

Wellmont launches new telemedicine program

Mac Mclean | Posted: Friday, March 4, 2011 10:00 am

Almost half a million dollars in federal money is helping the Wellmont Health System provide care to some of Southwest Virginia's sickest residents without making them drive two hours to get it.

The \$497,438 distance learning and telemedicine grant was awarded to the eight-hospital health system by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development office.

Wellmont Foundation Executive Director Todd Norris said the money will be used to launch a new telemedicine program catering to people who live in rural communities and suffer from chronic diseases and conditions such as congestive heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and diabetes.

"We could be able to offer disease management programs to these people without requiring them to drive an hour one-way," Norris said as he explained how the new telemedicine programs would work.

Telemedicine uses high resolution video-conferencing technology and a fiber optic or broadband network to link doctors in one hospital with patients in another. The connection provided by this technology lets the two parties talk to each other, make basic physical observations and discuss test results without requiring them to be in the same place at the same time.

Norris said Wellmont's new program will link patients at the health system's Hawkins County Memorial Hospital in Rogersville, Tenn., Lee Regional Medical Center in Pennington Gap, Va., Lonesome Pine Hospital in Big Stone Gap, Va., and Mountain View Regional Medical Center in Norton, Va., with doctors at its Bristol Regional Hospital in Bristol, Tenn., or the Holston Valley Medical Center in Kingsport, Tenn.

Doctors and patients at the Southwest Virginia Cancer Center in Norton also would have a chance to use the hospital's new telemedicine initiative, he said, through both the chronic disease management program and a second program that caters directly to cancer survivors.

"The more convenient and accessible these services are, the more likely they are to be used," Norris said, pointing out one way the new telemedicine programs could help to improve the overall health of the region's residents – particularly those who live in its farthest corners.

The Virginia General Assembly illustrated its commitment to telemedicine last spring when it passed legislation requiring all health insurance companies to treat a doctor-patient visit made through telemedicine the same way they would treat a normal doctor-patient visit.

The USDA's Rural Development office expressed a similar commitment when it set aside \$30 million for the current fiscal year to fund telemedicine projects like the Wellmont Health System's most recent initiative, said Bobby Goode, the program's state director for Tennessee.

"Families in rural communities should have access to the same quality healthcare they would have living anywhere else," Goode said in a statement announcing Wellmont's grant. "The president has made rural access to broadband a priority and at USDA Rural Development we are helping people and businesses in rural areas use this technology to out-innovate, out-educate and out-build the rest of the world."

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