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The Vital Link to Good Health and Education for Our Citizens

By Jim Miller, General Manager, Citizens Mutual Telephone Cooperative

In a year when national issues like the war in Iraq are dominating the media, it's easy to forget the local issues.

I'm talking about access to telecommunications services, made possible for millions of Americans by the Universal Service Fund.

What is the Universal Service Fund, you ask?

It's an industry-funded program that pays a portion of the high cost of connecting rural consumers, schools, libraries, and hospitals with modern telephone and Internet service. It provides affordable access to telecommunications services for countless residents in our area, supports education in rural schools, and brings high-quality healthcare to rural hospitals through telemedicine programs.

Thanks to this fund, the telephone penetration rate in rural areas is approximately 95 percent, and broadband access in these areas stands at 70 percent and is increasing every day. Independent rural telephone companies are offering state-of-the-art services such as IP video, distance learning, and full motion interactive video that allows children to take classes from teachers hundreds of miles away.

Why is this important?

We live in a "wired world" – one where access to modern telecommunications equals access to knowledge and information. It allows people living in rural areas to keep pace with their counterparts in urban areas in terms of school education, access to modern medicine, and business competitiveness.

It's not only consumers in rural areas who benefit from the Universal Service Fund. People everywhere need to connect with friends and family wherever they may live – whether the connection is a simple phone call or sending online photos and other information.

Some members of Congress want to put a lid on the Universal Service Fund. They think it is a handout or a tax. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Common sense makes it clear that running telephone and Internet lines to faraway rural locations costs a lot of money. That's why Congress passed a law years ago guaranteeing that all Americans have access to affordable telephone service. The Universal Service Fund helps pay for this huge cost. Without this support, millions of rural consumers of modest means would pay hundreds (or even thousands) of dollars per month for phone service that most of us receive for less than \$50 per month.

President Bush has declared that all Americans should have Internet access by 2007. Regardless of your political leanings, most of us would agree this is a worthy goal. To make this happen, the Universal Service Fund will be more essential than ever.

If nothing else, consider the huge benefit the Universal Service Fund provides in education and healthcare – two key issues that are always close to home.

Children in rural areas deserve the same access to knowledge and information as students in urban areas. High-speed Internet connections make this possible. When these students graduate, they will be able to compete for jobs.

In healthcare, even the most remote areas can have access to specialized medical expertise through telecommunications medicine. A local clinic can send x-rays to a specialist anywhere in the country for a diagnosis. A patient living in a rural area recovering from heart surgery can conduct follow-up visits with his cardiologist hundreds of miles away via telemedicine at his local clinic.

When you go to the polls, think about these important local issues and ask yourself: Does the candidate support rural communities and the Universal Service Fund program? Their support of this fund is vital to our health, the future of our children, and our overall quality of life.