

## ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION AWARDS ALMOST \$3 MILLION IN INITIAL PHASE OF SOUTHERN RURAL ACCESS PROGRAM

**HERSHEY, PA**, April 22, 1999 - The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has made almost \$3 million in grants to improve access to basic health care for the most rural and underserved populations in the South.

The grants represent the initial installment of the Southern Rural Access Program, a \$13.9 million effort working in eight states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, the eastern portion of Texas and West Virginia). The Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation is providing additional financial support for work in West Virginia.

"These grants represent the first phase of a long-term investment by the Foundation to improve the quality of life for some of the nations' poorest and most medically underserved citizens. Based on the lessons learned from the first three-year phase of the program, the Foundation plans to support subsequent phases of the program," said RWJF Vice President Nancy J. Kaufman, RN. "We are excited about participating in this community-driven, public-private partnership to improve access to health care for those most in need."

The Southern Rural Access Program is administered by The Penn State Geisinger Health System, based in Hershey, PA.

According to William H. Brandon, chairman of the program's national advisory committee and president of the Southern Development Corporation, "The Southern Rural Access Program is more than a Band-Aid approach to solving the access problems inherent in the rural south. It is a long-term, infrastructure-building effort which should positively impact underserved communities for years to come."

The program is designed to improve access by improving the primary care and rural health infrastructure in underserved communities. Under this program grantees will work to:

- Establish a cadre of health professions students committed to becoming leaders in rural health areas
- Recruit and retain family practitioners, nurse practitioners and other primary care providers into underserved communities
- Build rural health provider networks serving multiple communities
- Establish a revolving loan fund to help rural doctors, clinics and other providers secure capital financing at terms and conditions that better meet their needs.

From July to November 1998, the Foundation accepted one proposal per state from a designated agency acting on behalf of a broad consortium of agencies interested in improving access to care in rural underserved areas. Throughout the next 15 months, the states' lead agencies and other partners will refine their plans in order to secure additional Foundation resources during the first phase.

"The Southern Rural Access Program represents a break from the traditional type of grant program funded by the Foundation," said Michael Beachler, national program director. "While there are specific goals for this program, the solutions and action plans will be innovative and unique to meet the diverse needs of each state's rural population."

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, based in Princeton, NJ, is the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care. It concentrates its grantmaking in three goal areas: to assure that all Americans have access to basic health care at reasonable cost; to improve care and support for people with chronic health conditions; and to reduce the personal, social and economic harm caused by substance abuse -- tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs.

CONTACT: Paul Tarini or Ann Searight  
RWJF News Line: 609-243-5937