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Eureka Community Health Center technician Kim Adams learned to take a digital scan of Kelly Ramirez's eye as part of a training exercise at the Gary Shapiro Telehealth and Visiting Specialist Center in January. The scans can be sent to ophthalmologists for review and are one example of how telemedicine can bring medical access to rural populations. Tyson Ritter/The Eureka Reporter

## Rural health care gets a boost

by Carol Harrison, 11/25/2007

California's underserved rural health care infrastructure got a boost from the Federal Communications Commission Wednesday with a three-year, \$22 million award to help develop a new California Telehealth Network.

The University of California Office of the President, together with the UC Davis Health System, will manage the project on behalf of the state and a coalition of stakeholders that worked together to prepare the California proposal.

"This is an attempt to build the backbone necessary to have telemedicine. It will make sure rural California gets the last mile to the backbone that's being built," said Herrmann Spetzler, executive director of the Open Door Community Health Center.

Spetzler was part of the coalition of government agencies, health care providers and others that landed the grant, which is part of the FCC's Rural Health Care Support Mechanism.

Spetzler said Eureka's Gary R. Shapiro Telehealth and Visiting Specialist Center, which opened two years ago this month, is "one of the main examples and site for what the FCC wants to do."

He compared the new network project to the federal government's effort in the early part of the last century to bring electricity to every corner of the country.

"The analogy is that it's like bringing electricity to the telephone pole or the electrical pole next to the house," he said. "There's still work to be done to each house to switch from candles to electricity. Many of us have wired our homes, but we haven't had the direct electrical connection to take advantage."

Additionally, the collaboration will link the UC and its medical schools into the network.

"California faces huge challenges in improving access to health services in its rural communities," said Dr. Cathryn Nation, UC associate vice president for Health Sciences and co-director for the project. "These new resources will be carefully invested to align with the governor's broadband initiative and with UC's efforts to employ new technologies to

connect UC medical centers and physician faculty to new sites across the state.”

“This is the biggest thing that’s happened in telemedicine in a long, long time,” Spetzler said. “And it’s happening not just in California, but 42 other states are getting some of these grants. Other than a coalition of several northeastern states that pooled together, California has the single largest allocation at \$22 million.”

Nearby Oregon ranked third in revenue to be received from the \$417 million FCC grant.

“This is going to make a big difference to the state of Jefferson,” Spetzler said. “For our folks in Crescent City, it will give them access they haven’t had before. Sometimes access to that part of the state is through Oregon. It’s really exciting to have Oregon as part of it.”

“As we move forward this year with comprehensive health care reform, using technology is a major component in improving patient care,” said Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger when he announced the grant Nov. 20.

“By expanding broadband networks for telemedicine, we can connect the best medical experts to clinics in remote areas of the state. It’s critical that California continues to lead the way with this technology, which shows how we can save time, money and most importantly, we can save lives.”

“What it means right here in this county is that it will lead to fiber-optic redundancy,” Spetzler said. “It will add to the effort to get the broadband fiber optic connection to Eureka and the entire Humboldt Bay area.

“It will allow a relatively good connection in Eureka to reach to all corners of rural northwestern California. For us specifically, we will connect over time. It will help build because without infrastructure, it makes no difference what’s happening inside individual homes and offices.”

The goal is to create new telecommunications infrastructure, eventually allowing California’s rural communities to access a broad range of technology-enhanced services to improve the quality of health care services.

According to a University of California news release, up to \$8.6 million in additional financial commitments have been secured from the California Emerging Technology Fund and UnitedHealth Group Inc. to help support the successful implementation of the new California Telehealth Network.

“Collectively, the FCC award and other new resources will help California develop an effective, sustainable and forward-looking telehealth network, focusing first on rural communities and subsequently expanding to serve increasing numbers of California health providers in both rural and urban areas,” the release stated.

“Over the course of the project, the new network will connect more than 300 rural sites with each other, and with a network of specialty providers at academic medical centers and other nonprofit and for-profit health providers statewide.”

In addition to infrastructure development, emphasis is to be placed on telecommunications quality and technical support.

The new network will build on existing rural telemedicine networks such as the local Gary R. Shapiro Telehealth and Visiting Specialist Center.

It will connect with health care providers currently unconnected to telemedicine services and will increase the bandwidth and number of telemedicine connections between providers.

In addition, the plan is to create a network that provides state-of-the art technology and security and high levels of reliability, scalability and flexibility.

In addition, the California Telehealth Network is to serve as a resource for emergency services and disaster preparedness.

Also, it will help fulfill one of the FCC’s broader goals for this pilot program: link California providers to a nationwide broadband network dedicated to health care.

The \$22 million grant will build upon a number of recent initiatives in California aimed at developing a statewide approach to telehealth.

Through executive orders S-23-06, S-21-06 and S-12-06, Schwarzenegger directed state resources to promote broadband access and increase use of health information technology.

Last November, California voters approved Proposition 1D, an education bond providing the University of California with \$200 million for infrastructure to expand medical school enrollment and build and enhance telemedicine statewide.

UC’s first telemedicine program began in 1992 with a tele-fetal monitoring link between the UC Davis Medical Center and a community hospital in Colusa.

Since then, UC’s telemedicine efforts have grown to include a variety of innovative telemedicine applications, including video-based consultations, emergency department and intensive care unit consultations, teleradiology, video interpreting and telehome health.

Over the past 14 years, the UC Davis telemedicine program has completed more than 16,000 video-based clinical consultations.

In 2000, UC Davis established the Center for Health and Technology ([www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/cht](http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/cht)) to consolidate its telehealth projects, which include telemedicine, distance education and applied medical informatics.

The center collaborates with health care professionals, information technology experts, medical researchers and engineers to develop and evaluate information and telecommunications technologies that improve access to high-quality patient care, information resources and health education opportunities.

Since 1999, the learning center has trained more than 1,200 health care professionals. It also serves as an educational resource to staff at other telemedicine sites.

"UC Davis is strongly committed to expanding its telemedicine efforts and sharing the technical and training expertise needed to develop telecommunication linkages essential for a statewide telehealth network," said Dr. Thomas Nesbitt, executive associate dean at the UC Davis School of Medicine and co-director for the project.

The Open Door system opened Eureka's Shapiro center in November 2005. It marked the completion of an eight-year dream for Spetzler, one of the early advocates for telehealth care and the access it provides.

The Shapiro center is designed to be the primary telemedicine provider for a region that covers Humboldt, Del Norte, Trinity, Mendocino and parts of Lake and Siskiyou counties.

Schwarzenegger visited the Shapiro center eight months ago to observe what may have been the nation's first three-way teleconsultation between two centers of excellence — Arizona's Barrow Neurological Institute and UCLA — and a rural community in Eureka.

Using new technologies, other UC campuses have moved to develop telemedicine programs in various medical specialties and subspecialties. Plans are to substantially expand the specialties and providers over the next several years.

One program that will be part of these expansions was created at the UC Berkeley School of Optometry and introduced to the Shapiro center in February.

Open Door technicians learned to snap a set of eye pictures for diabetic patients, then e-mail them to local ophthalmologists for evaluation.

Visiting optometrist Dr. Jorge Cuadros, a telehealth advocate since 1994, led the local training and the UC Berkeley outreach to the Latino population of the Central Valley.

Latinos have rates of diabetes nearly three times higher than the general U.S. population and are at high risk for diabetic retinopathy, a sight-threatening side effect of the disease.

"We're getting people into the system who would not otherwise be there," local ophthalmologist Dr. Andrew Cochrane said in February. "It will improve the quality of care."

The coalition also includes representatives from the Office of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger; California Public Utilities Commission; California Business, Transportation and Housing Agency; and the California Health and Human Services Agency.

Also involved: the California State Rural Health Association and the California Hospital Association.



Herrmann Spetzler, executive director of the local telemedicine center, called last week's announcement of a \$22 million infrastructure grant from the Federal Communications Commission a boon to rural health care. He compared the federal government's commitment to the project to its attempts to bring electricity to the entire country at the beginning of the last century. Tyson Ritter/The Eureka Reporter