

WEST CENTRAL TRIBUNE *Online*

New health education grant is 'mixed blessing' for regional center

By Anne Polta

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WILLMAR — Minnesota's network of Area Health Education Centers has received a \$3.4 million federal grant to continue its work of developing and training health care professionals in the state's rural areas.

The funding, which was awarded to the University of Minnesota Academic Health Center, was announced last week. The money comes through the Bureau of Health Professions in the Health Resources and Services Administration, which provides federal dollars matched with university and local resources to support the development of the rural health care work force.

With the grant, the Minnesota Area Health Education Centers will be able to expand from four to six regions of the state. Over the next two years, centers will be added in southeastern Minnesota and in north Minneapolis.

For the Southern Minnesota Area Health Education Center, which covers 26 counties in southern and southwestern Minnesota, it means more funding for the current fiscal year, said Kathy Huntley, the regional center's executive director.

The creation of a southeastern Minnesota AHEC also will reduce the size of the Southern Minnesota AHEC from 26 to 21 counties next fall.

This latest federal grant, however, is "a mixed blessing for our region," Huntley said.

Because the grant is designated for model, or new, AHEC programs, the Southern Minnesota AHEC will no longer be eligible for a portion of it when the fiscal year ends next Aug. 31, she said.

"So we will be very dependent on other sources of funds," Huntley said. "Of course we're looking at all options."

She said approval for two small grant applications is pending. "If that comes through, we'll have a little bit," she said.

The Southern Minnesota AHEC also received a \$25,000 grant this month from the Wal-Mart Foundation that will help continue outreach to the region's high school students.

The Area Health Education Center — the second one in the state — was established in 2004. Its headquarters are in Willmar, but it's active across the region, working with school-aged youths to foster an interest in health care careers and developing rural training opportunities for students in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, advanced-practice nursing and other health care professions.

It's hoped that by encouraging home-grown talent and giving students in the health professions a firsthand chance to experience rural practice, they'll settle in rural Minnesota and help reduce the rural shortage of health care professionals.

"The need is huge in terms of health professionals in rural areas, but you don't see the results for several years," Huntley said.

There are signs that some progress is being made.

This past year the AHEC had contact with more than 4,500 youths in classroom programs and career fairs, Huntley said. It hosted 45 high school students this summer for University on the Prairie, a science-based program now in its second year.

During her first year with the AHEC, Huntley worked with or supported 23 students in the health care professions. This year it was 149.

"It's grown a great deal," she said.

From among the first group of medical students she worked with, one has signed a contract to come back and practice medicine in the region. A couple of nurse practitioners and a physician assistant also have returned to the region after completing their training.

Interest in rural training seems to be growing, especially for the University of Minnesota's Rural Physician Associate Program, which allows third-year medical students to spend a nine-month rotation experiencing day-to-day primary care at a rural clinic, Huntley said.

"In fact there's more demand for the spots than there are spots to put them in," she said. "We're beginning to see some results."

She has been especially encouraged by the growing number of clinics, hospitals and other facilities in the region that are willing to become training sites.

"One of the most heartening things for me is the health care facilities in the region are beginning to really recognize the importance of working with students and having that early contact with students," she said.