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REACH PARTNERS WITH THREE COUNTIES ON RURAL HEALTH CARE INITIATIVE

MERRIAM, KANSAS – The REACH Healthcare Foundation announced a new partnership with three rural counties to address gaps in health care access and quality. The REACH Foundation is supporting community-based planning activities in Cass and Lafayette counties in Missouri, and Allen County, Kansas, as a first step toward identifying solutions to improve health care for uninsured and medically underserved people in rural communities.

Cass, Lafayette and Allen counties are part of the foundation's six-county service area. REACH is providing planning grants and access to research and consultation to help leaders in each county identify solutions that address the specific health care challenges in their communities. The Health Care Coalition of Lafayette County is coordinating planning activities in Lafayette County.

"With this initiative, the foundation is taking a different approach from our usual funding process by investing in county leadership so residents have the knowledge and tools to make improvements in their health care systems," said William Moore, Vice President of Programs, Policy and Evaluation.

Moore said the foundation has funded health programs in the counties over the past several years, but has not seen marked changes in health disparities between rural and urban areas. Moore said the foundation wants to invest in community capacity to identify solutions that will provide rural residents the same opportunities for high-quality, affordable health care that their urban neighbors have.

To launch the Rural Health Initiative, the REACH Foundation sponsored planning teams from Allen, Cass and Lafayette counties to attend the National Rural Health Association Summit in Denver in April 2012. The foundation also will connect the county leaders with rural health program leaders from other parts of the country and experts in designing community change efforts. The foundation expects to invest grant dollars over several years to support proposals that result from the planning processes.

National and regional data show that access to primary medical care, oral health care and mental health services is more limited in rural communities. County health rankings for Cass, Lafayette and Allen counties show higher rates of preventable hospital stays, and lower rates of diabetic screenings and mammography. Life expectancy is lower in two of the three counties than the national average.

Premature death in the three counties is also higher than the national average. For example, Allen County, Kansas, exceeded the national benchmark by more than 200 percent.

The three counties have been part of the foundation's service area since its beginnings. Moore said the challenge for REACH in investing in rural areas is the concentration of population and services in a few communities and the limited number of nonprofit health and human service organizations. Moore said the focus on developing county-wide networks offers the potential to bring in new voices for how counties can improve health services for uninsured and medically underserved residents.

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About the REACH Foundation

The REACH Foundation awards grants to nonprofit organizations in a six-county area encompassing Allen, Johnson and Wyandotte counties in Kansas; Cass, Jackson and Lafayette counties in Missouri, and Kansas City, Missouri. Since 2005, the foundation has invested more than \$33 million in grants and initiatives in the areas of oral health, mental health and safety-net health care.