

## Grant offers rural hospitals link to specialists

By [Kate Clements](#)

Thursday November 29, 2007

SPRINGFIELD – Rural hospital patients will soon be able to see big-city specialists without leaving their beds, thanks to a \$21 million federal grant.

"It's a real investment in something that's vitally important to our state – decent health care for everyone, no matter where they live," said Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn, who announced the Federal Communications Commission grant on Wednesday.

The money will pay for a fiber-optic cable connection between 85 hospitals throughout the state. They include John and Mary E. Kirby Hospital in Monticello, Hoopston Community Hospital, Gibson Area Hospital and Health Services in Gibson City, Carle Clinic in Tuscola, Dr. John Warner Hospital in Clinton, Paris Community Hospital and the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Urbana.

"This allows critical access hospitals, which are in sparsely populated areas and traditionally don't have a lot of access to medical specialties, to be able to communicate with specialists in world-class centers with real-life, real-time video and sound connections," said Brad Schwartz, dean of the UI College of Medicine.

With such a connection, an urban specialist would be able to see a high-quality picture of the rural patient, ask him or her questions, and even ask the rural doctor to do certain things, such as listen to the heart and report the results, Schwartz explained.

"These connections can carry almost limitless electronic information, so you get a real picture of what somebody sees," Schwartz said.

The new Illinois Rural Health Network will also allow for almost instantaneous transfer of X-rays, MRIs, CT scans and other diagnostic test results, and it will help rural doctors and nurses consult with experts from around the state and even participate in training. Rural patients could also get secure, private psychiatric services.

"This will be a godsend for rural Illinois," said Roger Holloway, president of the Illinois Rural Health Association. "The opportunity to improve access to health care services through technology is something we have talked about a lot, and this project will make that a reality for many areas across the state. We are eagerly looking forward to the day when this comes online."

The northern half of the state should be ready in 18 months, and the rest of the locations will be ready in three years, according to a news release from Northern Illinois University.

NIU is leading the Illinois Rural HealthNet Consortium, the group of hospitals and universities that put the grant application together and will now be in charge of implementing the project. The UI College of Medicine and Carle Foundation Hospital are also members.