

## Town hall meeting focuses on health care

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A centralized computer system that will link health care providers across the county is well under way.

"It's the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality grant we received two years ago," said Linda Axley, chair of the Cherokee County Community Health Coalition and executive director of the Cherokee County Health Department. "Last year was the planning year, and we began last fall to implement the program."

Gerad Gibson is working as AHRQ IT coordinator for the grant. He made a presentation on the AHRQ grant at the Cherokee County Community Health Coalition's meeting Tuesday.

"The national goal set by the president is to have electronic health care within 10 years," said Gibson. "Michael Leavitt, secretary of Health and Human Services, personally committed to implementing AHRQ across the county."

Cherokee County, thanks to the CHC, was one of 13 across the country selected to receive the \$1.5 million grant. More than 300 groups applied.

"We were selected because we are kind of unique," said Gibson. "We look a lot like the rest of America and what the rest of America has, but because of the coalition and council, we were already working together, and that's why we got the grant."

Bill Willis Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse Center, CHC, Cherokee County 911, Cherokee County Health Services Council, Cherokee Nation Health Services, Hastings Indian Medical Center, Northeastern Oklahoma Community Health Centers, Northeastern State University, Oklahoma State Department of Health, Oklahoma Center for Rural Development, Rural Health Institute and Tahlequah City Hospital have all partnered in the endeavor.

"We've created a Web site where the community can go in and find information on local health care services," said Gibson.

The grant will also connect patient information from all participating agencies, allowing doctors at one clinic or pharmacy to see all the patient's information from other health care organizations.

"The electronic health exchange will allow for 250,000 patients' information to be connected through various health care providers," said Gibson.

The advantages of using electronic patient health exchange include improving patient safety; improving speed of treatment; eliminating the need to read the handwriting of others; reducing duplicate testing; improving coordination of medication; doing real-time population-based health assessments; and being a primary resource in case of bioterrorism and pandemic disease outbreaks.

The Web site, Healthfinder, is a resource for the 400,000 people in rural Northeast Oklahoma, to assist them in locating a wide variety of health providers and social services, including physicians, dentists, mental health, optometrists and community health centers, among others.

"The goal of the grant is to improve access to health care and see health care errors reduced," said Gibson. "By the end of the year, everyone in Cherokee County will have access to the Web site and the companion 1-800 number."

The phone line will be staffed by the Cherokee County 911 dispatchers.

Gibson said he is still working out problems being raised by HIPAA, which restricts access to patient information.

"This information will be passed between providers using a highly secure HIPAA compliant electronic resource which will be supplied through the AHRQ grant and overseen by the provider/participants technology and privacy professionals," said Gibson.