

The Post-Star

## Sharing medical records to improve care

By MAURY THOMPSON [thompson@poststar.com](mailto:thompson@poststar.com) | Posted: Tuesday, October 13, 2009 6:15 pm

If you need flu shots and live in the Adirondacks, by this time next year you might be receiving an e-mail reminder from your doctor to stop by the office.

If you have a child running a 103-degree temperature at 5 a.m., you could have a number to call of a personal physician who would advise you whether to go to the emergency room.

These are among the features of a new regional health care project announced Tuesday at a summit meeting at the Warren County Municipal Center in Queensbury.

The new "medical home" program will cover Clinton, Essex, Hamilton, Franklin and northern Warren counties.

The concept harkens back to the days of having a family doctor who tended to virtually all of a family's medical needs and knew patients' life histories, said state Health Commissioner Richard Daines.

Under the program, which will be phased in beginning in January, every patient will have a designated physician to call when necessary.

What will be different, Daines said, is that, instead of the doctor keeping information in his head, doctors and staff will compile patient information from a shared database of health centers, hospitals and health insurance companies.

Patients will be reminded via e-mail or telephone when preventative or follow-up care is needed.

"We know the electronic records now will be able to flag for us all of those people who, because of age or because of illness, need a flu shot," said Dr. John Rugge, CEO of Hudson Headwaters Health Network.

If an e-mail or phone call isn't answered, health centers will go so far as to send someone to the patient's home to deliver the message in person, Rugge said.

The goal is to reduce health care costs over time, because patients are hospitalized less and make fewer visits to the emergency room when their care is managed better and they know where to turn for care.

"The key word in this project is cooperation, and the goal is better health care," said state Sen. Elizabeth Little, R-Queensbury.

Area medical providers and state officials have been discussing the concept for about two years as an outgrowth of talks about how to deal with a shortage of doctors in the Adirondacks, Daines said.

The program doesn't deal specifically with the issue of people who are uninsured, but it makes local health care systems more financially viable in order to care for all.

"You can have all the health insurance in the world, but you don't have a place to go if you don't have a provider," said Garry Douglas, president and CEO of the Plattsburgh North County Chamber of Commerce.

The regional program, covering from Lake George north to the Canadian border, is meant to be a model for rural areas in the rest of the state and nation to follow.

To make the program possible, the state passed legislation exempting health centers, hospitals and insurance companies from anti-trust laws, so they can share information.

The state also is providing about \$10 million in grants, plus additional Medicaid funding, to launch the program.

As of Tuesday, all but two major regional health insurance companies - Excellus Blue Cross Blue Shield and Blue Shield of Northeastern New York - had agreed to participate, Rugge said.

Hudson Headwaters has set an Oct. 22 deadline for the two companies to agree to participate, or Hudson Headwaters will stop accepting those plans, he said.

Contacted later on Tuesday, representatives of both companies said they support the concept and hope to reach an agreement.

Fidelis Care, United, Empire Blue Cross and Blue Shield, Capital District Physicians Health Plan and MVP Health Care all have agreed to participate, starting Jan. 1, Rugge said.

Participating health plans, as well as the state Medicaid program, would pay an extra \$7 per patient per month for five years, an estimated \$8.5 million annually, Rugge said.

The program includes the following medical providers: Hudson Headwaters, which runs health centers in Warren, Saratoga, Essex and Hamilton counties; Adirondack Medical Center and Trudeau Health Systems in Saranac Lake; Champlain Valley Physicians Hospital and affiliated doctors in the Plattsburgh area; Elizabethtown Community Hospital; Interlakes Health in Ticonderoga; and Smith House Health Care Center in Willsboro.

Glens Falls Hospital will share in a medical records technology grant related to the program, but its health centers and doctors will not be among those receiving additional monthly payments to coordinate care.

State Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward, R-Willsboro, said she hopes the program can be expanded to include Glens Falls Hospital.

Hudson Headwaters and other health centers will hire additional staff to run the program, but exactly how many new jobs will be created has not been determined.

"We think that every physician is likely to have at least one mid-level practitioner working with him or her - that there will be several nurses for every physician and that there will be a care manager and health educator for every few physicians," Rugge said. "So I've not done the arithmetic exactly how many more jobs that means, but it means more people on the case in primary care."

The program is also meant to make it easier for the elderly to stay in their homes or with family instead of entering a nursing home, Rugge said.

"We want to have the time and the ability to take care of people wherever they are. And if it's a choice between seeing somebody in a nursing home and seeing somebody in their own home, we'll pick the latter," he said.

In order for the new program to be successful, it is essential that the federal government approve an application for federal stimulus funding for a regional broadband system, said Douglas, the chamber executive.