

## **Blue Cross Blue Shield of Georgia News**

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### **The Georgia Department of Insurance and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Georgia Launch Teleradiology Pilot Program for Rural Georgia Hospitals *\$1 Million WellPoint Foundation Grant To Fund Program***

ATLANTA – The Georgia Department of Insurance (DOI) and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Georgia (BCBSGa) announced today a joint pilot program that will allow rural hospitals to purchase teleradiology equipment. The pilot program is made possible through a \$1 million grant from the WellPoint Foundation. WellPoint, Inc. is the parent company of BCBSGa.

Teleradiology is a new area of health care that allows small rural hospitals to connect with radiologists in larger cities to receive and interpret radiology images. Utilizing state-of-the-art digital technology and specialized computer monitors, remote radiologists in Savannah, Atlanta, Macon and other major markets will be able to receive images and provide faster diagnosis and consultations to attending physicians in rural areas.

“A major part of our mission is to provide access to affordable, quality health care for our members. Through teleradiology, we are increasing access not only to our members, but to all Georgians,” said Monye Connolly, president, BCBSGa. “We are honored to have the opportunity to collaborate with Commissioner John Oxendine to support this important project.”

To date, the Georgia pilot teleradiology program has equipped four rural health care facilities with the technology and training needed to transfer diagnostic images digitally to radiologists in more urban areas or anywhere in the world instantaneously, enabling quicker diagnosis and treatment. The pilot program kicked off at Louis Smith Memorial Hospital (LSMH) in Lakeland on April 3. Other hospitals participating in the pilot program include Calhoun Memorial Hospital in Arlington, Clinch Memorial Hospital in Homerville, and Chatuge Regional Hospital in Hiawassee.

The teleradiology system provided to participating rural hospitals consists of three major components: an image sending station, a transmission network and a receiving/image review station. The receiving/image review stations are equipped to receive images and consultations from a Radiologist’s office in an urban location.

Following the pilot, a total of 11 hospitals will receive funding through the WellPoint Foundation grant to be used toward the purchase of a teleradiology system. In order to receive funding, hospitals will be evaluated based on criteria that demonstrate a need for this technology. For example, a hospital must be in a rural community with a county population of 35,000 or less; operate as a not-for-profit health care provider with less than 150 beds; and have no full-time radiologist on-site or use an alternate means for radiology readings. In addition, hospitals must have the technological infrastructure to move the project forward and demonstrate they have the time and resources for the education and training required to operate the system.

“There is a demonstrated need for this program,” said John Oxendine, Georgia Commissioner of Insurance and Safety Fire. “Many hospitals in rural Georgia do not have 24-hour on-site access to radiologists, the medical specialists who interpret diagnostic images such as X-ray, MRI and CT scans. If a patient requires interpretation of an image when a radiologist is not on-site, these

hospitals must physically drive the film to another hospital that could be as far as 30 miles away in order for a radiologist to interpret the film, make a diagnosis, and the on-site physician to begin treatment. Valuable time is wasted transporting the film that could be used to treat patients. In medicine, time can save lives, and we believe this program will do just that.”

“This is a very important endeavor for the hospital and a great opportunity for us to expand on our current offerings,” said Bill Wilson, Director of Ancillary Services at LSMH. “It’s a much timelier and efficient process than the former way of producing films that were then sent manually by courier to Valdosta for readings. Through the use of this technology, we can now upload images and our physicians can consult with the remote radiologists within minutes.”

To date, more than 2,800 teleradiology encounters have occurred during the pilot program, saving valuable time and increasing access to specialized medical care for rural Georgians.

"This teleradiology pilot will raise our standard of care for patients in Calhoun County, and will enable our facility to diagnose quickly and better treat our patients at our facility versus sending them elsewhere for diagnosis and treatment," said Stephanie Williams, MD, Calhoun Memorial Hospital. "Never before has our community been afforded such 'state-of-the-art' medical care."

### **Telemedicine Program exceeds number of planned sites to serve rural communities**

BCBSGa also announced it has exceeded the number of Telemedicine system installations committed to Georgia, providing access to specialty health care for the Georgia residents throughout the state.

Telemedicine is a health care delivery system that applies high-speed phone lines, computer equipment and specialized medical cameras to securely enable physician specialists to consult with patients remotely. This allows patients from rural areas to receive diagnosis and treatment plans from leading specialists in the state without the inconvenience of having to travel outside of their neighborhoods.

BCBSGa committed \$11.5 million to establish, equip and finance telemedicine sites in 36 rural hospitals or clinics, plus an additional four academic teaching hospitals, for a total of 40 systems installed by June 30, 2006.

As of Sept. 1, 2006, 69 specialists representing 37 specialties, including dermatology, endocrinology, cardiology, and pediatric neurology, are now available to serve rural areas at 48 telemedicine locations throughout the state. To date, the program has produced more than 175 telemedicine encounters.

### **About Blue Cross Blue Shield of Georgia**

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Georgia is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association and is an operating subsidiary of WellPoint Inc., the largest publicly traded commercial health benefits company in terms of membership in the United States. WellPoint, Inc. is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association and serves its members as the Blue Cross licensee for California; the Blue Cross and Blue Shield licensee for Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Missouri (excluding 30 counties in the Kansas City area), Nevada, New Hampshire, New York (as Blue Cross Blue Shield in 10 New York City metropolitan counties and as Blue Cross, Blue Shield or Blue Cross Blue Shield in selected upstate counties only), Ohio, Virginia (excluding the Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C.), Wisconsin; and through UniCare. Additional information about WellPoint is available at

<http://www.wellpoint.com> . Blue Cross Blue Shield of Georgia can be found on the web at <http://www.bcbsga.com>.

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