

STATE LIBRARY *of* LOUISIANA

Eleven Public Libraries Receive Grant Funds to Provide Rural Residents With Access to Telehealth Services

By Daniel Monteverde

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BATON ROUGE -- While technology has become an everyday part of life for countless people around the world, there is still a large segment of society that's been left out of the digital revolution.

That's why 11 public libraries across Louisiana are working to provide telehealth services for patrons who can't easily access healthcare and might not have the knowledge, hardware, or internet connection required for virtual doctor visits.

The Vermilion Parish Library was one of the public library systems chosen to receive part of a \$50,000 telehealth grant from The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana Foundation through the State Library of Louisiana.

"I'm spending it (the grant money) as fast as I can," said Charlotte Bourg, director of the Vermilion Parish Library, adding that she plans to launch her library's telehealth program in October.

Bourg said the \$3,200 in grant money has allowed her to buy a laptop, camera, and speakers so patrons can have private telehealth visits with their doctors. She also bought basic medical equipment, such as a scale and blood pressure cuff. There's also a new, dedicated phone line for telehealth visits.

"I bought a duffle bag this morning so when the staff has to help someone, they just pull out the bag and set it up for them," Bourg said.

The grants will pay for medical equipment such as fingertip pulse oximeters, portable EKG monitors, laptops and tablets, and private booths in other public libraries so patrons can meet virtually with their doctors. The other parish library systems to receive grant funds were in Beauregard, Cameron, Concordia, East Carroll, Franklin, Ouachita, St. John the Baptist, Union, Washington, and West Baton Rouge parishes.

Bourg said the Vermilion Parish Library has partnered with Abbeville General Hospital for virtual visits for patients whose doctors practice there. But access to the equipment will be available for anyone to use, Bourg said. "If someone has an appointment with MD Anderson (Cancer Center), they can come here."

"It's been a long time since libraries were simply a place to check out books or do research. They are community hubs where people can access services they might not otherwise be able to afford, such as high-speed internet," said State Librarian Meg Placke. "These grants are just the latest way our state's libraries are serving their patrons, and there are few needs as important as access to healthcare."

Bourg agreed, saying the grants are especially important in rural parishes with older populations.

“A lot of elderly patients and a lot of local impoverished patients don’t have access to a ride or the equipment” for proper medical care, Bourg said. “It’s just a matter of accessibility and having something available.”