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North Idaho hospitals land grant

Funds will provide new telemedicine charts, video bridge

COEUR d'ALENE - A North Idaho consortium of hospitals has landed a federal grant that spokespeople say will dramatically improve health care for rural residents.

"It's really difficult for these rural hospitals to afford some of this expensive new equipment," said Tom Hauer, TeleHealth director with Kootenai Health. "So what this federal funding does is it gives us a starting point to get our equipment up to date."

The North Idaho Rural Health Consortium, comprised of five hospitals in the region, has been awarded a \$421,622 grant for telemedicine services and distance learning from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities program.

The dollars will provide a new video bridge, video systems room and telemedicine charts for each hospital in the consortium, said Jonathan Adelstein, administrator of Rural Utilities Service with USDA.

The benefiting hospitals include Kootenai Medical Center, Benewah Community Hospital in St. Maries, Bonner General Hospital in Sandpoint, Boundary Community Hospital in Bonners Ferry and Shoshone Medical Center in Kellogg.

"It's a tremendous opportunity for residents of the Panhandle to get better quality health care in an affordable way," Adelstein said.

The new technology will update the decade-old video conferencing system the hospitals have used to communicate with each other, Hauer said.

"Not only will we be able to connect between the five as we can now, but we can also connect off our area network to other specialists or other providers," Hauer said. "This is really going to be a shot in the arm, and bring us up to par with the rest of the networks."

The equipment will allow patients at rural facilities to communicate through video link with specialists at other locations. Staff at different hospitals can also use the technology to consult with each other.

These services are crucial, said NIRHC spokesperson Carol Wilson, as rural facilities lack specialists in certain fields.

"That makes a big difference just for things like telepsychiatry - the telepsychiatric consults have made a big difference to patients in the rural communities," Wilson said. "We can do ER consultations, or neurology or cardiology. There are many, many applications for any rural hospitals."

USDA awarded more than 100 such grants across 38 states, Adelstein said.

Not every entity that applied was awarded a grant, he added.

The consortium's application was strong because the group could provide matching funds, he said. The hospitals are paying for roughly half the project, with a cash match of \$23,000 and an in-kind match of \$480,000 from the facilities' combined capital budgets.

"They're putting up a big chunk of funds to make this work," Adelstein said. "It (the consortium) won a competitive grant process to win this award."

The consortium has been pursuing this project for some time, Hauer said.

"It's kind of like having a three-year old computer on your desk. You really start to notice when things slow down, and you can't download certain applications anymore," he said. "This (upgrade) is really going to help us out. It's going to help our physicians out."