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Schwarzenegger launches nation's largest 'telehealth' system [Updated]

August 18, 2010 | 10:17 am

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger joined U.S. Chief Technology Officer Aneesh Chopra at the UC Davis Cancer Center on Tuesday to announce the launch of the country's largest "telehealth" system, which organizers say will one day connect patients to hundreds of hospitals and clinics statewide using broadband technology.

"What we are launching today is a new era for healthcare," Schwarzenegger said. "Through a simple broadband link, this state-of-the-art system will save lives by instantly connecting people from across the state, including under-served and rural areas, with the best and brightest doctors. The California Telehealth Network marks the beginning of a new digital highway that will fundamentally change the future of how healthcare is provided."

The network, a broadband stream separate from mainstream Internet broadband, will be dedicated solely to healthcare information. The network's first two remote sites were launched Tuesday at Oroville Hospital north of Sacramento and CommuniCare Health Center in West Sacramento. During the next month, organizers plan to add another 50 sites. Those partners include rural but also urban groups such as the Health Information Technology Extension Center for Los Angeles.

"What this is really about is to use broadband technology to improve clinical outcomes and reduce costs," said Eric Brown, the project's executive director. "The mission of the program is to increase access for rural clinics all over the state and also in urban areas where there is not proximity to quality care."

[Updated at 10:20 a.m.: Among the first to connect to the network will be the five UC medical centers and local health care providers, including Providence Tarzana Medical Center and St. John's Well Child and Family Center clinics in South Los Angeles, Brown said.

Brown said 60% of the networks' expected 850 providers will be rural, but the network will help urban patients reduce or eliminate the wait to see specialists.

"At a lot of these urban clinics, if you need to see a specialist you could wait 12 to 18 months," brown said. "If you have. Child with special needs, as a parent, that's a long time to wait."

Network officials demonstrated for the governor, Chopra and UC Senior Vice President John Stobo how the network connected UC Davis with Oroville Hospital to the north, UC Irvine Medical Center to the south and CommuniCare Health Center to the west. They introduced the group via computer monitors to Darla Carias in Oroville, who has been driving 500 miles south to seek treatment for her 4-year-old son with Dr. Gail Fernandez, a pediatric psychiatrist at UC Irvine Medical Center.

On Tuesday, Carias spoke with Fernandez for the first time via the network, which will enable her son to be treated remotely.

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