

COLORADO TELEHEALTH NETWORK



Steve Ward, FACHE, VP for Rural Health and Hospitals, Colorado Hospital Association

“A new truth” for Colorado Telehealth

Colorado is embarking on an initiative to create a statewide high speed fiber optic data transmission network for health care providers. Now that's a statement we've heard over the past 20 years—and after countless hours of discussion and meetings around this subject, Colorado still hasn't seen any results.

The Colorado Hospital Association (CHA) is taking action and has developed a three-year initiative to establish one of the country's largest and most complete telehealth networks. Stemming from a Federal Communications Commission Rural Health Pilot Program, CHA has received \$4.6 million in federal funding with a 15 percent match from participating health care providers. In a collaborative move with the Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council, this total rises to \$9.8 million in federal funding, with an overall budget in excess of \$11 million to be spent lighting fiber for rural hospitals, clinics and mental health clinics to transmit data between health care providers.

As of July 28, 50 rural hospitals (100 percent), 22 metropolitan hospitals, 118 rural clinics and approximately 170 mental health care clinics have signed letters of agency stating their interest in participating in the Colorado Telehealth Network.

“This represents more than 350 points of presence on the Colorado Telehealth Network,” said Steve Ward, project coordinator and CHA vice president of rural health and hospitals.

The federal award will allow for the connection of fiber optic cable and the installation of routers to participating facilities. Rural clinics will be provided with 4.5 mbps (megabit per second) connection, rural hospitals will get 40

mbps and micro metro hospitals will have 100 mbps. (Note: A T1 line is about 1.5 mbps). Some rural hospitals now have only two T1 lines coming into their facilities. The Telehealth Network will allow for the equivalent of about 26 T1 lines for transmission of medical data, for roughly the same monthly fee. The new connection will drastically reduce the time it takes to send images over the Internet. The Colorado Telehealth Network will connect with Front Range GigaPop and Internet2 (the world's most reliable and scalable internet provider network in the world). In addition, the network will also connect with the National LambdaRail, which has 32 wavelengths each capable of transmitting data at 10 billion bps per wavelength.

Dr. John Bender M.D., FAAFP, President-Elect of the Colorado Academy of Family Physicians comments, “Effectively sharing health information on a statewide level remains a cumbersome barrier to high quality and timely health care delivery. For the physicians, patients, and hospitals in our state, the Colorado Telehealth Network promises to become THE real-time, HIPAA compliant, health data exchange and communications solution. No system will be more secure, more capable, and more interconnected.”

Participation in the Telehealth Network through the FCC funding is limited to public and not-for-profit health care providers. However, that doesn't preclude for-profit facilities and clinics from participating on the network. More important the network encourages physician offices to accept the opportunities that the Colorado Telehealth Network offers. For-profit entities will be required to

pay for the installation of fiber and routing configuration but will be able to participate and connect to this high speed network. Primary care physicians and specialty physicians will soon be able to provide tele-consultations to remote rural areas. In addition, rural health care providers will now be able to electronically connect with metro tertiary centers.

Firewall protection and HIPAA requirements will be strictly adhered to in the transmission of medical data and images. The Colorado Telehealth Network is a sub-net work of the public Internet and will not incur background transmission clutter. It is a dedicated network for a specific purpose. The network does not disrupt or replace those networks that currently exist in larger systems. It simply allows them to connect to a more robust and secure statewide network.

The Colorado Telehealth Network initiative will begin lighting fiber in October 2008 and may be completed within the next two years. Medical application advisory committees and business operations advisory committees are currently being formed. These advisory committees will be responsible for the development of a menu of applications that can be specifically applied to geographic regions based on clinical indicators as well as operational efficiencies in the health care system as patients are transferred.

The Colorado Telehealth Network will support video conferencing for medical consultation and transmitting and receiving data for the broad range of clinical and informational needs of health care providers, including radiology, EMR, pathology,

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TELEHEALTH (CONT.)

echocardiograms, CT scans, MRO, electronic pharmacy, electronic ICU and more. It also provides access to interstate and intrastate medical education and telemedicine.

CHA President and CEO Steven Summer, noted that the Colorado Telehealth Network complements recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Health Care Reform (the 208 Commission). "This is a crucial component of efforts to improve access to quality health care—particularly in rural areas where it can be difficult for patients to access health care," he said.

Support for the Colorado Telehealth Network initiative comes from the State of Colorado, CHA, the CHA Rural Hospital Council, Colorado Rural Health Center, CORHIO, University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center, Banner Health, Front Range GigaPop, NCAR and National LambdaRail.

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