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SHAWANO COUNTY RURAL HEALTH INITIATIVE GARNERS \$75,000 *U.S. Senator Kohl Secures Funds for Program that Reaches out to Farming Families*

U.S. Senator Herb Kohl announced recently that he secured \$75,000 for the Shawano County Rural Health Initiative, a program that works to address the health care needs of family farmers. The funding will be used to support data collection on the health status of farm families, farm family health education outreach, and direct service costs associated with providing certain health services.

“We are grateful for the support from Senator Kohl and his office,” said Tom Anderson, Shawano County agriculture agent and president of the initiative. “When the second most dangerous career is coupled with today’s health care cost escalation, the result is a crisis in the farming community. These funds will help us assist more farm families to manage that crisis.”

The funding is included in the fiscal year 2005 omnibus budget, which Congress approved in late November. Kohl is a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and its Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and had identified the project as a priority for funding.

“Too many family farmers in Wisconsin lack access to affordable health care,” Kohl said. “We need to invest in initiatives like this one that reach out to area farmers and ensure that they have the necessary information and health services for their families. The Shawano County Rural Health Initiative is doing good work, and I am so pleased we could provide additional funding.”

According to the Wisconsin Public Health and Health Policy Institute, 20 percent of Wisconsin dairy farm families have no health insurance, and another 41 percent are covered by high deductible, major medical plans. Four out of five farm families lack any insurance coverage for check-ups and preventive care.

Business, health care and agricultural leaders created the Shawano County Rural Health Initiative in 2003 to address the lack of rural health care in the region. Major supporters include Genex Cooperative Inc., Mid-County Cooperative, ThedaCare, AgVentures LLC, Bay Lakes Cooperative, Premier Community Bank and Greenstone Farm Credit Services. The Mielke Family Foundation, Shawano Area Foundation, and the Shawano Medical Center Foundation have also contributed.

In February of this year, Rhonda Strebel was hired as the rural health coordinator, and she began making house calls to farm families to provide health information and education, referrals to area services, and screenings for such problems as blood pressure, cholesterol and skin cancer. In addition, Strebel organizes health screenings and events throughout the community at events or locations frequented by farmers.

For more information, media may contact Megan Wilcox, ThedaCare marketing, at (920) 830-5847 or pager (920) 554-0730, or Lynn Becker or Zach Goldberg in Sen. Kohl’s office at (202) 224-5653.

A Bridge to Improve and Sustain Health Care for the Farming Community.