

PRESS RELEASE

Medical School Launches Center for Rural Health with Gift From Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida

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By Nancy Kinnally
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TALLAHASSEE, Fla.-The Florida State University College of Medicine announced today the establishment of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida Center for Rural Health with a \$750,000 gift from the Jacksonville-based health plan.

The gift, which is eligible for a \$490,000 match from the State of Florida, will fund research projects designed to assess and improve health services for Floridians living in rural areas.

"Rural health is one of the priority areas identified in the mission of the FSU College of Medicine," said College of Medicine Dean J. Ocie Harris, M.D. "In addition to graduating a significant number of physicians who will serve in rural areas, we want to generate solutions to many of the health issues that are unique to rural communities. This new center will help guide that collegewide effort."

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida Center for Rural Health will address the special needs of the more than 1 million Floridians living in the state's 33 rural counties, 19 of which are federally designated as medically underserved.

Robert Brooks, M.D., associate dean for health affairs at the College of Medicine, said the center will help the medical school achieve its goal of becoming a national leader in rural health policy and research.

"With these funds we will be able to launch our rural health research program immediately, while having a basis on which to operate for years to come," Brooks said.

The center's first research project will be an analysis of the information technology capabilities of Florida's 29 statutory rural hospitals. Over the next year, researchers will examine the hospitals' use of tools such as electronic medical records, computerized prescribing systems and computer-based infection tracking, all of which can help reduce medical errors and improve patient safety. Researchers from the College of Medicine's Center on Patient Safety, the FSU School of Information Studies and the Center for Rural Health will collaborate on the project.

Wayne NeSmith, President of the Florida Hospital Association, said Florida's rural hospitals provide critically needed services and face special challenges.

"Most rural hospitals operate on very limited margins, but still must respond to demands for better technology and continuously improving systems of care," NeSmith said. "This new center will offer hospitals important tools for meeting this challenge."

Michael Cascone Jr., chairman and CEO of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida, said the company is honored to work with the FSU College of Medicine to create the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida Center for Rural Health.

"Our support is one way we fulfill our mission to advance the health and well-being of Florida's citizens, especially the uninsured and underserved," Cascone said. "We believe programs aimed at health care awareness and training, research and policy initiatives and workforce preparation can make a positive difference in our

communities. We look forward to our partnership with Florida State University, a highly respected institution and an integral part of our state's educational system."