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A Case for an Exception to the FCC Rule: Vulnerable Populations and Telemedicine

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On December 14, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to remove regulations that prohibit providers from blocking websites or charging for high quality service to access specific content. Many worry that allowing telecommunications companies to favor certain businesses will cause problems within the health care industry. Specifically, concerns have risen about the effect of the ruling on the progress of telemedicine and the role it plays in access to care. Experts worry that a tiered system in which service providers can charge more for speed connectivity can be detrimental to vulnerable populations. Although the ramifications of the ruling are not entirely known, an exception for health care services would ensure that vulnerable populations can continue to gain access to care.

Telemedicine is often used as a tool to improve care by providing access to those who wouldn't ordinarily have access to care. Through video consultation, patients have the ability to check-in with health care providers and access health specialists. Robust connectivity is vital for these services and community providers, and rural areas may lack the financial means to pay for optimal connectivity in a tiered framework.

In the past, the FCC recognized the importance of broadband connectivity to the health care industry. In 2015, the [FCC's Open Internet Order](#) acknowledged that health care is a specialized service that would be exempt from conduct based rules. However, the new rule may undermine the 2015 Order and thus leave vulnerable populations at risk.

Moreover, the technology industry would likewise benefit from a health services exception. Innovation in health care delivery could be stifled by the FCC ruling and hurt the population as a whole. From tech start-ups to access-to-care advocates, various members of the health care ecosystem may need to anticipate building coalitions and urge the FCC to create an exception for health care services.

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Article By
[Eunola Aniyikaiye](#)
[Epstein Becker & Green, P.C.](#)
[Health Law Advisor](#)
[Communications, Media & Internet](#)
[Health Law & Managed Care](#)
[All Federal](#)