§ 464-d. Program established. 1. The commissioner is authorized to establish within the department a rural human services networking program, for the purpose of assisting human services providers in rural areas who seek to participate in the program as hereinafter provided, to develop pilot projects to address intense social problems through the creation of contracts or joint or cooperative agreements. Such pilot projects shall capitalize on the strength of existing providers by promoting the sharing of resources and service delivery in rural areas, with the goal of reducing total cost to both consumers and providers while increasing the availability and accessibility of human services in such areas. Pilot projects shall also serve to identify methods of overcoming impediments to the joint provision of integrated and cost-effective human services in rural areas.

2. Within one hundred twenty days after the effective date of this article, the commissioner, with the advice and guidance of the advisory committee, shall establish and give public notice of the existence of the rural human services networking program, and the availability of competitive grants to human services providers interested in undertaking pilot projects pursuant to the provisions of this article. At that time the commissioner shall also distribute information on such program, and application forms and procedures to eligible human services providers.

3. In order to implement the rural human services networking program the commissioner shall, within the amounts appropriated therefor, provide grants to eligible applicants on a competitive basis. No grant for a pilot project shall be awarded by the commissioner unless the application for such grant has been reviewed by state agencies which license or certify the applicant agencies and any comments on such proposals are considered by the commissioner. To be eligible for a grant under this article, each application shall be submitted pursuant to a contract or joint or cooperative agreement on behalf of two or more local or regional human services providers intending to implement a pilot project in a rural area. Applications shall be submitted to the commissioner on such forms and at such times as the commissioner shall prescribe, and completed applications shall be approved or disapproved within ninety days of submission. In the event the commissioner

determines that a grant application is incomplete, or where waivers of any regulations are requested by an applicant, the commissioner shall have an additional ninety days to act upon such application.

4. In determining whether an application shall be approved and funds awarded pursuant to this article, the commissioner shall give priority consideration to applications received from human services providers intending to implement a pilot project in the most sparsely populated rural areas, as shall be previously determined by the commissioner, in conjunction with the advisory committee. In addition, the commissioner shall consider, but such consideration shall not be limited to, the following:

a. The specific objectives and description of the proposed pilot project, including demonstrated awareness of the level of human services currently being provided within the service area;

b. The degree to which the proposed pilot project would meet local or regional human services needs;

c. The demonstrated ability of the applicants to undertake the pilot project;

d. The contribution the project would make toward the identification and development of innovative delivery systems;

e. The degree to which the proposal would enhance the delivery or improve the availability and accessibility of services with respect to the full continuum of human services needs;

f. The degree to which continuity of care would be fostered and improved;

g. The degree to which the proposal would enhance cost efficiency and access to human services by populations in need of such services;

h. The degree to which information sharing, communication, and

cooperation between providers and consumers would be fostered;

i. The degree to which economies of scale in both the supply and demand of services would be addressed;

j. The demonstrated level of commitment and support for the project expressed by the community, local government body or bodies, and other local or regional human services providers;

k. The impact the proposed pilot project will have on state agencies providing services or funds for human services programs in the area, as determined by the commissioner after consulting with such agencies;

l. The consistency of the proposed pilot project with the provisions of article forty-one of the mental hygiene law; and

m. Any potential loss of funds or state or federal aid to which providers may now be entitled, including but not limited to medicaid funds, and the actions to be taken by the applicant and by the commissioner to ensure the continuation of the same amount of funds or aid.

5. The commissioner or his or her duly authorized representative may meet with representatives of the applicants for the informal discussion of preliminary and informal plans for a proposed project and may provide such technical assistance as may be requested to implement an approved project.

6. Pilot projects shall be approved for a time period not to exceed three years. Within the amounts appropriated therefor, the commissioner shall approve pilot project grant awards of not less than ten thousand dollars nor more than fifty thousand dollars per pilot project in any one calendar year. Such grants may be renewed annually for up to three consecutive years, subject to the availability of funds. Funds awarded to each recipient in the second and third years may be the same amount as the grant received in the first year, or may be a lesser amount, with the amounts of such awards determined in accordance with the nature of

the approved pilot project, the number of delivery and consumer agencies, and the number of clients to be served. If the commissioner determines that a grant is being used for purposes other than those which are in conformity with this article, the commissioner may withdraw approval of the project and require repayment of all or part of such grant to the state. The commissioner shall cause reports to be prepared and submitted for each project by the grantees at such times and in such manner as are consistent with the purposes of this article.

7. For the purpose of promoting innovative approaches and maximum effectiveness in the utilization of state and local monies, and notwithstanding any other provisions of law, the commissioner may waive any departmental regulations that may impede the successful implementation and testing of a pilot project, provided that there is a finding by the commissioner that the general welfare of the people receiving human services will not be impaired. In addition, the commissioner shall consult with federal, state, and local officials with respect to securing their cooperation in coordinating related programs and in seeking necessary regulatory waivers, in order to assure the effective operation of any pilot project. Notwithstanding any other provisions of law, at the request of the commissioner, on behalf of an applicant, the commissioner or director of any other state agency or department shall be authorized to waive any applicable regulations of such agency or department that may impede the successful implementation of a pilot project, provided there is a finding that the general welfare of the people receiving human services will not be impaired.

8. Upon the request of an applicant, the commissioner or his or her duly authorized representative may render to such applicant such technical services and assistance as the department may possess or as may be available to it in order to enable the applicant to carry out the project and terms of such contract.