Wisconsin Office of Rural Health Supports Emergency Services-
Frequent User Program

In 2010, the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health (The Office) provided funding to Community Memorial Hospital in Oconto Falls to conduct an assessment of the impact of frequent users on the Hospital’s emergency department and local EMS. “Frequent users” are defined as individuals who use EMS and emergency department services frequently and out of proportion to others in the community. There can be many reasons for this frequent use: lack of transportation, inability to treat chronic conditions on their own, etc. Whatever the reason, the impact on patients, EMS and hospitals can be significant. Frequent users:

- often have chronic health problems that are better treated outside an emergency setting;
- use ambulance and emergency room time that may be needed for acute emergencies;
- use EMS and emergency room staff time that is already limited, in particular EMS staff that are often volunteers;
- can cause EMS and hospitals to incur significant costs.

Community Memorial, in conjunction with Oconto Falls Area Ambulance Service and Oconto County Department of Health and Human Services, reviewed Hospital, EMS and Department records to identify the most frequent users of their services. Based on this review, they found that frequent users generally fall into two categories: those with substance abuse and/or behavioral problems, and those who seek care through emergency services rather than a clinical setting. They calculated an annual cost, in terms of non-reimbursed services, across all agencies of almost $260,000. Based on this assessment, the Office of Rural Health has funded a pilot project titled the “Frequent User Program”, in Oconto County. The Office is providing funds to hire temporary, part time staff which includes a behavioral health case manager who will work with substance abuse/behavioral health patients, and an emergency room services assistant, who will work with those patients using emergency services for primary care reasons. The goal is to inform patients of appropriate services and how to access them, reducing the number of patients using costly emergency services. The agencies will evaluate the impact on frequent users and decide the sustainability of the program. The Wisconsin Office of Rural Health expects to fund the program through November 2011.