operations and financial sustainability through informatics and analytics that support transitions to new payment and delivery models; strengthening cybersecurity; and leveraging the benefits of rapidly developing AI systems. Instead, many rural providers must use dated, fragmented technologies or paper. Alternatively, they rely on incentives that compel them to use large health systems’ certified health IT systems that do not meet rural patient clinical needs nor their operational/financial needs. In these arrangements, the needs of rural providers are secondary to the priorities of large health systems. Outdated technologies have limited security features and do not support new features, such as multifactor authentication and encryption, leaving rural providers more susceptible to attacks and data breaches. Rural providers may also not have up-to-date software patches to address security vulnerabilities which opens them up to increased risk of cybercriminals using these as potential vectors of compromise. Therefore, providing new funding to support rural hospitals and providers is essential.

The *Rural Hospital Technical Assistance Program Act* would incorporate technical assistance and training to rural hospitals to increase the health facility’s viability through the improvement of its financial position, provision of loan and grant assistance, and modernization of its health information system. In addressing the financial, operational, and quality improvement needs of rural hospitals, health providers will be provided with financial strategies and modernized health IT systems to meet the unique demands of rural and underserved communities.

Rural America’s communities are resilient, self-sufficient, and adept at optimizing resources even when they are scarce. For rural communities, health and overall community and economic vitality are intrinsically linked. The funding and support of rural hospitals is essential to establish comprehensive and integrated care for rural communities. Please contact me at stollj@ochin.org if we can provide any additional information to support your efforts.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Stoll
Chief External Affairs Officer
External Affairs