

Two health education centers will be the first formed in Nebraska as part of a three-year, \$2.08 million federal grant that was awarded in 2001 to the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

The centers are being formed through the federal Area Health Education Center (AHEC) program, through which medical schools and community centers cooperate to recruit and train health-care professionals to serve in rural areas.

This is Nebraska's first AHEC grant. Over the next year, the Central Nebraska AHEC will be formed to support a 28-county area around Grand Island. A Northeast Nebraska AHEC will take shape around Norfolk in 2002-2003.

"Nebraska's reputation as an innovator in addressing rural health concerns is recognized by this award," said Michael Sitorius, M.D., chairman of the

AHEC GRANT BRINGS HEALTH-CARE TO 28

rural counties

UNMC department of family medicine and director of the AHEC program in Nebraska.



OUTREACH

by Bill O'Neill

"This is the beginning of what we anticipate will be a statewide network. We view the centers as a way to augment what the state, university and rural communities already are doing to recruit, educate and train students to practice in rural Nebraska. We look forward to partnering with rural communities to educate students and practitioners for rural health care."

UNMC was awarded the grant through a competitive process. Dr. Sitorius, a Cozad native, said the Nebraska congressional delegation and state officials — including Gov. Mike Johanns — were supportive of UNMC's funding application for the centers.

UNMC formalized its commitment to rural Nebraska nearly a decade ago when it formed the Rural Health Education Network (RHEN), which has begun several programs — including eighth-grade science meets and the highly successful Rural Health Opportunities Program (RHOP) — to address rural health-care shortages.

"AHEC will build on the success of RHEN and will provide for more community decision-making, in terms of their health-care needs and resources," said Roxanna Jokela, coordinator of RHEN and deputy director of the UNMC AHEC program.

The AHEC grant comes after extensive discussions among UNMC officials, health-care providers around Grand Island and Norfolk, and other agency officials in those areas. Twenty-eight counties will be served by the Central Nebraska AHEC. Each



State Sen. Doug Cunningham of Wausa, right, visits with Roger Wiese of O'Neill during the first AHEC State Advisory Board Meeting. Both men are members of the board.

Nebraska AHEC will have its own executive director and board of directors. Sarah Cunningham, Ph.D., is the Central Nebraska AHEC executive director.

"The areas we identify for development will be those which have been noted by our constituents as those of highest need, or those which they believe will be of highest need in our 28-county area," said Marie de Martinez, vice president for planning and development at St. Francis Medical Center in Grand Island. "We have already held meetings in which we have asked health-care providers and public health representatives to identify their areas of greatest need. So far, physicians, radiation technologists, respiratory therapists, mental-health providers and dentists have been determined to be areas of highest need.

"It will be incumbent upon the executive director and her board of directors to maintain communication with these health-care representatives in central Nebraska. We must stay ahead of the curve in developing interest and enthusiasm in people interested in entering health-care professions. We have already identified directors with varied backgrounds who are committed to this project and will assist in its implementation."

The grant stipulates that 75 percent of the money must go to the rural Nebraska sites, while the remaining 25 percent can go toward support provided at the UNMC campus in Omaha.

Of the \$2.08 million over the three years, \$536,788 has been awarded for the first year, when the Central Nebraska AHEC will be formed. In 2002-2003, about \$750,000 will be used to continue to support the central Nebraska site and to form the Northeast Nebraska AHEC.

"We're excited," Dr. Sitorius said. "Rural health is an important part of our mission as the state's health science center. This is another way in which we can reach out to the whole state." d