

UC receives \$22 million FCC telehealth grant

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The University of California, in partnership with a coalition of government agencies, health care providers and others, received a three-year, \$22 million award today (Nov. 20) from the Federal Communications Commission to help develop a new California Telehealth Network. The grant is part of the FCC's Rural Health Care Support Mechanism and will allow UC and its partners to begin to establish a statewide broadband telehealth network aimed at improving the rural health care infrastructure throughout California.

The University of California Office of the President, together with the UC Davis Health System, will manage the project on behalf of the state of California and a coalition of stakeholders that worked together to prepare the California proposal.

The coalition includes representatives from the Office of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger; California Public Utilities Commission; California Business, Transportation and Housing Agency; and the California Health and Human Services Agency. Participants also include the California State Rural Health Association, rural health networks and coalitions, the California Hospital Association, and other health care providers and partners.

This large and diverse group of partners will work together to create new telecommunications infrastructure, eventually allowing California's rural communities to access a broad range of technology-enhanced services to improve the quality of health care services. Up to \$8.6 million in additional financial commitments have been secured from the California Emerging Technology Fund and UnitedHealth Group Inc. to help support the successful implementation of the new telehealth network.

Collectively, the FCC award and other new resources will help California develop an effective, sustainable and forward-looking telehealth network, focusing first on rural communities and subsequently expanding to serve increasing numbers of California health providers in both rural and urban areas. Over the course of the project, the new network will connect more than 300 rural sites with each other, and with a network of specialty providers at academic medical centers and other nonprofit and for-profit health providers statewide. Strong emphasis will be placed on infrastructure development, telecommunications quality and technical support.

Creation of the California Telehealth Network is intended to improve access within rural and underserved areas to high quality, collaborative health services and to make new networking capability available for more California health providers. In addition, the California Telehealth Network will be developed for use as a resource for emergency services and disaster preparedness. Also, it will help fulfill one of the FCC's broader goals for this pilot program, by linking California providers to a nationwide broadband network dedicated to health care.

This new funding is particularly timely and will build upon a number of recent initiatives in California aimed at developing a statewide approach to telehealth, among them Schwarzenegger's executive orders S-23-06, S-21-06 and S-12-06, directing state resources to promote broadband access and increase use of health information technology; and last November's voter approval of Proposition 1D, an education bond providing the University of California with \$200 million for infrastructure to expand medical school enrollment and build and enhance telemedicine statewide.

"The University is pleased and honored to receive this new FCC grant on behalf of the state," said UC President Robert C. Dynes. "This new funding will enable the UC system to partner with a broad collation of partners in developing new technology-based programs to improve access to health services statewide."

The funding, part of the FCC's \$417 million national initiative, will also enable the project partners to:

- Create a network that provides state-of-the art technology and security; high levels of reliability, scalability and flexibility; and improved telecommunications quality for rural health providers;

- Increase the bandwidth capacity and number of telemedicine connections between California's health providers; and
- Build upon existing rural telemedicine networks and connect health care providers that are currently unconnected to telemedicine services.

“California faces huge challenges in improving access to health services in its rural communities,” said Dr. Cathryn Nation, UC associate vice president for Health Sciences and co-director for the project. “These new resources will be carefully invested to align with the governor’s broadband initiative and with UC’s efforts to employ new technologies to connect UC medical centers and physician faculty to new sites across the state.”

Telemedicine and UC

UC’s first telemedicine program began in 1992 with a tele-fetal monitoring link between the UC Davis Medical Center and a community hospital in Colusa. Since then, UC’s telemedicine efforts have grown to include a variety of innovative telemedicine applications, including video-based consultations, emergency department and intensive care unit consultations, teleradiology, video interpreting, and telehome health. Over the past 14 years, the UC Davis telemedicine program has completed more than 16,000 video-based clinical consultations.

In 2000, UC Davis established the Center for Health and Technology (www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/cht) to consolidate its telehealth projects, which include telemedicine, distance education and applied medical informatics. The center collaborates with health care professionals, IT experts, medical researchers and engineers to develop and evaluate information and telecommunications technologies that improve access to high-quality patient care, information resources and health education opportunities.

UC’s Telemedicine Learning Center at Davis teaches physicians, clinic coordinators, business executives and technicians how to establish effective telemedicine programs to meet the needs of patients in their communities. Since 1999, the learning center has trained more than 1,200 health care professionals. It also serves as an educational resource to staff at other telemedicine sites.

“UC Davis is strongly committed to expanding its telemedicine efforts and sharing the technical and training expertise needed to develop telecommunication linkages essential for a statewide telehealth network,” said Dr. Thomas Nesbitt, executive associate dean at the UC Davis School of Medicine and co-director for the project.

Using new technologies, other UC campuses have moved to develop telemedicine programs in various medical specialties and subspecialties. These efforts will be expanded substantially over the next several years to include an expanded array of specialties and providers. One exemplary program that will be part of these expansions was created at the UC Berkeley School of Optometry, and involves faculty optometrists who work with doctors at community clinics throughout California’s Central Valley to provide eye exams for thousands of low-income diabetic patients. Many of the patients are from the Latino population, which has rates of diabetes nearly three times higher than the general U.S. population and is at high risk for diabetic retinopathy, a sight-threatening side effect of the disease. www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2006/08/14_telemedicine.shtml

The UC Office of the President and UC Davis Health System have agreed to lead this FCC-funded project on behalf of a broad coalition of partners, all of whom are committed to a long-term vision for a statewide telehealth network that will improve California’s rural and underserved health care infrastructure.

See Office of the Governor news release: <http://gov.ca.gov/index.php?/press-release/8148>

For more information about the University of California:
www.universityofcalifornia.edu