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Program links hospitals, patient files

\$200,000 in grants to help connect rural health providers to state network

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By **Teresa Moss**

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A newly created program will award nearly \$200,000 to Arkansas' small and rural hospitals for the connection to a statewide health-records system, the Delta Regional Authority and Arkansas Office of Health Information Technology announced Thursday.

Nineteen hospitals with fewer than 49 beds will have an opportunity to apply for awards up to \$10,000 through the State Health Alliance for Records Exchanges Connectivity Program. The program is funded by both the authority and the office of health information technology.

"These hospitals and our communities will be connected to better health care," authority co-Chairman Chris Masingill said. "We are very proud of this investment and that we were able to set up and help the Delta along with the state."

The Delta authority has committed \$125,320 to the program. Funds from the authority will be used to fund 12 small or rural hospitals located in the Delta region. Another \$70,000 from the office of health will be committed to seven eligible hospitals outside the Delta.

The State Health Alliance for Records Exchange is an electronic health-records system that allows healthcare providers to share patient information in a secure and electronic format, said Ray Scott, office of health information technology director.

"We are trying to allow a patient's health-care records to follow them from one place to the next," Scott said. "We'll have our mobile technology on our hip and our financial information is on our debit card, but the most critical information that we need is our health-care information."

The office of health information technology received a \$7.9 million federal grant in 2009 to set up the electronic system, Scott said. He said the first step was to provide a way for health-care providers to securely email health records to one another.

"When a doctor or a nurse attaches a person's medication history and sends it to a recipient, they need to be assured that the person is who they say they are and that the email is going to them and only them," Scott said.

Scott said the office validated the identity of everyone who uses the secure system to send information.

The office moved forward with a second step in the records exchange in September 2012, Scott said. He said the second phase includes pushing specific patient information from provider's computer systems to the state record exchange.

"It is able to move the records out of a system and share it with another healthcare provider,"

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Scott said. "It is about making sure that the information a provider needs about a patient is there when they need it."

Christy Williams, spokesman for the office of health information technology, said there are currently 116 healthcare sites in the state in various stages of connecting to the exchange. Six of those sites are live, according to the office's website.

The Family Medicine Clinic in Harrison is one of those six sites. The clinic is part of the North Arkansas Regional Medical Center System, which includes a hospital and several clinics.

John Leslie, a doctor at the clinic, said using the exchange is a more efficient way to share information.

"Typically if we are trying to get records from other doctors or locations, we have to sign a release, fax that to the facility and then the records have to be faxed back to us," Leslie said. He said now he can get on his computer and pull patient information, if it is on the exchange.

The exchange also helps reduce duplication of tests such as lab work, Leslie said.

The costs for small or rural hospitals to connect to the system can be \$6,000 to \$15,000, a news release from the agencies states. Awards from the program could be awarded to hospitals by the end of the year, Scott said.

Hospitals must be classified as a critical-access or small rural hospital by the Arkansas Department of Health's Office of Rural Health and Primary Care to be eligible, Williams said. Critical-access hospitals in the state have 25 beds or fewer, Williams said. She said small rural hospitals have between 25 and 49 beds.

Williams said hospitals eligible for the awards include: Ashley County Medical Center, Bradley County Medical Center, Chicot Memorial Hospital, Community Medical Center of Izard County, Dallas County Medical Center, Delta Memorial Hospital, DeWitt Hospital and Nursing Home, Drew Memorial Hospital, Five Rivers Medical Center, Fulton County Hospital, McGehee-Desha County Hospital, Booneville Community Hospital, Howard Memorial Hospital, Chambers Memorial Hospital, Little River Memorial Hospital, Magnolia Regional Medical Center, Mena Medical Center and Ozark Health Medical Center.

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