

## DAILY MAIL:

Tuesday September 29, 2009

### **Health care services to be connected**

by **George Hohmann**  
Daily Mail Business Editor

Sen. Jay Rockefeller announced a project to interconnect Huntington's major health care providers with high-speed broadband so their services will be more accessible to rural residents of southwestern West Virginia.

The "Metro Fiber Build" project 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, Rockefeller said.

The project also will connect Huntington's health care facilities with rural health centers - specifically, the Tug River Health Association's center at Keystone in McDowell County and the Lincoln Primary Care facility in Lincoln County. Citizens who use those rural facilities will have remote access to Huntington's top physicians and specialists.

It seems to be a part of the Appalachian culture that "people are sometimes reluctant to make themselves available to health care when it is in their interest," Rockefeller said. The West Virginia Democrat recalled that when he was a VISTA worker at Emmons in the 1960s, some residents wouldn't go to a hospital but would visit the nearby Lincoln County Primary Care Center.

A visit to a rural health care center doesn't require an overnight stay at a hotel and the atmosphere is friendly, Rockefeller said. The broadband project "means people will have a choice - they'll be able to remotely access physicians and have their questions answered," he said Monday at a press conference at the Marriott.

Marshall University President Stephen Kopp likened the quest for broadband to the construction of the nation's railroads and, later, the Interstate highway system. "This is the next generation connectivity," he said. "Without it you're off the map. If you have it, you're a player not just in health care but also in international commerce. This is the first of several projects coming to the state. It is absolutely critical for the state to have this connectivity."

Larry Malone, chairman of the West Virginia Telehealth Alliance, said project construction will begin in the next few weeks. The network should be up and running by June 2010. It will cost \$550,000 to build the fiber network and \$250,000 for the equipment to make it work, he said. Marshall University will manage the network.

Malone said the project is the first of several that will eventually connect about 300 health care locations across the state.

The statewide program was announced two years ago. Funding includes \$8.4 million provided by the Federal Communications Commission's rural health care pilot program, \$1 million provided by the state of West Virginia, and a 15 percent match provided by health care institutions, Malone said.