

## **BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH:**

### **Future of area health care gets high-tech boost**

**By CHARLES OWENS**

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WELCH — A high-tech link between health care providers in the greater Huntington region and those in rural McDowell County will soon be enhanced.

U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., joined Marshall University President Stephen J. Kopp and Larry Malone, chairman of the West Virginia Telehealth Alliance, in announcing Monday the Metro Fiber Build project, which will provide an advanced broadband interconnection among Marshall University, Marshall's Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, St. Mary's Medical Center and Cabell-Huntington Hospital.

The project is expected to expand existing telemedicine links with the Tug River Health Association in McDowell County, which will be able to access remotely physicians and specialists from each of the three Huntington facilities.

"This is the future of rural health care," Rockefeller said. "We are on our way toward improving the delivery of medical services to West Virginia families, giving people greater access to the specialized care they need, and strengthening health education and research. This project is so full of promise for people in southwestern West Virginia, and I couldn't be happier that we're making it happen."

Tim Crofton, administrator of the Tug River Health Association, said the telemedicine upgrade is welcomed.

"We like to think of ourselves as the pioneers in telemedicine," Crofton said. "We were one of the first, if not the first, in (southern West Virginia)."

Crofton said telemedicine technology is already making a big difference at the Tug River Health Association. The agency operates health clinics in Gary, Northfork and Welch.

"That really is probably one of the most successful things we've done," Crofton said. "We do a lot of video conferencing. We have an exercise physiologist who provides (assistance) to individuals in our fitness program, and also a nutritionist who does the same thing at our nutrition center. So there is just a lot of untapped potential here, and hopefully help is on the way. I think it (the Metro Fiber Build Project) will be very, very helpful."

Malone said the new Metro Fiber Build initiative will provide for a better and faster connection with the Tug River Health Association in McDowell County.

Malone said the fiber build project not only will provide advanced broadband interconnection among the three Huntington institutions for the exchange of health information and health education purposes, but it also will allow rural health centers in McDowell and Lincoln counties to access remotely via telehealth to the physicians and specialists at the three interconnected facilities.

"Historically, there has been an advanced telecommunications network already established between Tug River, the Community Health Network of West Virginia, and Marshall University," Malone said. "Once the Huntington metro-fiber ring is complete, Tug River will have the ability to use specialists at Cabell-Huntington Hospital and St. Mary's Medical Center as well as Marshall University all through this single connection point. Finally, both Lincoln Primary and Tug Valley Health will be seeking to expand their existing broadband connectivity to 10 megs as part of a second RFP that currently is being prepared by the WVTA."