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Adirondack health-care project set to launch

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POSTED: October 14, 2009

Doctors across the Adirondacks will receive more money from both the state and private health insurance companies in return for agreeing to meet certain patient-care benchmarks under a unique program set to launch in January.

The Adirondack Regional Medical Home Pilot is designed to improve the quality of care while also addressing the shortage of primary-care physicians in the region.

"This is a project that came out of the inability of North Country communities to recruit and retain qualified primary-care physicians, to the extent that it's hindering access to health care in the entire region," said Dr. William Viscardo, Adirondack Medical Center's chief medical officer.

Under the agreement, which was unveiled Tuesday at an event in Lake George, the 40 health-care providers in Clinton, Essex, Franklin and Hamilton counties and contiguous areas who've agreed to take part in the pilot project will receive an extra \$7 per patient per month.

Dr. John Rugge, CEO of the Hudson Headwaters Health Network, said the money will be used to establish what he called "care teams" that will take responsibility for coordinating patient care, providing preventative services and managing chronic diseases. The additional reimbursement will also be used to upgrade electronic medical record keeping and provide increased compensation to physicians "because we're way below market and can't compete with other regions," Rugge said.

Health-care providers participating in the pilot will have to meet several standards of care, including a reduction in hospital readmission rates.

The increased reimbursement is expected to be offset by decreased costs in emergency room visits, prescription drugs, hospital admissions and an overall increase in patient health.

Viscardo said the pilot project changes the way health care is delivered from a volume-based system to an outcome-based system.

"The way our current system is, what a physician gets reimbursed is not necessarily dependent on how the person did," he said. "In other words, the incentives aren't aligned right now with the pay. The 'medical home' system tries to align the incentives to the pay and the outcomes."

Viscardo is optimistic that the additional compensation will help in physician recruitment.

"We lost 14 doctors in 17 months at one point," he said of the Tri-Lakes area. "We're still struggling to recruit. But this has given us hope. This is truly a giant conglomerate of people that have come together to try and make this work."

The primary-care providers taking part in the pilot so far include Champlain Valley Physicians Hospital and physicians in the Plattsburgh area, Elizabethtown Community Hospital, AMC and the Trudeau Health System, Hudson Headwaters, which is based in Queensbury but has three clinics in Essex County, Inter-lakes Health in Ticonderoga and the Smith House Health Care Center in Willsboro.

Participating payers include the state, through Medicaid and its civil service program, and several private insurers: Empire Blue Cross, Fidelis Care, MVP Healthcare, United Healthcare and Capital District Physicians' Health Plan. Organizers are still working with Excellus and Blue Shield of Northeastern New York. Rugge said he's hopeful that the federal government, through Medicare, will eventually join the program.

The current state budget provided \$4.5 million in financial support for the program over its first 18 months. The state is also providing \$14 million in grants to providers participating in the program to use in purchasing electronic medical record keeping equipment.

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