

# RURAL MATTERS

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## Small or Rural Hospital Meeting Scheduled

The new toolbox for small and rural hospitals will be previewed from 2:00 to 3:30 p.m. Wednesday, October 15, during THA's annual meeting.

This presentation will provide a preview of the products and services that will be part of THA's new rural hospital toolbox, an association benefit designed to provide high priority, affordable services to small and rural hospitals that cannot typically afford to pay traditional prices for many needed services. To deliver the toolbox, THA will directly provide or work with vendors to develop low-cost alternatives to traditional vendor products.

To find out more about this exciting new benefit, which will include a review of clinical and financial benchmark expertise, charge master review services, and supply chain analysis, register for the small or rural meeting that will be held during THA's annual meeting. Conference registration information can be found at [www.tha.com](http://www.tha.com).

## HRSA Announces Grant Offerings for 2004

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) recently published a *Federal Register* notice announcing its grant offerings for fiscal year 2004, including program eligibility and application information.

The grants include an estimated \$15.46 million in educational loan repayment for nurses and \$6 million in scholarships for nursing students who agree to work at least two years in a healthcare facility with a critical shortage of nurses; \$11.4 million for nursing schools, academic health centers and others to increase nursing education opportunities for underrepresented minorities and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds; \$4.8 million for nursing schools, academic health centers and others providing advanced education nursing traineeships; and \$3.06 million for nursing schools, healthcare facilities, academic health centers and others for projects to strengthen nurse education, practice and retention to address the nursing shortage.

The *Federal Register* notice can be found at [http://www.access.gpo.gov/su\\_docs/fedreg/a030904c.html](http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fedreg/a030904c.html) under the Health Resources and Services Administration.

## Rural Provisions Discussed in Medicare Conference

Medicare conferees have resumed meetings regarding the Medicare Prescription Drug and Modernization Act following the congressional August recess.

Conferees ratified a number of agreements reached by staff during the recess. Included in the approved agreements are the following rural provisions:

- Consolidated billing is eliminated for the professional services provided by rural health centers (RHCs) and federally qualified health centers (FQHCs).
- The "hold harmless" for hospital outpatient services at small rural hospitals would be extended for two years. During this time, the secretary for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) will review the prospective payment system rates.

- A safe harbor is created for donations and other remunerations used to improve services at FQHCs.
- Hospitals that are missing cost reports will be eligible for sole community status if one base year cost report is available.
- Nurse practitioners will be able to continue to treat their patients who enroll in hospice programs.
- Critical access hospital (CAH) improvements include:
  1. An increase in payment amounts to 101 percent of costs.
  2. Up to 25 beds can be used for acute care.
  3. New eligibility rules that allow hospitals with no greater than 10 psychiatric or rehabilitation beds to become CAHs.
  4. On-call payments to physician assistants, nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists.
  5. Reinstate periodic interim payments and develop alternative timing methods to achieve and appropriate level of cash flows.
  6. Eliminate the barrier for receiving the physician bonus.
  7. Authorize \$35 million a year for FLEX grants, with 95 percent of the funds going to hospitals.

Additional rural provisions will be discussed as the conference progresses. While these agreements have been reached, everything is subject to change until a final vote is taken on the entire package.

### **3R Net Releases Manual on Recruitment, Retention**

*Recruiting for Retention*, a comprehensive manual, was developed by a committee of the National Rural Recruitment and Retention Network, Inc. (3R Net) members and customized for Minnesota by the Minnesota Center for Rural Health.

This 114-page manual identifies state, regional and federal resources to help with recruitment and retention efforts, as well as to improve healthcare delivery in rural communities. The 3R Net is comprised of state organizations that assist health professionals in locating practices in rural areas throughout the country.

*Recruiting for Retention* is available for \$45. To order a copy of the manual, call 800-997-6685 or order online at [www.ruralcenter.org](http://www.ruralcenter.org).

### **Rural Telecommunications Funding Deadline**

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recently published a notice in the *Federal Register* announcing the final deadline for rural healthcare providers to submit applications for funding under the rural healthcare support mechanism for funding year 2002.

The FCC program provides up to \$400 million annually to help public and not-for-profit rural healthcare providers obtain reduced rates for a variety of telecommunication services. Applicants for funding year 2002 (July 1, 2002-June 30, 2003) must submit completed form 466/468 packets to the rural healthcare division of the Universal Service Administrative Co. by October 8.

The *Federal Register* notice can be found at [www.access.gpo.gov/su\\_docs/fedreg/a030827c.html](http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fedreg/a030827c.html) under Federal Communications Commission. For more on the program and application process, go to [www.rhc.universalservice.org](http://www.rhc.universalservice.org).