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Johnstown, PA - Congressman John Murtha announced today that Greene and Fayette counties will be the focus of a project designed to improve the efficiency and quality of diabetes care in rural populations.

Murtha obtained \$245,516 in funding for the project, which will be conducted by St. Francis University's Center of Excellence for Remote and Medically Under-Served Areas, based in Loretto, Cambria County.

CERMUSA will partner with the Primary Care Center in Mount Morris to implement a chronic disease registry in a clinic serving Greene and Fayette counties to streamline the planning of care for individual patients, the delivery of proactive care to high-risk patients and an increased flow of information between patients and doctors.

A pilot study will be conducted to evaluate the feasibility of using the Internet to import blood glucose logs into the registry so that levels can be closely monitored and medication regimes can be adjusted accurately.

In addition, researchers will create an Internet site containing links to state and federal chronic-disease-related Web sites and an adult education module that will be accessible nationwide. Rural residents without home computers will be able to access the site from patient education kiosks in Greene and Fayette counties.

Finally, the project will study the use of wearable body monitors to track blood glucose levels. Use of the monitor could decrease the number of finger-stick blood glucose readings for diabetic patients. CERMUSA and Dr. Stephan Kowalyk of Greensburg will conduct the research.

"Southwestern Pennsylvania, particularly Fayette County, is disproportionately affected by diabetes, yet too often, residents in rural areas are isolated from their healthcare providers by disabilities, lack of transportation or inclement weather," Murtha said. "We hope that the results of this study will lead to an improved quality of life for rural patients by helping them to avoid the debilitating effects that often result from poorly managed diabetes."

Murtha said he is also concerned about the strain placed on the nation's overburdened health-care system by caring for diabetic patients. In 2002, for example, diabetes cost the country \$132 billion in direct medical and indirect expenditures such as lost workdays, permanent disability and mortality. The cost to treat a patient with diabetes was \$13,243, compared to \$2,560 for people without diabetes.

With their rural populations, Fayette County, with just 188 residents per square mile, and Greene County, with only 71, are ideal locations to use a registry to streamline diabetes management and evaluate the medical interventions performed, Murtha said. In 2003, for example, Fayette County was among those with the highest rates of hospital

admission rates for diabetes and for admissions involved end-stage renal disease. Also in 2003, the county's diabetes-related death rate was 131.4 per 100,000 people, compared to the state's rate of 83.5 per 100,000. Greene County's rate was 95.3 per 100,000.

Education, he said, is the key to reversing the trend. Even those with pre-diabetes, a condition that can lead to diabetes, are at increased risk for heart and stroke, he added.

"We want to help patients manage their diabetes, but we also want to spread the message that diabetes can be prevented in many cases by eating properly and exercising," he said. "Reaching people in rural areas is sometimes difficult, but I'm optimistic that programs like this will help turn the tide here in Southwestern Pennsylvania."