

UAMS Set to Open Eighth Area Health Education Center

June, 2007 - Little Rock, Ark. – North central Arkansas will have the state's eighth University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Area Health Education Center (AHEC) starting July 1.

AHEC North Central will be the first AHEC located within two community colleges – the University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville and Arkansas State University Mountain Home. In addition to its partnership with the local colleges, it will work closely with the White River Medical Center in Batesville and the Baxter Regional Medical Center in Mountain Home.

“Like all of our AHECs, the goal for AHEC North Central is to help increase the number of health care providers and improve the quality of health care, especially in small and rural communities,” said Charles O. Cranford, D.D.S., vice chancellor for regional programs and executive director of the AHEC Program. “This AHEC center will extend UAMS programs into a part of the state that has been underserved.”

Batesville, about 75 miles southeast of Mountain Home, will serve as AHEC North Central's primary administrative office, but the two locations will offer equal programs. The AHEC will serve 10 counties: Baxter, Fulton, Sharp, Independence, Stone, Cleburne, Van Buren, Searcy, Marion and Izard. Those counties fall between AHEC Northwest in Fayetteville and AHEC Northeast in Jonesboro.

“UAMS has had the privilege of operating an AHEC system that is nationally recognized for effectively delivering health care and health care education to areas of the state that need it most,” said UAMS Chancellor I. Dodd Wilson, M.D. “We're excited about establishing our newest AHEC and developing new partnerships in north-central Arkansas.”

The Arkansas Legislature earlier this year approved two years of funding for the new AHEC totaling \$2.6 million. Like the state's seven other AHECs, AHEC North Central will rely heavily on local support. The two colleges will provide space for the AHEC in new buildings being constructed on each campus. Until those facilities are completed, the AHEC will occupy temporary space as programs are selected and put in place.

AHEC North Central, like the Delta AHEC in Helena, will not have a residency program for physicians, but it will have numerous education programs for rotations of UAMS students of medicine, pharmacy, nursing and other health care professions. UAMS, which already enjoys a strong partnership with the two local hospitals through the UAMS Rural Hospital Program, will expand its continuing education programs for health care professionals in the area when the AHEC is in place, Cranford said.

Gary L. Bebow, White River Health System Administrator and Chief Executive Officer, said he is pleased with the partnerships. “Ensuring the availability of well-trained health professionals is one of the White River Health System's important strategic initiatives,” Bebow said.

Deborah Frazier, UACCB Chancellor, said her institution is eager to embark on the partnerships. “AHEC North Central will allow UACCB to continue to explore new programs for nursing and allied health while expanding and strengthening current programs and services to area residents,” Frazier said.

Robert Kerr, M.D., acting CEO of the Baxter Regional Medical Center, said he is pleased that the AHEC will locate in Mountain Home. “We think it will be a great help to the people of north central Arkansas in helping train our personnel in the health care fields,” Kerr said.

Ed Coulter, Chancellor of ASU Mountain Home, said Mountain Home has a lot to celebrate today and for the future of the area. “A new AHEC, a new Health Sciences Building on our campus, investigation of new programs in the health professions with our friends at UAMS, and a new administrator at Baxter Regional Medical Center – the possibilities just seem endless here in the health care field.”

The AHEC Program was established in 1973 by the Legislature and then-Gov. Dale Bumpers as UAMS’ primary educational outreach effort and as the state’s strategy for decentralizing the education of physicians and other health professionals. Since that time, the AHECs have played a critical role in making health care more accessible to rural residents throughout the state.

Seven teaching centers in El Dorado, Fayetteville/Springdale, Fort Smith, Helena/West Memphis, Jonesboro, Pine Bluff, and Texarkana now serve as training sites for students in medicine, nursing, pharmacy, and various allied health professions, as well as for residents specializing in family medicine.

UAMS is the state’s only comprehensive academic health center, with five colleges, a graduate school, a medical center, six centers of excellence and a statewide network of regional centers. UAMS has about 2,430 students and 715 medical residents. It is one of the state’s largest public employers with about 9,400 employees, including nearly 1,000 physicians who provide medical care to patients at UAMS, Arkansas Children’s Hospital, the VA Medical Center and UAMS’ Area Health Education Centers throughout the state. UAMS and its affiliates have an economic impact in Arkansas of \$5 billion a year. For more information, visit www.uams.edu.