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## A Cooperative Advantage In Cyberspace

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The goal of the RWHC Data Network is for rural hospitals and other providers to achieve a cooperative advantage in the rapidly developing world of electronic transactions as they have historically done through RWHC in traditional arenas. The first phase of the Network is expected to be operational this Summer.

In 2000, the Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative received a targeted consultation grant from the Academy of Health Services Research & Health Policy to study the feasibility of developing a common data network that would allow rural hospitals to share informational technology (IT) resources, including: infrastructure, hardware, software and expertise. The consultant's conclusion was that there would be immediate and tangible benefits to such a network; an opinion that has been reinforced by other experts who assisted us during the planning stage of the project.

The original impetus for this endeavor stems from the significant challenges rural providers face when trying to implement large-scale, systemic IT projects. These can include cultural, organizational and financial barriers. Rural hospitals agree that if there is one area where collaboration makes sense, it is in the ever-changing arena of information technology. The RWHC Board of Directors identified IT-telecommunications enhancements as their highest priority during their 2002 strategic planning retreat.

By partnering with Norlight Telecommunications ([www.norlight.com](http://www.norlight.com)), an established, regional telecommunications carrier, RWHC will be able to offer rural providers access to a frame relay, Advanced Technology Management network that will feature T1 connections to participating hospitals and clinics, regional providers and the Internet. The Wide Area Network infrastructure permits secure connectivity that will be HIPAA compliant due to redundant firewalls, authentication, security auditing, virus scanning, intrusion detection and filtering mechanisms. Basic services will include: high-speed Internet access, e-mail services, video conferencing streaming, scalable bandwidth, centralized administration and 24 hour, 7 days a week technical support.

Member hospitals have expressed a singular motivation for participation - cost savings through shared business/clinical applications. Examples of applications that surfaced during the 18-month planning phase include: a shared medical library, online verification of benefits eligibility, billing/claims processing, medical dictation/transcription, digitized medical records and image archiving/storage. These applications (and others) will be phased in over time, based on direction from the participants. A pilot group of 6-10 hospitals will determine what will be offered initially. In addition, it is expected that the development of this network will significantly accelerate access to long distance education and remote specialty services.

RWHC has hired a full-time IT manager who will help administer the project, which is targeted for June/July implementation. We are also seeking grant funding to help underwrite the shared connectivity/administration fees of the RWHC Data Network, including extensive dependence on Universal Service Funding through the Federal Communication Commission. *For more information, contact Larry Clifford, RWHC Director of Product & Member Development at 608-643-2343 or <[lclifford@rwhc.com](mailto:lclifford@rwhc.com)>.*

