



Wednesday, July 08, 2009

Stimulus money to help heal the North Coast

Electronic medical record keeping will aid Coastal Family Health Center

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One Clatsop County health center was awarded a chunk of stimulus funds last week.

Oregon Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden announced June 30 that \$14.6 million in Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds was awarded in Oregon.

Of that, \$359,000 will go to Coastal Family Health Center in Astoria.

Jim Coffee, the center's director, said the grant is to be used over the next two years on two projects.

The first project is to replace the facility's telephone system, which was a used system when purchased in 2002. The new system will be managed through software, and will allow the clinic to assign its seven extensions more freely. Coffee said he hopes to have the new system in place by Oct. 1.

The second project is to replace the facility's electronic medical record keeping program with one that's more modern.

Coffee said the federal government requires health centers that are dependent on federal grants - like Coastal - to generate quarterly reports. But it takes his clinic weeks to extrapolate the required data and produce the reports. And affordable record-keeping systems that efficiently collect data and produce the reports typically aren't available for health centers.

With this grant, and through OCHIN (a nonprofit organization formerly known as the Oregon Community Health Information Network), Coastal will get access to Epic System - a medical information system that typically costs \$5 million to \$6 million, Coffee said. With this technology, he can produce the reports in about 25 seconds.

OCHIN only works with clinics that take low-income patients, or patients who are unable to pay for medical expenses. OCHIN and Epic Systems have partnered to allow multiple community health providers to share medical records and utilize a system designed for much larger medical groups, hospitals and healthcare organizations.

"We support our most medically underserved patients," said Ruby Haughton, a member of OCHIN's media relations staff. She said she'd spoken with Coffee before the deadline for the application for the grant. But Coffee didn't have time to fill out the application. No problem - one of the services OCHIN provides is access to the organization's grant-writer.

"My board of directors and all my staff are very, very excited about these opportunities," Coffee said.

The implementation of this new system is expected to be completed by Jan. 1. It will allow access to patients' records from other collaborators in the network, and in the future, possibly no matter where the patients seek medical care.

"The value of having electronic medical records has got to be that it improves health outcomes," Haughton said. "You can improve health outcomes if you know what's wrong with me when I come in or what's been wrong with me when I first come in."

"Fixing the American health care system is a massive task and creating a 21st century health care infrastructure is a major part of the solution," Merkley said in a press release issued last week. "This Recovery Act funding will be creating jobs in Oregon while at the same time improving the facilities, information technology, and electronic records that allow our health care providers to focus on delivering quality care to patients."

In the same press release, Wyden said, "More than 17 million Americans from small towns to urban centers rely on community health centers for basic health care."

"As we work to reform our current health care, we need to make sure that we take care of those elements of the current system that offer the services that people need most. Keeping these centers healthy is crucial to keeping Americans healthy."

The Tillamook County Health Department also received \$441,000 from the package.

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