Southern Rural Access Program: William Hewitt

One client of the East Texas Health Access Network was William Hewitt, a 68-year-old Center, Texas, resident with numerous health problems, including cancer, emphysema and a bad heart. Until 2006, he also had painful, diseased teeth. They all had to come out, a dental surgeon told him.

But how could this retired manager of a chicken processing plant possibly pay for the procedure? It was dental work, so Medicare wouldn't help, he was told. He and his wife had no private dental coverage, and he certainly couldn't pay out of pocket.

Because of his overall poor health, his teeth had to be removed in a hospital setting; performing the procedure in a dental office would be too risky, the dental surgeon told him.

Facing a big hospital bill on top of the surgeon's fee, Hewitt called every organization he could think of for help and got none—until someone told him to try the East Texas Health Access Network.

The response there was quick and positive, he says. The network staff made arrangements for him to have his teeth removed at a Houston hospital by University of Texas dental students under the supervision of a dentist.

That's what he did, his cost—including dentures and two fittings—totaling just over $1,000. "I still don't know what would have happened without their help," Hewitt says, referring to the network. "They've done something for me that no one else in the country would do, not even the government."