Prescott, Ark. — Thanks to a $495,926 USDA telemedicine grant, Mercy will be able to provide 900 people in some of the nation’s most hard-to-reach rural areas medical care like they’ve never known before.

Through the three-year tele-home project, Mercy – a network of hospitals and physician offices in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma – will target patients with the most chronic ailments, including diabetes, heart disease and respiratory disease. The grant monies will fund monitoring devices so patients can electronically transmit results from home via computer or telephone line directly to their physician.

“I recently had a patient come in with a blood sugar level way above normal and I couldn’t figure out why it was so high because she was taking two oral medications and insulin to control her diabetes,” said April Revis, APN, a family nurse practitioner at Mercy’s Scott County Rural Health Clinic in Waldron, Ark., over 45 miles from the closest urban area. “After talking to her, I discovered it had become difficult for her to see well enough to draw up her insulin so she stopped taking it. If we had been using tele-home monitoring and tracking her blood sugar rising, we would have been able to get her help long before there was a problem.”

St. Joseph’s Mercy Health Center in Hot Springs, St. Edward Mercy Health Center in Fort Smith and Mercy Medical Center in Rogers are a part of Mercy.

Extensive research shows behaviors change when someone is paying attention to them. Just tracking hypertensive patients nationwide with remote blood pressure monitors could potentially save $100 billion a year in unnecessary health care costs.

“In addition to traditional care, Mercy is providing a new version of the house call for the digital age. Because of our integrated electronic health record, we can track patient care across four states 24/7 whether you are in a hospital, clinic, ER and now from your home with monitoring devices,” said Tim Smith, MD, vice president of research for Mercy’s Center for Innovative Care. “By regularly tracking glucose levels, blood pressure, oxygen levels and more, our patients reap the benefits.”

Patient benefits include:

- Reduced travel time
- Greater access to medical personnel
- More accurate referrals
- Quicker consultation time
- Reduced costs
- Improved understanding of chronic illness

The Mercy facilities participating in the grant project include: Berryville, Ozark, Paris, Waldron, Cassville, Mo.; and Mountain View, Mo. Some of these communities are 100 miles from the nearest urban area, sometimes over mountainous rural roads. In addition, all six of the communities exceed national poverty rates.

“We intentionally chose areas where there is the greatest medical need,” said Tom Hale, MD, executive medical director of Mercy’s Center for Innovative Care. “We continue to find ways to innovate so we can provide better patient care.”

Mercy’s Center for Innovative Care (CIC), the driver behind the tele-home project, creatively combines people and technology to extend Mercy’s reach and services well beyond the walls of doctors' offices, hospital campuses and other traditional facilities. By studying the impact of new approaches and then putting new technologies to the test, Mercy’s CIC ultimately hopes to provide better care through more convenient and lower-cost locations.

Through the tele-home project, Mercy will test the waters for even greater patient connectivity by moving beyond an electronic health record to providing patients with personal health records (PHR). Eventually, the goal is for all Mercy patients, not just those in rural areas, to have the ability to input data such as glucose readings, blood pressure and other measurements with integrated home monitoring devices to better their health.

Already in place today in many communities, MyMercy, a free online service, gives Mercy patients the ability to track health history, schedule appointments, contact a doctor and renew prescriptions via a personal computer or smart phone. Up and running for just three months, already more than 85,000 people across Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma have signed up for MyMercy. It will be available in the Hot Springs and Fort Smith areas in the coming months.

“Mercy is raising health care to a new level,” said Dr. Smith. “We are providing patients with ways to be more involved in their own care and the potential benefits to patients are mind boggling.”

Mercy – Sisters of Mercy Health System – is the eighth largest Catholic health care system in the U.S. and serves more than 3 million people annually. Mercy includes 28 hospitals, more than 200 outpatient facilities, 45,000 co-workers and 1,300 integrated physicians in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma. Mercy also has outreach ministries in Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas.
For more about Mercy, visit www.mercy.net.
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