



News Release

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USDA Invests \$42 Million in Distance Learning and Telemedicine Infrastructure to Improve Education and Health Outcomes

Investments Will Benefit 5 Million People, Including Rural Residents of Vermont and New Hampshire

WASHINGTON, Feb. 25, 2021 – The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) today announced it is [investing \\$42.3 million to help rural residents gain access to health care and educational opportunities](#). Distance Learning & Telemedicine (DLT) grants awarded to institutions in northern Vermont and southern New Hampshire are included in the national initiative: \$994,326 to North Country Hospital Health Center (VT) and \$995,158 to Fall Mountain Regional School District (NH).

Rural areas are seeing higher infection and death rates related to COVID-19 due to several factors, including a much higher percentage of underlying conditions, difficulty accessing medical care, and lack of health insurance. The \$42.3 million in awards includes \$24 million provided through the [CARES Act](#). In total, these investments will benefit 5 million rural residents.

“The coronavirus pandemic is a national emergency that requires an historic federal response. These investments by the Biden Administration will help millions of people living in rural places access health care and education opportunities that could change and save lives,” said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. “USDA is helping rural America build back better using technology as a cornerstone to create more equitable communities. With health care and education increasingly moving to online platforms, the time is now to make historic investments in rural America to improve quality of life for decades to come.”

A recent [report](#) by the Rural Policy Research Institute’s Center for Rural Health Policy Analysis found infection and death rates in rural America due to COVID-19 are 13.4 percent higher than in urban areas. A recent report from USDA’s Economic Research Service, [USDA ERS - Rural Residents Appear to be More Vulnerable to Serious Infection or Death From Coronavirus COVID-19](#), underscored the challenges facing rural Americans amidst the COVID-19 pandemic with even greater detail. Due to a confluence of factors, including higher percentages of underlying conditions, lack of health insurance, and lower access to medical facilities/care than urban counterparts, ERS analysts found rural Americans are suffering more severe illness or death due to COVID-19.

Rural Residents Appear to be More Vulnerable to Serious Infection or Death from Coronavirus COVID-19

	Rural Percent	Urban Percent
Underlying health conditions (ages 20 to 84)	23.7	3.0
Older adult population scale	15.9	4.0
Lacking health insurance (ages 25 to 64)	20.2	10.5
Distance to county with an intensive care hospital	11.3	0.3

*The table above is from the USDA ERS January 2021 report: **Rural Residents Appear to be More Vulnerable to Serious Infection or Death from Coronavirus COVID-19***

Background:

USDA is funding 86 projects through the [Distance Learning and Telemedicine](#) (DLT) grant program. The program helps rural education and health care entities remotely reach students, patients and outside expertise. These capabilities make world-class education and health care opportunities accessible in rural communities. The ability to use telehealth resources is critical, especially now during a global pandemic.

USDA announced investments today in Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, [New Hampshire](#), New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, [Vermont](#), Virginia, West Virginia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

- In Vermont, North Country Hospital Health Center will use a \$994,326 grant to establish telemedicine services and expand capacity through patient monitoring systems and telehealth carts throughout its network. The project will benefit approximately 64,260 constituents through a partnership comprised of 16 locations in Orleans and Caledonia Counties offering a variety of health services: a critical-access hospital, nine specialty health clinics, three rehabilitation and therapy disciplines, two primary-care centers, a pediatric office, five residential-aging facilities, visiting nurses, an opioid-service entity and sleep-disorder clinic.
- The Fall Mountain Regional School District in New Hampshire is receiving a \$995,158 grant to build and expand learning services in Cheshire and Sullivan counties. Distance learning will enable schools to share instructional resources, provide cultural literacy and career pathways programs for students, and provide professional development opportunities. The funding will also help expand the number and variety of courses offered, enable resource sharing through CTE centers, and provide access to special education and therapeutic services.

To learn more about investment resources for rural areas, interested parties should contact their [USDA Rural Development state office](#).

In January, President Biden requested all parts of the federal government to contribute resources to contain the coronavirus pandemic. USDA is responding to the President's call to action. To date, more than 350 USDA personnel have deployed to assist with standing up vaccination sites, for example. In addition to personnel, USDA is offering its facilities, cold chain infrastructure, public health experts, disaster response specialists, and footprint in rural and Tribal communities across the country. USDA's commitment to control the pandemic extends to our own staff and facilities, with masking and physical distancing requirements across USDA, a commitment to provide PPE to our front-line workers, and working with states to prioritize vaccinations for our workforce. For more information, visit www.usda.gov/coronavirus. USDA also encourages people seeking health insurance to go to HealthCare.gov now through May 15th due to a Special Enrollment Period. If you are recently uninsured due to a job loss or because you're between jobs, find a plan at HealthCare.gov and keep it for as long as you need it.

If you'd like to subscribe to USDA Rural Development updates, visit our [GovDelivery subscriber page](#).

USDA Rural Development provides loans and grants to help expand economic opportunities and create jobs in rural areas. This assistance supports infrastructure improvements; business development; housing; community facilities such as schools, public safety and health care; and high-speed internet access in rural areas. For more information, visit www.rd.usda.gov.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. In the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, ensuring access to healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit www.usda.gov.

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