

GAZETTE:

September 28, 2009

Broadband network aims to improve health in southern counties

Marshall University and two Huntington hospitals are building a \$750,000 fiber-optic network designed to improve health care in Southern West Virginia, Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., announced Monday.

By [Eric Eyre](#)

Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Marshall University and two Huntington hospitals are building a \$750,000 fiber-optic network designed to improve health care in Southern West Virginia, Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., announced Monday.

The Metro Fiber Build project will establish a high-speed broadband connection between Marshall's Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, St. Mary's Medical Center and Cabell Huntington Hospital.

Patients seeking care at rural health centers, such as Lincoln Primary Care in Lincoln County and Tug River Health Association in McDowell County, will be able to receive care remotely from physicians and specialists at Marshall's medical school and the Huntington hospitals.

"It's really a roundhouse effort to reach out to people in southwestern West Virginia," Rockefeller said Monday during the West Virginia Broadband Summit in Charleston. "This means people will have a choice and access on a remote basis to a physician. This is a massive step forward."

The network's construction starts in several weeks, and the project is expected to be finished by June.

The Huntington project is one of several planned by the West Virginia Telehealth Alliance, which has \$8.4 million in federal funds and another \$1 million in state money to improve computer networks at 300 rural hospitals and clinics across the state.

Rockefeller said many rural West Virginia patients are reluctant to seek care at large hospitals, including the state's four U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals.

The "telemedicine" initiative will allow patients to go local health centers, where they can consult over the Internet -- usually via a Web cam -- with physician specialists, such as psychiatrists and cardiologists, work at university hospitals and other large medical centers.

Someday, patients also may be able to use their home computers to access specialty care, said Larry Malone, who directs the state Telehealth Alliance.

Malone said the network would foster an increase in the use of electronic medical records. Health-care institutions also will likely share more public health-care data, he said.

"The development of this health network will help enhance health-care delivery to rural, medically underserved regions using telehealth/telemedicine technologies," Malone said.

Marshall University President Stephen Kopp said he spearheaded a similar statewide medical telecommunications initiative in Michigan 10 years ago. He predicted the expanded fiber-optic network in Huntington would dramatically improve health care for patients throughout the region.

"Access to the highest-quality medical care is critical," Kopp said. "This project has tremendous strategic implications for education, research and clinical care in our community and the entire region."

Also Monday, Rockefeller said he continues to push private telecommunications companies to expand computer broadband service into rural West Virginia. Rockefeller said the companies target urban areas where customers are concentrated.

"With broadband, we can transform education, improve health care, shore up business and employment opportunities, foster new dialogue and most importantly, improve our economy," Rockefeller said.

"I believe we can harness the power of the digital age to build the infrastructure that for generations to come will serve as our economic engine, strengthen our bonds and offer a new range of opportunity to West Virginians."

One-fifth of West Virginia households don't have access to broadband, Rockefeller said. A Federal Communications Commission study shows that West Virginia is among five states with the lowest broadband penetration rates in the nation.

"This is profoundly unacceptable," Rockefeller said. "And it is time to do something about it."

The federal economic stimulus package includes \$7.2 billion to expand broadband across the U.S.

West Virginia groups -- including schools, businesses, nonprofits, and local and state government agencies -- have filed 80 applications for broadband stimulus funds, said Lawrence Strickling, an assistant secretary with U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

The groups requested nearly \$216 million for projects.

The largest single request -- \$126 million -- came from the governor's office. The state project calls for expanding the West Virginia's fiber-optic network by 900 miles.

Frontier Communications, which plans to purchase Verizon's wire lines in West Virginia and other states and expand broadband services, also has asked for stimulus funds.

The government expects to distribute broadband grants later this year.

Strickling said West Virginia already has taken important steps to make broadband available throughout the state.

"Innovation has to move beyond Silicon Valley and become a reality along Main Street America," said Strickling, a keynote speaker at Monday's conference.

West Virginia Commerce Secretary Kelley Goes, who also serves as chairwoman of the state Broadband Council, said she and Gov. Joe Manchin remain committed to the goal of making broadband available to all West Virginians by the end of 2010.

The Discover Real West Virginia Foundation hosted Monday's summit at the Charleston Marriott.