

## **U.S. SENATOR MICHAEL BENNET**

*Member: Agriculture, HELP, and Finance Committees*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Friday, February 15, 2013

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## **Bennet, Thune, Tom Udall Introduce Bill to Improve Access to Emergency Services in Rural Areas**

**Washington, DC** – Colorado U.S. Senator Michael Bennet joined Senators John Thune (R-S.D.) and Tom Udall (D-N.M.) to introduce a bill to improve access to emergency services in rural and medically underserved areas. The Strengthening Rural Access to Emergency Services Act (S. 328) would amend the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA) to allow eligible hospitals in rural and medically underserved areas to use interactive telehealth programs to satisfy the federal emergency room staffing requirement for an “on call” physician when an associate provider, such as a physician assistant or nurse practitioner, is already on site at the rural emergency room.

This bill is supported by the National Rural Health Association, the American Telemedicine Association, the American College of Emergency Physicians, and the American Academy of Physician Assistants.

“Rural communities in Colorado are all too familiar with the challenge of accessing health services,” **Bennet said**. “This bill combines innovation with flexibility for rural hospitals working to bring health care services to their communities. I look forward to working with Senators Thune and Udall to pass this bill quickly.”

“Access to fast, reliable emergency medicine in rural hospitals is critically important,” **said Thune**. “My legislation updates federal law to reflect advancements in telehealth technology that are already in use across the country. Emergency telehealth technology improves the quality of care provided in rural emergency rooms while also leveraging the technology to address problems in recruiting physicians to rural areas. I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to move this legislation through Congress. ”

“Small rural hospitals are lifelines for local communities, and telehealth technologies can enhance the emergency room services they provide,” **said Udall**. “New Mexico is a large state and many

residents live far from urban areas, so telehealth offers us the best avenue to meet their healthcare needs. I am very pleased to join Senator Thune to introduce this bipartisan legislation that will help save time and save lives."

Currently, small rural hospitals across the country are facing physician recruiting challenges, partly due to federal requirements that do not reflect advancements in emergency telehealth technology that can be employed to create a practice environment that is more attractive to young physicians. EMTALA requires a physician to be on call and able to arrive to the emergency department within 30 minutes, even if an associate provider, such as a nurse practitioner or physician assistant, is already covering the emergency department. For physicians in small hospitals who see patients all day and then must be on call at night, this creates a "24/7" work environment that can be unattractive to many young physicians and unnecessarily drives up the costs of health care.

The bill would allow for a physician available by an interactive emergency telehealth system to satisfy EMTALA requirements at eligible rural hospitals when an associate provider is on site, and would keep patients at their local hospital and avoid unnecessary, expensive, and geographically difficult transfers to larger hospitals.

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