Gov. Mike Leavitt says his business recruiting efforts last fall have borne fruit: three health information management companies have committed to bringing more than 1,000 new jobs to economically challenged rural Utah.

Indeed, state officials said the three companies -- Wipro Technologies of Bangalore, India; Marlton, N.J.'s MedQuist; and Practice Rx, based in Phoenix -- actually could top 1,500 new jobs for Utah by 2008, with at least several hundred expected by the end of this year.

The governor, who unveiled the partnerships Wednesday, said the infusion of new employment -- with most positions offering average wages of $12 to $15 -- represented "a major step in carving out Utah as a world leader in health informatics."

Training, and some employment, will be offered at an as-yet-unspecified number of Utah's 20 high-tech "Smart Sites" throughout the state's rural areas. However, many of the jobs will be "at home" opportunities.

Seeds for the announcement were planted during receptions held last November at the governor's mansion, where Leavitt and economic development staffers wooed company representatives.

Part of the deal: access for the three companies to more than $3 million in state training assistance funds.

"Once we started focusing on the industry and zeroing in, they paid attention to us," Leavitt said. "These are better-than-average jobs. . . . This is an ideal partnership for our rural smart sites. It's great off-site work."

Blaine Bergeson, chief executive for Practice Rx, said his company's 500 new jobs will be split between home work stations and business offices. Practice Rx, a medical billing firm, is a subsidiary of the 2,800-member Arizona State Physicians Association.

"We currently employ 20 people in Arizona, but are acquiring billing companies nationwide," Bergeson said.

MedQuist nationally employs 7,000 medical transcriptionists -- specially trained processors of dictated doctors' reports, as well as lab and diagnostic evaluations and clinical correspondence. It looks to train 100 Utahns within the next couple months, and 500 within five years.

"We recently brought 200 plus jobs to North Dakota through a similar program," said Blaine Prince, manager of the company's Salt Lake City client service center. "Now, we are looking at going into mostly rural Utah. . . . This will give a lot of folks the chance to earn a pretty fair wage as independent contractors working from their homes using a computer and the Internet."

Amy Rees Lewis, representing Wipro, said the international company -- which has dozens of Fortune 500 companies as clients and employs 14,000 worldwide -- said the several hundred jobs it will bring to Utah will range from lower-paying health-care transaction-processing positions to high-paying medical professional positions.

She declined to be more specific on Wipro's plans, saying corporate officials plan next month to release more detailed information.

However, Wes Curtis -- state planning coordinator and liaison to the governor for rural economic issues -- said each of the companies committed to providing "up to 500" new jobs.
Curtis said that overall, 300-500 new paychecks should be generated from the initiative by year's end. "We actually hope to get ramped up and start many of these within 60 days," he said.