

## You can put 'e' in front of anything

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Bringing legislators, policy experts, and lobbyists together, the National Conference of State Legislatures' **Spring Forum** convened last week in Washington D.C. One panel focused on transforming rural health through technology and aptly illustrated the role technology will play in policy formation and improved health care in the not-so-distant future.

I say future, but in fact the technology is being used every day in rural communities throughout the nation. A speaker from a South Dakota provider lauded the role futuristic-sounding things such as e-stroke, e-ICU, e-consult, e-nursery, and e-urgent care have in the lives of thousands of rural residents. As the provider succinctly stated, the goal is to put 'e' in front of anything and fundamentally transform health care in the hardest to reach locations of our country. This goal is both admirable and realistic, but not without challenges.

The most daunting of these challenges is broadband access. Outlined by a representative of the **Federal Communications Commission**, the **National Broadband Plan**, in an effort to close gaps with an affordable technical infrastructure, has already identified problem areas that lack access. Indeed, many states have begun to narrow these gaps by devoting funding to public-private partnerships and tax credits to encourage the build-up of necessary broadband infrastructure. The main challenge, identified by President Obama as a key directive, is to encourage private companies to invest in the low-population, often low income, rural areas. Some states are also working to combine broadband needs on the local level to increase demand and spur investment.

The telehealth market will be a key driver of demand. Many telecommunications companies are already investing in the solutions necessary to make telehealth a success. These companies have seen the benefit of combining state-of-the-art technical solutions with access to a broadband network. By entering the telehealth market, these companies make access to broadband a necessity for the rural citizen who might not have seen its value prior to an eConsult or eHealth experience at a local clinic. The benefits of these investments are great for both the company and the patient.

By increasing the use of telehealth in the health care market, policy makers hope to improve patient outcomes while also building and expanding our nation's technical infrastructure. It was very clear from the questions and excitement I saw in the room at the NCSL Forum that putting 'e' in front of everything is a goal shared by all.