



Cellular company urges continuation of access funding

By Charlotte Eby, Globe Gazette Des Moines Bureau

DES MOINES -- Local cell phone provider U.S. Cellular and a leading Iowa law enforcement official are urging the federal government to preserve funding that helps pay to build cell phone towers in rural areas.

Some rural areas of Iowa still remain without cell phone coverage, which Clay County Sheriff Randy Krukow said is an important public safety issue.

"This stuff is critical. I mean, you're talking life or death," said Krukow, who is president of the Iowa State Sheriffs' & Deputies' Association.

The Federal Communications Commission is considering a cap on the Universal Service Fund. The fund is used to ensure rural residents who are expensive to serve can get phone service at rates comparable to those in urban areas.

Currently, close to \$4 billion a year is spent on the effort, up from \$2.6 billion in 2001.

Krukow said cell phone coverage has improved in his county, but areas still exist without coverage, a problem he hears from law enforcement officials from all over the state.

Emergency personnel can use cell phones to track those who are in trouble but can't describe their location.

Recently, Krukow's department was able to find people involved in a fatality because of the cell phone technology.

He said he hopes federal officials are listening. "We still feel it is very crucial out here in the heartland, and when we're talking homeland security, wouldn't that be part of that?" Krukow said.

Federal dollars have helped U.S. Cellular build towers in the Iowa communities of



Buffalo Center, Neola, Paullina, Missouri Valley, Tripoli, Camanche, Little Sioux and Rowley among others.

U.S. Cellular president and CEO John Rooney is concerned federal officials are considering capping funding and said he believes it will hurt areas of rural America significantly.

Rooney said building a tower typically costs about \$300,000, but the return on the investment is smaller in rural areas where they are serving fewer customers.

"If you have a town of 500 people, which is what many parts of rural America are made up of, the cost of putting up the tower, you'll never get it repaid," Rooney said in a phone interview.

He lists several towers the company has built in Iowa recently, and said they wouldn't have been built without federal assistance.

Rooney said bringing cell phone service to those towns also helps attract businesses.

"Cellular now is not some sort of an option, it's not some sort of a thing that's for the rich folk. Cellular is an integral part of everybody's lives," Rooney said.

U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, said ensuring rural Iowans have access to affordable, reliable telephone service has been one of his top priorities.

"I am closely examining the FCC's proposals regarding the Universal Service Fund to ensure that they do not affect efforts to continue improving rural Iowa's communications infrastructure," Harkin said in a statement.

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