



## Grant to fund state health care network

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Thanks to a \$21 million federal grant, health care in Illinois soon might receive a telecommunications boost.

On Wednesday, a coalition of universities, hospitals and other health care organizations throughout the state announced the creation of a fiber-optic point-to-point wireless communications network, designed to boost health care options in many areas of Illinois.

Known as the Illinois Rural HealthNet, the network will be built using a grant obtained from the Federal Communications Commission.

The grant award was one of 69 such grants targeting the expansion of rural health care announced by the FCC Nov. 19.

The network will extend from Galena in the northwest to Metropolis at Illinois' far southern tip, serving 80 small towns and a few larger communities, including Geneva and DeKalb.

It initially will include 85 hospitals and clinics, but can be expanded as needed, organizers said Wednesday.

Participants in the northern half of the state should come online in the next 18 months, with the rest of the state targeted to be tied in within three years.

When fully operational, the network will allow participating health care organizations to expand the services that they offer, giving patients greater access to improved diagnostics.

But the network also will help hospitals serving suburban and urban communities, such as Delnor-Community Hospital in Geneva.

Hasi Smith, director of information systems at Delnor, said Delnor had been a key player in the Rural HealthNet effort, partnering with Swedish American Hospital in Rockford to provide health care-related guidance to Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, which was overseeing the development of the network.

She said that Delnor saw the network as an opportunity to advance telemedicine and so-called telehealth care throughout the region.

"It's all about efficiency," Smith said.

She noted that for patients who undergo medical imaging procedures, the system would be a boon, as it would enable health care organizations to send images and electronic records in minutes, rather than hours or days.

"If we don't have a specialist on site, how can we treat a patient when time is of the essence?" Smith said. "The answer lies in bandwidth, and this network gives us an opportunity."