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Area health care facilities may get hooked to missing link

Staff reports

Four regional telehealth networks, including those that could serve residents in Coshocton and Muskingum counties and other surrounding areas, are among 69 projects nationwide receiving $417 million in federal funding through a Federal Communications Commission pilot program.

These projects will provide high-speed Internet connections to facilities in nearly half of Ohio's 88 counties, with the help of the Ohio Supercomputer Center Network (OSCnet) and allow for remote patient record sharing, diagnosing, and consultation to improve the quality of care to rural areas.

The projects are:

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The Southern Ohio Healthcare Network will receive $13,929,417 to provide connectivity to about 60 facilities by building or purchasing fiber-optic rings, as well as to provide connectivity to facilities outside the reach of the rings.

This regional network will impact 15 Ohio counties: Adams, Athens, Fayette, Gallia, Highland, Hocking, Jackson, Meigs, Morgan, Perry, Pike, Ross, Scioto, Vinton and Washington.

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The Northeast Ohio Regional Health Information Organization will receive $11,286,200 to expand and upgrade an existing network to connect approximately 19 medical facilities.

This regional network will impact 22 Ohio counties: Ashland, Ashtabula, Carroll, Columbiana, Coshocton, Cuyahoga, Erie, Geauga, Holmes, Huron, Lake, Lorain, Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Sandusky, Seneca, Stark, Summit, Trumbull, Tuscarawas and Wayne.

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A consortium of eight health care facilities in southeastern Ohio, Holzer Consolidated Health Systems, will receive $1,836,000 to upgrade its existing network to a broadband fiber-optic network. This regional network will initially impact Ohio's Gallia and Jackson counties.

Eventually, through a collaborative relationship with the Appalachian Regional Informatics Consortium Electronic Data Interchange project, the Holzer network plans to expand to facilities in West Virginia's Wood County and eight additional Ohio counties: Athens, Fairfield, Guernsey, Hocking, Muskingum, Ross, Scioto and Washington.

Genesis HealthCare System in Zanesville and Southeastern Ohio Regional Health in Cambridge would eventually be linked to the system.

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The statewide West Virginia Telehealth Alliance will receive $8.4 million to connect approximately 450 West Virginia health care facilities, reaching Internet2 through OSCnet connections to Marshall University in Huntington, W.Va.

U.S. Rep. Zack Space of Dover was able to help secure about $25 million for some of these initiatives, which overlap parts of his 18th Congressional District.

Ohio Governor Ted Strickland said the My Broadband Ohio plan aims to create sufficient broadband capacity throughout Ohio to ensure that all communities and all Ohioans can benefit from initiatives such as this.

"We are delighted to have the opportunity to work with the Ohio Supercomputer Center to build a health care network that will open the world of high-tech medical innovation to all of southern Ohio," said Tom Reid, project director for the Southern Ohio Health Care Network.

The Southern Ohio group, piloted by O'Bleness Health System in Athens and Adena Health System in Chillicothe, will include health centers and clinics in Crooksville, Malta and New Lexington.