

\$16 million grant makes WNY diabetes 'Beacon'

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A \$16.1 million federal economic-stimulus grant will mean an unprecedented level of preventive care for 60,000 diabetes patients in Western New York, as medical providers and insurers collaborate to use technology to keep patients on top of their treatment. What's more, local leaders say, the funding -- the largest of 15 electronic medical records grants the Obama administration announced Tuesday -- is proof that the region is well on its way to becoming a showcase in the burgeoning field of health information technology.

Western New York will become what the Obama administration calls a "Beacon Community" in the use of electronic medical records -- an example for the rest of the country.

"This is a great leap forward for Western New York and the Western New York health care leadership," said Rep. Brian Higgins, D-Buffalo. "This would not have happened if not for the foundation of **HEALTHeLINK**," the local consortium of medical providers and insurers that has already spent nearly \$20 million to link local patients, doctors and insurers.

That investment means that in Western New York -- unlike many other areas nationwide -- quick access to electronic medical records will help emergency room physicians give patients the right treatment and the right prescriptions, while cutting back on wasteful duplication of paperwork.

Through use of the federal money, local diabetics will be fully integrated into an electronic network that will alert them to the need for periodic blood tests and eye exams, and that will make sure that every local health care provider who sees them knows about -- and accounts for -- their condition.

"Patients, and all of us really, need repeated reminders of what kind of care they need," said Dr. Raghu Ram, senior medical director for BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York, which is part of the consortium that received the grant.

The grant is hugely important for at least two reasons, health providers said:

Western New York is home to an unusually high number of diabetics.

Diabetes, if left untreated, will spiral into other conditions -- some costly and traumatic, such as vision loss, and some deadly, such as kidney failure.

"This is a fantastic use of federal stimulus dollars putting Buffalo at the forefront of patient care," said Rep. Louise M. Slaughter, D-Fairport.

Developing an electronic system to keep diabetes patients healthy is an extension of the work that has been done for years in Western New York to make sure that modern technology provides doctors and patients with the best, most current patient information possible.

"What we're all about is saving lives and saving money by making critical information available at the point of care," said Daniel E. Porreca, executive director of **HEALTHeLINK**.

The local effort started a decade ago and has cost upward of \$40 million in total, with about half of that spent by **HEALTHeLINK** since its formation in 2006, Porreca said. **HEALTHeLINK** pulls together all the region's major hospitals and all its major insurers to share patient information electronically.

While that might sound like common sense, local health providers said that's by no means the national norm. In some other locales, competing hospitals and competing insurers are reluctant to share information -- even though such sharing can have a dramatic impact on the quality and cost of health care.

For example, the use of electronic medical records can dramatically cut down on dangerous prescription errors -- so much so that experts believe record sharing could reduce hospital admissions by 5 percent, said Dr. Michael W. Cropp, president and chief executive officer of Independent Health and chairman of the **HEALTHeLINK** board. The sharing of records cuts costs in another way, too.

"There's much less duplication of lab tests because of this system," Cropp said.

HEALTHeLINK won the federal grant along with 14 other organizations, including the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota and Geisinger Health System in Pennsylvania. While several of the grant recipients got nearly as much as the local group, its amount was the largest. "They were looking for communities that had already made that investment in electronic medical records and that wanted to accelerate their effort," Porreca said. "This is really a tribute to the leaders of that collaboration."

Vice President Biden announced the grants at a news conference. "These pioneering communities are going to lead the way in bringing smarter, lower-cost health care to all Americans through use of electronic health records," he said.

The White House said the grants will create 1,100 jobs, but Cropp and others said the grant's real economic impact will come in the long term, when Western New York's lower health care costs increasingly appeal to employers looking for a good place to do business.

Sen. Charles E. Schumer, D-N.Y., agreed that the grant and the local leadership on electronic medical records would help the local economy.

"This is proof positive that the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus will not only be on the cutting edge of electronic medicine," he said, "but will be an important force for economic development and job creation in Western New York."

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