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Landmark health initiative announced in Adirondacks

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LAKE GEORGE, N.Y. -- It's being hailed a landmark deal.

On Tuesday, dozens of health care industry professionals announced the formation of the Adirondack Region Medical Home Pilot, a coalition including providers, hospitals, and insurance companies working together to improve patient care.

Primary doctors would focus on preventative care, begin electronic record keeping, and get bonuses for meeting certain benchmarks for patient care.

"Better patient satisfaction, better quality, better access, and I really do believe we can get some cost savings, as well," says Dr. Dennis Weaver, President of EastPoint Health, a consultant on the design and implementation of the project.

Participating doctors would be required to set an action plan for improving the health of their patients. Within six months, they would have to begin using electronic records and computers to write prescriptions. Within the program's first year, they would have to meet various standards for patient-centered medical homes, including physician follow-up, coordinated care among the doctors in a particular provider group, and targeted blood pressure and blood sugar levels for their patients.

Dr. John Rugge of Hudson Headwaters Health Network, who helped spearhead the pilot program nearly two years ago, says the agreement also provides monetary incentives for participating doctors. He says they would receive \$7 per patient on a monthly basis, enough to offset the cost of implementing new policies and procedures. Over the course of a year, the incentives would add up to as much as \$10 million.

"This is going to be a bang-up success," Rugge says.

Similar programs across the country have seen hospital admissions drop by 20 percent, total medical costs drop by seven percent, and more patients saying they're satisfied with the quality of the care they receive. But none of the programs is as large as the one in the Adirondacks, which will include 40 practices--representing 125 physicians and 85 physician assistants and nurse practitioners--four hospitals, seven commercial health plans, and various state groups.

"There's a lot of interest and enthusiasm in the model," says Phyllis Torda with the National Committee for Quality Assurance. "This region will be a national leader in demonstrating the model."

But in order for the program to work, there has to be broadband access. It's estimated that no more than half of the people in Clinton, Essex, Franklin, and Hamilton counties--where the program would serve--has access to high-speed Internet. Experts say even where it does exist, in some places it's spotty at best.

Garry Douglas of the Plattsburgh North Country Chamber of Commerce says efforts are underway to apply for and use \$22 million in federal stimulus money to expand broadband in those areas next year.

That would coincide with the launch date for Adirondack medical program, which is set for Jan. 1.

"It's not just a medical home here and not there," says New York State Health Commissioner Dr. Richard Daines. "It's a whole region where we create a virtual medical care organization."

Organizers hope this kind of reform will take hold on the national stage, too. As the debate continues in Capitol Hill, local players in the health care industry say real change is starting right here at home.

"It's really only this kind of reform that will really save money," Ruge says. "Just moving the deck chairs around and changing the insurance rules won't make health care more efficient, won't make it more affordable."



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