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Telemedicine grant funding runs out

Grant funding for rural clients receiving mental health treatment via the telemedicine network has run out, meaning many uninsured patients will have to pay up front for services. Hospital officials said they will continue to seek additional grants, while one rural hospital plans to fund the program in-house.

Administrator Rod Jacobson said Bear Lake Memorial Hospital is looking to the hospital's charitable committee and fundraising efforts through the Bear Lake Memorial Hospital Foundation to fund telemental health services. The program allows patients at BLMH to consult with a mental health care provider in Pocatello.

"(Telemedicine) has been so popular here, we're going to find a way to fund it," Jacobson said.

Shaun Tobler, director of mental health services at BLMH said 53 patients currently receive mental health service through the telemedicine network.

Tobler said the program, based at Portneuf Medical Center, prevents acute cases and keeps mental health clients out of emergency rooms.

"One hospitalization could cost as much as \$70,000," Tobler said. "We think this is more cost-effective."

PMC Spokesman Brad Huerta said mental health services will still be provided at rural hospitals in Southeast Idaho through the telemedicine network. The program is being expanded to include teleoncology and telecardiology as well. However grant-funded payment subsidies are no longer available.

Huerta said federal dollars were used to develop the clinical treatment program and equip hospitals with telemedicine capability. Additional grant funding from the Hospital Cooperative, made up of 13 hospitals spanning from Jerome to Afton, Wyo., and Salmon to Oneida County, has offset the cost to uninsured clients.

"Telemedicine is not going anywhere," Huerta said. "PMC and the Hospital Cooperative will continue to solicit grant funding to assist uninsured clients to pay for treatment."

Caribou Memorial Hospital Chief Executive Officer John Hoopes could not be reached for this story, but said in an interview last month that THC grant provided \$6,780 in funding for the telemedicine program in Soda Springs last year.

As well as clinical analysis, the telemedicine network is also a valuable administrative tool.

Stephen Weeg, executive director at Health West in Pocatello, said the telemedicine network is also used for training and conferences between clinics in Pocatello and Mc-Cammon.