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**USDA Invites Applications for Grants to Bring Improved Educational and Health Care Services to Rural Communities**

***Distance Learning and Telemedicine Program has Funded 1,400 Rural Health and Education Projects***

**WASHINGTON**, June 28, 2013 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced that USDA is accepting applications for grants to provide access to education, training and healthcare resources in rural areas. Funding is authorized through the Department’s Distance Learning and Telemedicine (DLT) Grant Program.  The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) remains focused on carrying out its mission, despite a time of significant budget uncertainty. Today's announcement is one part of the Department's efforts to strengthen the rural economy.

“With access to the latest technology, America’s rural citizens can compete in today’s global economy,” Vilsack said. “These Distance Learning and Telemedicine grants will modernize equipment and improve healthcare services and educational opportunities for residents in remote areas. They will help generate jobs in small towns and revitalize rural economies.”

   Under this notice, USDA may provide up to $17.5 million in grants. Funds can be used to buy equipment and provide technical assistance. To be eligible, applicants must serve a rural area, demonstrate economic need and provide at least 15 percent in matching funds. Awards range up to $500,000.  In 2012, USDA Rural Development provided 58 DLT grants for projects in 36 states. Since the program began, 1,400 projects have been funded.

   For example, in 2011, USDA Rural Development awarded the Kennett School District in extreme southeast Missouri funds for a results-oriented distance learning project. Using the connectivity that interactive video affords, their distance learning initiative offers community college programs during after school hours.  Also, in 2010, the St. Alexius Medical Center in Bismarck, North Dakota, received a grant to expand access to state-of-the-art EKG (electrocardiogram) and ECG (echocardiogram) services.  More than 24,000 rural residents in 25 communities have benefited by not having to drive great distances for their heart care services. The medical center used the USDA grant to purchase medical equipment and software that immediately transmits patients’ test results and other information to cardiac specialists in Bismarck.

   Completed applications must be received by August 12, 2013. For further details about eligibility rules and application procedures, see the notice published on page 38915 of the June 28, 2013 Federal Register: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-06-28/html/2013-15597.htm>.

   President Obama’s plan for rural America has brought about historic investment and resulted in stronger rural communities. Under the President's leadership, these investments in housing, community facilities, businesses and infrastructure have empowered rural America to continue leading the way – strengthening America’s economy, small towns and rural communities. USDA’s investments in rural communities support the rural way of life that stands as the backbone of our American values. President Obama and Agriculture Secretary Vilsack are committed to a smarter use of Federal resources to foster sustainable economic prosperity and ensure the government is a strong partner for businesses, entrepreneurs and working families in rural communities.

   USDA, through its Rural Development mission area, has a portfolio of programs designed to improve the economic stability of rural communities, businesses, residents, farmers and ranchers and improve the quality of life in rural America.

   USDA has made a concerted effort to deliver results for the American people, even as USDA implements sequestration – the across-the-board budget reductions mandated under terms of the Budget Control Act. USDA has already undertaken historic efforts since 2009 to save more than $828 million in taxpayer funds through targeted, common-sense budget reductions. These reductions have put USDA in a better position to carry out its mission, while implementing sequester budget reductions in a fair manner that causes as little disruption as possible.

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