

Grant bolsters medical network

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USDA funds aid rural S. Dakotans

Thanks to a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant, people in South Dakota's outlying areas will be able to receive health care without leaving their hometowns.

Earlier this month, Horizon Health Care Inc. of Howard received a \$202,720 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Program. With the money, the clinic will be closer to its goal of 28 community health care centers in the network.

High-tech audio, visual and data transmission equipment will be installed at the sites. The equipment will allow the sites to electronically access medical data, discuss medical issues and hold monthly meetings.

Five health centers now are connected: Horizon Health Care in Howard, Bell Medical Services in De Smet, Jerauld County Clinic in Wessington Springs, Mission Medical Clinic in Mission and Bennet County Community Health Center in Martin. Other clinics associated with Horizon Health Care are in Bryant, Lake Preston, Plankinton, White River and Woonsocket.

Two sites in Sioux Falls, Sioux River Valley community Health Center and Community Health-Care Association of the Dakotas are participating in the overall project, although they aren't using money from the USDA grant to buy their equipment.

Administrators at Mission Medical Clinic say the program is a big help because the nearest hospital is 50 miles east in Winner.

"When we were hooked up in May 2002, we were able to get together to do staff and providers meetings in one location without traveling," said Dan Heyduk, physicians assistant at the Mission Medical Clinic. "That part has had a major impact."

Heyduk said the clinic also has been able to use technology to forward X-rays and other materials to one of the cooperative physicians for further diagnosis.

"We could consult with any providers in the nation or

world-wide," he said. "We have to keep our supervising physician informed of what we are doing before we consult other providers. They possibly could give us more direction or tell us to consult another provider."

Patients are able to see specialists at the Mission clinic through videoconferencing. "We will send them to the physician to see them first and then monitor their progress locally," Heyduk said.

The original conferencing was paid for with another USDA grant three years ago. The present grant expands the program and later will create a continuing education curriculum. It also will help pay for equipment so that smaller clinics can work together on group purchasing and human resources.

"This allows us to operate more efficiently and effectively and offers more services for our patients," said John Mengershausen, chief executive officer of Horizon Health Care Inc. in Howard.

"So far so good," said Lori Kollmann, a physician's assistant in Howard who has been involved in education programs with video-conferencing.

"It works real well for continuing education," she said. "It saves time off work. It gets us back sooner with our patients."

"Having video will reduce the isolation factors for our health care providers," said Scott Weatherill, information technology supervisor for Horizon Health Care. "It will act as a recruitment tool and give us a connection to the outside world."

