

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has announced funding for 52 distance learning and telemedicine projects that will increase access to health care and enhance educational opportunities in 29 states. Four Nebraska educational and health care institutions received a total of more than \$969,000 for distance learning opportunities.

Among area recipients are: •Mid-Plains Community College of North Platte—\$123,042: Funds will be used to purchase video teleconferencing equipment for a distance learning system between Mid Plains Community College and their affiliated end user campuses in this 18-county area of Western Nebraska.

Equipment will be installed in campus locations at Broken Bow, Ogallala and Valentine, and video communications bridge equipment will be installed at Broken Bow. The equipment will allow the College to expand dual high school college credits and other coursework leading to a number of degrees, certification and licensing.

Collaboration with various industries bonds the project to job and career training, with an immediate focus on increasing the number of qualified nursing professionals.

This will address the nursing shortage in rural and frontier areas, and save students the 100- to 200-mile daily round-trip they currently travel to attend certification classes.

•Educational Service Unit 16 of Ogallala—\$412,925: Funds are being used in a system-wide upgrade to outfit schools with video conferencing equipment and update their video bridge in this vast sparsely populated area of Southwest Nebraska. The modernized bridge unit is better able to leverage available bandwidth. This allows for richer content to run through the system while using less bandwidth expenses, thus saving on connection expenses. The project will provide students and others in their communities with expanded curriculum offerings, virtual travel opportunities, and career advancement.

“Our rural communities need access to the latest educational and health care services to compete in the 21st Century,” Vilsack said.” The funding I am announcing today for the Distance Learning and Telemedicine (DLT) program will help ensure that rural citizens receive the same high-level, specialized medical care and educational services as enjoyed by their fellow citizens in urban areas.”

The projects total \$14 million and include 19 distance learning projects, 32 telemedicine projects and one combined project. All will benefit rural counties. Nearly half of the total funding—45 percent—will go to counties where the minority population is greater than 30 percent. Another 18 percent of this funding will benefit areas where the Native American population exceeds 30 percent.