

AHECs strengthen outreach efforts; UNMC stretches 500 miles wide

By Lisa Spellman

In 1990, the Nebraska Legislature provided start-up funds for the development of the Rural Health Education Network.

The goal: To change how and where health science students are educated by establishing partnerships among rural communities, primary health care providers, health care institutions, higher education, and the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

To support this goal and add the presence of an outreach arm across the state, UNMC applied and was approved for federal funding through the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) in 2001 to develop Area Health Education Centers.

Through their local presence, AHECs are able to expose rural youths to careers in the health sciences and create a way for schools and community centers to recruit and train health professionals to serve in rural areas.

Today, the state continues to provide annual support of more than \$1 million for rural education and outreach programs.

“The AHECs are a natural extension of the work of the Rural Health Education Network (RHEN),” said Roxanna Jokela, director of RHEN and deputy director of the Nebraska AHEC Program Office.

“RHEN has truly built a solid foundation of community support and collaboration,” she said. “Many thanks goes to the efforts and commitment of our network of volunteer preceptors across the state and the communities for their support of students and special way in which they make each one feel at home.”

Currently there are three AHECs in Nebraska: the Northern Nebraska AHEC serves more than 223,000 people in 26 counties; the Central Nebraska AHEC

serves more than 365,000 people in 35 counties; and the Panhandle Nebraska AHEC serves nearly 100,000 people in 14 counties. Recently, HRSA announced funding for two additional AHEC’s – in Omaha and southeast Nebraska.

“Since opening in January 2003, we have developed a variety of programs and services that are working to meet the needs of Northern Nebraska,” said Gretchen Forsell,

Panhandle AHEC Area

14 Counties

Total Population: 99,205

Square Miles: 16,870



Central Nebraska AHEC Area

35 Counties

Total Population: 365,249

Square Miles: 26,655

executive director of the NNAHEC.

To reach out to area youths, the NNAHEC has offered summer health career camps and job shadowing opportunities, and has created a coloring book for elementary students that showcases more than 28 health professions, Forsell said.

The NNAHEC also has provided 60 programs for health professionals in the area, after learning through a survey that they wanted more continuing education opportunities locally.

The CN-AHEC is one of 10 demonstration sites nationwide for *Hablamos Juntos*, a project funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The goal of the project is to develop affordable language service models at the 10 sites to improve the quality of health care for Latinos.

“Recent studies have shown that as many as one in five Latino patients who speak limited or no English do not seek care when they need it,” said Sarah Cunningham, Ph.D., executive director of the CN-AHEC.

Dr. Cunningham said that this often leads to patients who wait until their health problems become acute before seeking care.

In an effort to provide continuing education opportunities for health professionals in their region, Dr. Cunningham said the CN-AHEC sponsors bioterrorism and telehealth conferences and is currently assessing the language

and interpreter skills of health care interpreters to identify areas for potential growth.

The CN-AHEC also has played a role in getting the Telehealth Network set up, she said.

“Through the Telehealth Network, we have been able to provide continuing education workshops on pain management, tobacco prevention and communicating across cultures in the form of satellite broadcasts from the School of Public Health at the University of New York-Albany and the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha,” Dr. Cunningham said.

To promote awareness among youth about the variety of health care career opportunities, Dr. Cunningham said the CN-AHEC also sponsors summer health career camps and a puppet show developed by four ninth-grade Grand Island students. The puppet show promotes understanding of the non-traditional and multi-cultural roles in health care, via puppets to real-life professional role models.

“We have been so pleased with the dedication and energy of the Central and Northern Nebraska AHEC,” said Jokela.

“In just three short years the dedication of their staff and board of directors deserve all the recognition for a job well done,” she said. “With plans for the Panhandle AHEC, just funded in September 2004, we are taking one more giant step in reaching across Nebraska as a 500-mile campus.” ■

