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News Release
Nov. 17, 2026

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UAMS Researchers Receive $3.5 Million to Implement Telehealth Program to Improve Hearing Health in Rural Schools

LITTLE ROCK — A national nonprofit organization has awarded $3.5 million to researchers at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) to implement a new telehealth program to screen for hearing loss in rural Arkansas schools.

The Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) awarded the funds to Samantha K. Robler, Au.D., Ph.D., and Susan D. Emmett, M.D., MPH, researchers in the UAMS Center for Hearing Health Access, to implement findings from a study they led on school-based hearing programs in rural Alaska from 2017-2020.

The findings from the landmark Hearing Norton Sound Study, which was funded by PCORI, were published June 15, 2022, in *The Lancet Global Health Journal*. They found that referring children to specialists through telemedicine provided significantly quicker access to follow-up care compared to the standard school referral letter sent home to families.

Robler, a nationally recognized expert in telehealth technologies who is the associate director of the center, which is part of the UAMS College of Medicine Department of Otolaryngology — Head and Neck Surgery, said the participating schools in Arkansas are in Clark, Garland, Hempstead, Logan, Monroe, Montgomery, Newton, Polk, and Union counties.

“We’ll work with families, school staff, healthcare providers, and community partners to adapt the program to local needs,” Robler said. “We’ll also develop a train-the-trainer approach so local leaders can prepare school staff to conduct screenings and coordinate follow-up. Audiologists will review results remotely and provide recommendations for children who do not pass screening.”

The implementation project, “Implementing Enhanced Hearing Screening and Specialty Telehealth Follow-Up to Achieve Hearing Health Access in Rural Schools,” will bring an evidence-based hearing screening and specialty telehealth follow-up program into

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rural schools in California and Alaska as well. Robler and Emmett are overseeing the entire effort and have co-investigators helping in the other states, as well as representatives from advisory boards in all three states guiding the work.

Regarding the earlier study in Alaska, Robler said, “Children offered specialty telehealth follow-up were more than twice as likely to receive care after screening, and they received care more than 17 times faster than children whose families received a referral letter.

“The new project will help schools put the specialty telehealth follow-up approach into routine practice,” she added. “Across the three states, we expect the program to reach about 14,531 children eligible for school hearing screening during active implementation.”

Emmett and Robler’s initial randomized controlled trial examined hearing health disparities and barriers to accessing hearing care in 15 rural Alaskan communities. It was the first study to demonstrate that telemedicine can reduce a key rural health disparity in access to care.

Emmett, who is director of the center, said that study found that even when children are identified with hearing loss at school, they often never receive the care they need, due to a lack of follow-up to screening programs and a dearth of specialists in rural areas.

“The purpose of the [Hearing Norton Sound] study was to test whether telemedicine can address this challenge,” she said, “providing a way for rural children to promptly enter the healthcare system to receive the specialty care they need.”

This latest funding award to UAMS has been approved pending completion of PCORI’s business and programmatic review and issuance of a formal award contract. The funds are scheduled to be received over four years.

Even the most impactful findings from clinical research studies can take years to make it into widespread clinical practice. Cutting that lag time and smoothing the path to uptake is the focus of this PCORI-funded project.

“In addition to funding patient-centered comparative clinical effectiveness research, PCORI funds implementation projects like this one to support the use of findings from PCORI-funded research in clinical practice,” said PCORI Executive Director Nakela L. Cook, M.D., MPH.

Emmett is a professor in the College of Medicine Department of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery and the Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health at UAMS. Robler, an assistant professor in the otolaryngology department, is also a senior administrative advisor at Norton Sound Health Corporation in Nome, Alaska, a tribally owned and operated independent not-for-profit organization that was the tribal health partner for the

seminal study. Emmett and Robler are longtime collaborators and led the study before coming to UAMS in 2022.

PCORI's mission is to fund patient-centered CER designed to provide patients and those who care for them with evidence to make better-informed healthcare decisions.

UAMS is the state's only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; hospitals in Little Rock and Bryant; an orthopaedic hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute, and the Institute for Community Health Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS' clinical enterprise, including affiliated hospitals in Pine Bluff, Helena-West Helena, Mena, and Warren. UAMS is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 3,813 students and 1,030 medical residents and fellows, and two dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with about 12,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children's, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube or Instagram.

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