

Dates of Activity: October 2008 through December 2008
Seed Grant: Valley Telehealth Partnership
Grantee Organization: School of Natural Sciences, University of California, Merced
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Description of Quarter's Activity/Impact on Partnership

1. **Partnership Agreements Executed** – Valley Telehealth Partnership (VTP) partners signed agreements to participate in the VTP, receiving the benefits of equipment utilization, shared information, networking and program startup assistance in exchange for regular reporting on program utilization and success.
2. **Connectivity** – Sites were connected using all available discount programs in order to ensure greater long-term affordability. The UC Merced hub site also was established to allow for an extendable out-bound telemedicine connection for all VTP participants both now and in the future.
3. **Equipment Delivered**– Polycomm units and peripherals were delivered and assembled at each of the sites in preparation for services to patients.
4. **Program Training** – Two-day telemedicine program training was scheduled at UC Davis to educate on operation/design/organization of telemedicine programs to ensure more successful outcomes. Site coordinators and key partner staff participated.
5. **Marketing Materials Created** – Hard copy brochures and mailers developed in English, Hmong and Spanish were created for use by VTP participants in their marketing efforts. A tool-based, information-sharing Web site was built as a part of this overall promotional effort to allow networking between telemedicine sites and patients seeking telemedicine consults via the Internet to assist with answers to common questions/issues.
6. **VTP Meeting** – The first open forum VTP meeting was held with regional facilities and partnering sites in December 2008 to discuss current project status, needs and concerns regarding telemedicine in the San Joaquin Valley.

Planned Activities for next 3-6 months:

Though the funding period has expired and funds are expended, some work will continue in support of the VTP in the coming months:

1. Web-based assistance on program development and customization of programs
2. Full support to sites as they begin providing services to patients
3. Additions to the Web site, including user tools, educational links, networking directories.
4. Assistance with conducting community “telemedicine days” to introduce telemedicine to local user communities, including schools.
5. Assistance to onsite telemedicine coordinators as they begin working individual programs
6. Data collection for interpretation of program success/challenges along the way.

Challenges/Problems/Bottlenecks/Feedback

During this past year, the San Joaquin Valley economy incurred severe damage on multiple fronts as the state's budget woes, high unemployment rates and a devastating real estate crisis hit communities hard. The build-up of these situations has created great strain on the health care facilities in our area, including those working with VTP. The high staff turnover rates and slow responses to our requests to take necessary “next steps” to further the progress of individual telemedicine projects contributed negatively to our original project time line for implementation and completion. “Survival” was the critical factor in health care facilities during the past year, and as a result, our project often became a sidebar during those times.

Now that the VTP sites are connected and equipped and are undergoing specialized program training, we anticipate, shortly, a final push toward the delivery of services to patients in each of these communities. The stress of managing this difficult economic situation is the top priority for our participating facilities. Therefore, as each facility now comes under the added strain of seeing higher rates of uninsured patients and a redirection of patients from shuttered clinics (due to expanding financial insolvency), we anticipate the adoption of telemedicine to continue to be slower than previously expected.

In the coming challenging times, it is our intention to assist our partnering sites in the best way possible—as a friendly, local resource that is available to help them achieve telemedicine programs that work. We believe that telemedicine will become a critically helpful lifeline to these communities and health care facilities that will be making do with less and less as money and resources get tighter in coming months. UC Merced is committed to providing the support and energy required for a successful outcome to telemedicine in the San Joaquin Valley. UC Merced plans to continue offering assistance with information sharing, tools and networking opportunities to ensure full realization of the promise of telemedicine for our communities.