

## **New fiber optic network to greatly enhance rural Montana healthcare**

**East Glacier, MT** – A new 425-mile fiber optic network will be dedicated on August 28, marking a new era in rural healthcare for Montana. The Health Information Exchange of Montana (HIEM), a consortium of five hospitals and two federally funded community health centers in Northwest and North Central Montana, made this possible with support from HIEM members and in cooperation with numerous local partners.

With a \$13.6 million award from the Federal Communications Commission's Rural Health Care Pilot Program and a \$2.4 million cash match provided by network partners, the HIEM will connect 21 hospitals and clinics to create one of the most advanced and robust medical technology networks in Montana.

"This fiber network will vastly improve patient care and physician communication in the region while providing the opportunity for development and expansion of telehealth and telemedicine services," said Charles Pearce, Chief Information and Financial Officer for Kalispell Regional Healthcare.

Medical providers already have reported much quicker access to patient electronic medical records, making critical information available at the point of care and resulting in more efficient patient interactions. Kalispell Regional's Winkley Women's Center, a mobile mammography coach, found improved clarity of their images and faster turnaround in providing screening results to women in the rural and frontier communities it serves.

In addition, the HIEM network will expand connectivity for professional healthcare education through the University of Montana, Salish Kootenai College, Flathead Valley Community College and Blackfeet Community College.

"The Health Information Exchange of Montana is a powerful and strategic tool that builds on our partnerships with the University of Montana and Blackfeet Community College for nursing and allied health care training," said Dr. Jane A. Karas, President of Flathead Valley Community College and Chair-Elect of the American Association of Community Colleges. "The HIEM is an exciting advantage for Montana providers and educators, and delivers innovative tele-education to students and professionals for the benefit of patients across the diverse urban, rural and frontier landscape of Montana."

The HIEM partnered with numerous local and national entities to make this network a reality. BNSF Railway was instrumental in helping with the first section of the network route from Whitefish to Conrad. Local telecommunication providers 3 Rivers Communications, MontanaSky Networks and Montana West purchased excess capacity along the fiber network routes to improve telecommunications services to rural communities in their service areas and provide much-needed cash for HIEM match requirements. Flathead Electric Cooperative and Mission Valley Power leased pole space for aerial routes. Alamon Telco, the University of Montana and Cyan Optics

offered much needed technical advice. And, most recently, G4S Technology is constructing the Whitefish to Missoula and Kalispell to Libby sections.

“Without this collaboration and sense of partnership, our dream of a secure, dedicated fiber optic healthcare network would never have become a reality,” said Kip Smith, HIEM Executive Director.

More than 70 local, regional and national representatives, including the Federal Communications Commission, are expected to attend the celebration for the HIEM Fiber Network. The event will include a kick-off ceremony at the Whitefish Train Depot at 8:30 a.m., followed by a round-trip train ride on BNSF business cars from Whitefish to East Glacier, and a formal network dedication on the lawn in front of Glacier Park Lodge in East Glacier at 1:30 p.m.

For more information, contact Kip Smith, Executive Director, Health Information Exchange of Montana; 406-751-6687 or [kipsmith@krmc.org](mailto:kipsmith@krmc.org).

### **About HIEM**

The Health Information Exchange of Montana (HIEM) was formed in 2006 as a not-for-profit healthcare entity based in Kalispell, Montana and includes the following organizations: Glacier Community Health Center, Cut Bank; Kalispell Regional Healthcare, Kalispell; North Valley Hospital, Whitefish; Northern Rockies Medical Center, Cut Bank; Northwest Community Health Center, Libby; St. John’s Lutheran Hospital, Libby; and St. Luke Community Hospital, Ronan. HIEM’s vision is to be a leading regional health information organization in the areas of connectivity, infrastructure, innovation and sustainability.