

Background on the AHEC Program in Wisconsin

What is AHEC?

The Area Health Education Center (AHEC) program is a national initiative, begun in 1971, for improving the accessibility and quality of primary health care. The program was designed to encourage universities and educators to look beyond their institutions to partnerships that meet community health needs, working toward the goal of decentralizing health professions training and linking communities with academic health centers in partnerships that promote cooperative solutions to local health problems.



Almost every state has an AHEC program. The program operates through contracts between the host medical school and regional AHEC centers. These centers may be independently incorporated, or they may be hosted by a local health care provider or community organization. They all must have an advisory board with membership drawn from the region served by the center.

The nature of the programming undertaken by these centers varies greatly, depending upon state and academic resources and local needs, but almost always includes:

- Developing learning experiences for all health professions students at community-based sites
- Sponsoring health careers programming in schools in underserved rural and urban areas
- Providing services to health professionals in underserved communities to enhance the practice environment and connect community practitioners with the educational resources of the academic medical centers
- Partnering with local organizations in a variety of outreach activities to improve the health of the community.

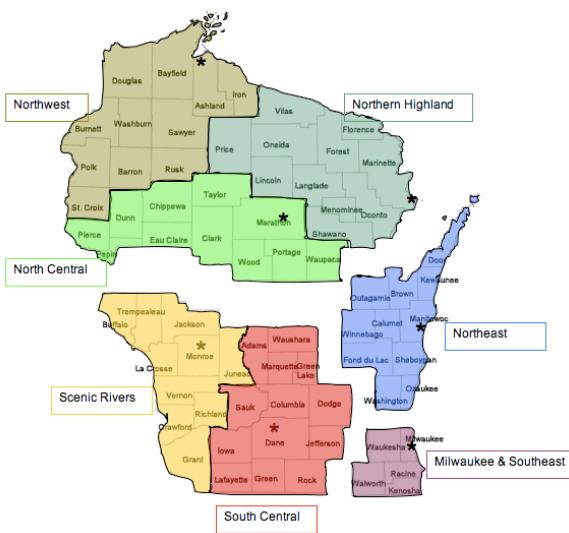
AHEC programs receive federal funding as “Basic AHEC” programs for their first six to twelve years of operation, depending upon the number of centers they develop. Thereafter a successful AHEC may apply for continued funding under the “Model AHEC” program. In both phases, programs reapply for federal funding every three years. To qualify for continued funding, in addition to meeting the federal programmatic requirements, programs must show significant match (at least 1:1) from state or other non-federal resources.

Organization of the AHEC Program in Wisconsin

Development of the AHEC program in Wisconsin started with a small state grant in 1990. The program received federal funding as a “Basic AHEC” from 1991-1999, and has received continuous funding as a “Model AHEC” from 1999 to the present. Although the program was created jointly by the UW Medical School and the Medical College of Wisconsin, with a program office at each school, MCW ended its formal role in the program at the conclusion of the “Basic” phase. The UWMS (now UW School of Medicine and Public Health) has hosted the program since 1999. The UWSMPH provides space, administrative and program staff for the AHEC Statewide Program Office on the UW-Madison campus. The Program Office provides oversight of statewide activities in partnership with a statewide board of directors composed of representatives from each Center, the academic partners, and state and community organizations.

Today, the Wisconsin AHEC programs serve all the health professions programs in the state. Over the last 18 years, project partnerships have included (in addition to the two medical schools) over 20 BSN nursing programs, eight advanced degree nursing programs, three physician assistant programs, three social work programs, the UW School of Pharmacy, the MPH programs, and a range of allied health and pre-professional programs at the 13 UW System campuses, 21 private colleges, two tribal colleges and 13 UW System two-year campuses. Wisconsin AHEC Centers collaborate regionally with the Wisconsin Technical College System (16 colleges with 47 campuses and numerous outreach centers) particularly the campuses offering associate degree nursing programs and a variety of other health professions technical training programs. Wisconsin AHEC has also worked with family practice residencies sponsored by the UWSMPH, Medical College of Wisconsin and La Crosse-Mayo programs, with a particular focus on the rural training track programs. The UW-Madison Health Sciences Library and medical libraries at Marshfield Clinic and Gundersen Clinic have worked with AHEC to extend access to library information services to community-based training sites. In addition, several state agencies and statewide organizations are active partners in Wisconsin AHEC programs, including the Division of Public Health, the Department of Workforce Development, the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health (WORH) and the Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association (WPCA).

In 2006, Wisconsin AHEC became a partner in the development of the community engagement component of the UW Institute for Clinical and Translational Research (UW-ICTR), which received a grant from the NIH Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA) program in the fall of 2007. The UW-ICTR community engagement program will place Regional Research Coordinators in at least three of the AHEC regional offices, and develop Regional Research Councils in those regions. AHEC is also an active partner with the UWSMPH in development of the Wisconsin Academy of Rural Medicine (WARM) and the Academy for Center-city Medical Education (ACME).



Wisconsin AHEC Regions

AHEC Regional Service Areas/centers

During the first three years of the program, Wisconsin AHEC developed four Centers encompassing the entire state: one single-county urban Center (Milwaukee AHEC) and three Centers with a mix of urban and rural populations, Northern AHEC serving 38 counties in the northern half of the state, Southwest AHEC serving 20 counties in south central and southwest Wisconsin, and Eastern AHEC serving Door County, the Lake Winnebago region and southeastern Wisconsin. The population of the four regions was roughly equal when the original centers were created. However, in terms of geographic reach and number of rural underserved areas the regions were very different.

In 2003 the Centers reconfigured their service areas to improve program delivery. Milwaukee AHEC assumed responsibility for Kenosha, Racine, Walworth and Waukesha counties in the southeast. Eastern AHEC then moved north to become Northeast AHEC, adding Brown and Outagamie counties to make an 11 county region. Southwest AHEC added Buffalo, Jackson and Trempealeau counties to its service area, for 22 counties total. Northern AHEC continued to serve a 33 county region in the northern half of the state.

Despite these changes, as the centers transitioned from grant-making agencies (disbursing small grants to a variety of partners) to service agencies relying on their own professional staff to develop and deliver programs, the challenges presented by the size of their service areas, particularly Northern and Southwest, became more and more apparent.

In 2006-7, in preparation for its 2008-2011 Model AHEC renewal application, Wisconsin AHEC undertook a comprehensive assessment of its programs, partnerships and program direction, including evaluation of the service areas of each center. It also reviewed the configuration of successful AHEC programs in other states with comparable populations and geography. This process culminated in a decision to divide the Northern region into three centers: North Central (Wausau), Northwest (Ashland) and Northern Highland (Marinette). Each of these northern regions serves 11 counties. The original Northern AHEC 501(c) 3 will serve as fiscal agent for all three northern centers. The Southwest area has divided into one 10-county region, to be known as Scenic Rivers (Cashton), and one 13-county region, to be known as South Central (Madison). The former Southwest AHEC will serve as fiscal agent for these two centers.

This change will enable AHEC to locate staff closer to the region to be served, reducing travel time and creating a program most responsive to local needs. The Board also hoped that creating new centers might leverage additional federal funding (the federal award amount is determined solely by the number of centers a program operates). **Wisconsin AHEC was awarded federal Model AHEC funding for all seven centers with its 2008-2011 competing renewal application.** The new 3-year award will total over \$1.7 million for the three-year period. The exact amount is determined annually, and has been set at \$574,772 for 2008-09 (an increase of 66% over the 2007-08 award).

The new federal funds will enable the centers to expand their partnerships with the UWSMPH and the UW System campuses in each region, as well as the Wisconsin Technical College System campuses, private colleges and universities, local health departments and other agencies. Ultimately, however, in order to maintain statewide programs and reach the full potential of the new centers, the program will need an increase in state and other funding.