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HEALTH CARE: Linked In

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For many rural areas of the country, telemedicine has long been more of an elusive dream than an everyday reality. And the challenge of getting up-to-date specialty care and continuing medical education into underserved areas has taken a back seat, on many occasions, to the challenge of creating interoperable electronic health records and streamlining the transmission of clinical data between hospitals and physicians.

But this week's official launch of the California TeleHealth Network is a big step forward for telemedicine. Four years in the making, this effort will link eight hundred medical facilities in the state through telehealth and broadband technologies and will be run by the University of California.

The FCC has put up $22 million of the $30 million cost, the largest single state grant it made in telehealth. Other partners include the California Emerging Technology Fund, United Healthcare, and the California HealthCare Foundation.

To be sure, only 50 of the expected partners will be linked in the coming months, and the availability of reliable broadband connections won't solve, on its own, the persistent issues about how to reimburse for telemedicine and how to get a critical mass of specialists to participate. However, this unusual public-private, federal-state partnership has the potential to make an enormous difference in access to health for rural Californians and to become a model to emulate.