

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation approves a \$2.5 million grant to PSGHS in support of the Southern Rural Access Program

Hershey, PA (July 29, 1999) -- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has approved a 30-month grant of \$2.5 million to the Penn State Geisinger Health System. The funds will support the 21st Century Challenge Fund, an innovative grant making initiative of the Southern Rural Access Program. Individual grant awards, expected to range between \$50,000 and \$250,000, will begin in early 2000 and culminate in December 2001. The Southern Rural Access Program, administered by the Penn State Geisinger Health System through its Rural Health Policy Center, was first funded in 1997 as a national program office of RWJF to provide technical assistance and support for the program's grantees. The Rural Health Policy Center is one of just a few national program offices given direct grant-making authority by the Foundation.

"The awarding of this grant-making authority to the System demonstrates that we have shown the proper experience and skills to effectively administer this innovative grant program," said C. McCollister Evarts, MD, senior vice president for clinical operations at The Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, chief academic officer of PSGHS and senior vice president for health affairs and dean of Penn State's College of Medicine. "This decision by the nation's largest philanthropy dedicated to health and health care acknowledges our abilities and commitment to improving the health status of the nation's most rural and underserved communities. We are eager to undertake this additional challenge."

The 21st Century Challenge Fund, designed to encourage creative risk-taking and solutions, will be used to support innovative pilot demonstrations or small analytic projects that address specific health care problems and increase access to basic health care within the eight states served by the Southern Rural Access Program. The pilot program will highly complement the other grant activities funded through the core grants of the Southern Rural Access Program. The 21st Century Challenge Fund will also provide a vehicle to build partnerships with local and regional philanthropies interested in improving health care in underserved rural areas.

"Our grantees and their key partners have demonstrated considerable enthusiasm for the 21st Century Challenge Fund," said Michael Beachler, Southern Rural Access Program National Program Director. "Each applicant is expected to obtain co-funding from local or regional philanthropies or other public or private sources. Our initial contacts with philanthropies in each of the eight states have shown considerable promise in garnering their interest and support."

Proposals will be evaluated for their innovation, feasibility, potential impact on access to care, potential to serve as an important model that could influence practice or policy in the targeted state and the amount of philanthropic and other matching resources. Examples of initiatives considered appropriate for the 21st Century Challenge Fund include:

- design of a rural regional transportation system to facilitate access to health care and other needed services for low income consumers in rural underserved areas.

- development of a new approach to help immigrants, other newcomers and/or migrant health workers access the health care system.
- development of effective ways to reduce access barriers for low-literacy consumers.
- development of a tool to test cultural competency models for enhanced delivery of healthcare to minority populations.

The eight states served by the Southern Rural Access Program are Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, eastern Texas and West Virginia.

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