

# Network connects hospitals across state

## Project will help rural health care

November 29, 2007

By [KATIE FOUTZ](#) Staff writer

Just as you can download full-length movies by broadband service at home, tiny hospitals in rural Illinois will be able to send MRI scans and consult distant Chicago-area doctors - with the federal government paying the Internet bills.

A coalition of 12 universities and health care providers received a three-year, \$21 million grant from the Federal Communications Commission to set up the statewide broadband 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.

So far, 85 institutions have signed on as charter network members, but the service will be open to every hospital in the state, Czerniak said. Delnor Community Hospital in Geneva is the member closest to Naperville. Czerniak hopes to have the northern half of the state online by early 2009 and the rest of the state by 2011.