



News Release

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USDA Connects Rural Mainers to Health Care and Education Options with \$1.7M in Grants

Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants to fund health and education programs across eight Maine counties.

Bangor, Nov. 22, 2023 – As 2023 draws to a close, rural Mainers can look forward to more healthcare and education options in the year ahead due to grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). USDA Rural Development Maine State Director Rhiannon Hampson announced three new awards today. Two recipients in Maine and one in New Hampshire will use the grants to provide distance learning and telehealth resources to rural Maine residents. Together, the three [Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants](#) (DLT) will benefit an estimated 79,000 individuals across the two states.

“At USDA Rural Development we believe everyone should have access to quality healthcare and educational resources, regardless of the size or location of their community,” said Director Hampson. “There is an urgent need for more health care options in rural areas. And across Maine, we need more diverse educational opportunities, including workforce development and science, technology, engineering, and math classes for students. The Biden-Harris Administration is making unprecedented funding available to move the needle on broadband connectivity and to provide the equipment necessary to utilize it fully. We’re excited to support these projects that will help do so in eight Maine counties.”

The three grant recipients announced today will offer a range of services at many different types of locations, from classrooms to libraries and community centers.

- **Regional School Unit No. 10 (Rumford)** will use its **\$982,191.00** grant to equip sites in Oxford and Franklin counties with interactive video-conferencing equipment and other resources. Instructors from multiple school districts will expand their collaboration to deliver expanded course offerings and mental health services. Programming will include workforce development, job training, continuing education, and professional development. The project will benefit approximately 3000 students across multiple campuses.

- **The University of New Hampshire Center for Digital Health Innovation** (Durham) will use its **\$129,746.00** grant to equip sites in Strafford, Sullivan, Carroll and Grafton counties in New Hampshire and Kennebec County in Maine with video conferencing, assistive technologies, and virtual reality equipment. This will allow health professionals located at the Center for Digital Health Innovation to offer virtual reality-based mental health and physical rehabilitation services to these underserved rural areas. The six community sites include libraries, a youth and senior center, and a Cooperative Extension office, serving a total of approximately 70,000 rural residents.
- **Northern Light VNA Home Health and Hospice** (South Portland) will use its **\$614,700.00** grant to equip sites in Aroostook, Hancock, Somerset, Penobscot, Kennebec, and Cumberland counties in Maine with updated telehealth equipment. Health professionals from Northern Light Home Care & Hospice will use the equipment to deliver home care and hospice services to approximately 6000 rural Mainers.

USDA's [Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants](#) help rural communities use technology to overcome the challenges posed by remoteness and low population density. The grants may fund the purchase of audio, video, and interactive equipment, broadband facilities used for distance learning or telemedicine, computer hardware, network components, and software, and instructional programming. State and local governments, federally recognized tribes, nonprofits, and other entities that provide education and healthcare are eligible to apply.

Although the USDA Rural Development DLT program is not currently accepting applications, there likely will be an open application period in the coming months. Interested Maine applicants may contact Robert Fry, Telecom General Field Representative (robert.fry@usda.gov or [202 768 0589](tel:2027680589)) with questions.

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Comments from USDA DLT Grant Recipients

**Deborah Alden , Superintendent of Schools, RSU #10
Rumford, ME**

“We are so fortunate to be part of this incredible funding source to continue and expand access for our students and staff in our rural setting. This is a game changer as we work for equitable learning and wellness opportunities for all in our District and communities.”

**Brian Carrier, Director of Technology, RSU #10
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“This grant will facilitate technology integration and enable participating school districts to share resources through video conferencing and distance learning hardware. This transformative technology empowers us to bridge educational gaps, extending mental health and educational opportunities seamlessly into the classroom environment. The USDA Rural Development DLT grant underscores our steadfast commitment to inclusivity, ensuring students of all economic backgrounds can partake in enriching experiences such as mental health services, distance learning opportunities, virtual field trips, and collaborative meetings.

“Thanks to this continued USDA Rural Development funding (we previously received a USDA DLT grant in 2019), RSU10 will continue to contribute to student development and the promotion of well-being throughout our rural community. By leveling the playing field and ensuring equal access to these innovative resources, we are not only broadening horizons but also fostering a supportive environment that positively impacts both students and staff. RSU10 takes pride in pioneering the use of technology to enhance education, fostering a more inclusive and connected learning experience for all.”

**Marguerite Corvini, EdD, MSW,
Director, UNH Center for Digital Health Innovation:**

“We are excited to partner with libraries and youth and senior centers to increase access to innovative health technologies, and also to expose graduate and undergraduate health students to the needs of rural communities.

“Libraries and community youth and senior centers are at the heart of our rural communities. The launch of this program will increase access to innovative health

technologies for people in rural areas, provide learning opportunities for our students, and build the capacity to provide more services over time.”

LeighAnn Howard RN, DNP, CHFN
Vice President of Clinical Excellence and Community Partnerships
Northern Light Home Care & Hospice

“For our patients living in remote areas of Maine, this USDA grant will help us continue to provide them easy access to care through telehealth technology. Using this equipment, we’re able to monitor their vitals, consult with them on their questions, and ensure they understand and are taking their prescriptions, all from the comfort of their own home. We know that it can be a struggle for many patients to travel one, two, even up to three hours for some of these services. This often turns into an entire day not only for the patient, but also for a family member or friend. This helps drastically cut down on those on those trips, and overall, has significantly increased the comfort and satisfaction of our patients.”