

\$25 million network to aid rural hospitals

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NAPERVILLE -- Just as you can download full-length movies with speedy broadband Internet service at home, small hospitals in rural Illinois soon will be able to quickly send MRI scans and consult distant Chicagoland doctors through a new fiber-optic health network.

A coalition of 12 universities and health-care providers has received a three-year, \$21 million grant from the Federal Communications Commission to set up the statewide system they're calling the Illinois Rural Health Network. Leading the coalition is Northern Illinois University, which announced the project Wednesday at its Naperville campus.

The initial cost is \$25 million to install a combination of fiber-optic cable and wireless broadband Internet service, plus about \$3 million per year afterward to maintain it. Officials are seeking state and private funding to match the federal grant.

Walter Czerniak, associate vice president for information technology at NIU, said the project takes the expertise of Chicago and suburban hospitals to patients throughout the state.

"The people who invented the wheel can now share it with the people who can't afford it," he said.

That includes hospitals that can't pay for radiology, neurology or cardiology specialists -- and patients who are too fragile to travel long distances to see those specialists.

Rural hospitals often ship patients with complex cases to the city as a precaution, but quicker diagnostic capabilities would cut down on unnecessary trips, said Roger Holloway, president of the Illinois Rural Health Association.

He said psychiatrists in particular are hard to come by in remote parts of the state.

"What really brings a rural hospital to its knees is a psychiatric patient in the ER because that's not the typical patient they see," he said, adding that a suicidal patient requires the attention of almost every emergency staff member in a small-town hospital. "If I'm a patient with congestive heart failure ... that takes away from the care I get."

Michael Flora, president and CEO of Ben Gordon Mental Health Center in DeKalb, said he has the luxury of an on-staff psychiatrist specializing in children and adolescents. In real time, she could use the network to consult with a 5-year-old downstate and a teen in the emergency room across the street, without leaving her office and the 20 people in her waiting room.

So far, 85 institutions have signed on as charter network members, including Delnor-Community Hospital in Geneva, but the service will be open to every hospital in the state, Czerniak said.

Czerniak hopes to have the northern half of the state online by early 2009 and the rest of the state by 2011.

The project does not need approval from the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board because it counts as infrastructure, he said.