



PRESS RELEASE  
For Immediate Release

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Gainesville, FL—The Rural Health Partnership of North Central Florida (RHP) recently received a three-year grant of \$180,000 per year from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). Grant funds will be used to improve and expand RHP's infrastructure, services and activities, and implement a pilot project for Medicaid patients.

RHP, a network of healthcare providers in nine rural counties of North Central Florida, currently survives on a slim budget of \$63,673 a year. The additional funds will be used in the RHP service area to reduce the number of persons without insurance by increasing enrollment in Medicaid and SCHIP programs, increase services to the uninsured, institute a voluntary physician referral program for rural communities, and increase the number of physicians practicing in the area. RHP will also investigate a regional electronic medical records system for its members.

A significant portion of the grant will be used to implement a pilot project that, according to RHP, will help decrease health disparities among the rural Medicaid and uninsured populations.

“The pilot project is based on the legislative vision of what the rural health networks can accomplish and the work done by another rural health network—the St. Johns River Rural Health Network (SJRRHN), which serves North East Florida,” said Jeff Feller, spokesperson for RHP and Chief Operating Officer of WellFlorida Council. Members of RHP wrote the grant which will be managed by WellFlorida Council as staff to the Partnership.

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In the example of SJRRHN’s pilot project, healthcare providers in the network are required to participate in Medicaid Reform, which includes enrollment in a Medicaid Managed Care Organization. The organization conducts the business functions and services that are more efficient if centralized. The network, SJRRHN, is responsible for provider and community relations. The primary care providers make decisions about patients and provide the authority, tools and incentives for their patients’ care.

“This model, which will be expanded and improved upon, blends the best principles of managed care with the cooperative aspects of the RHP. It will reflect the spirit of the Statewide Reform Initiative while preserving and strengthening the rural healthcare delivery system,” said Feller.

Initially, the project will target the current nine-county RHP service area, but this is proposed to grow by two neighboring rural counties. There are nearly 58,000 uninsured and 49,000 Medicaid eligible residents in this area—more than 35 percent of the region’s total population. By comparison, Florida’s total combined uninsured and Medicaid population account for only 20.2 percent of the total population.

“A robust rural health network will strengthen rural healthcare providers and rural healthcare systems by encouraging integration of activities across clinical, financial, technological and administrative functions,” said Feller.

RHP currently serves rural Alachua, Bradford, Columbia, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Levy, Suwannee and Union counties.

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