

Horizon Health Care Launches 26 Site Network

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Howard — It took pooling resources, but a network connecting 26 community health centers in South Dakota and North Dakota was unveiled here last week.

The network, which has connected health centers throughout the past year, allows for video conferencing and telemedicine capabilities.

John Mengenhausen, CEO for Horizon Health Care, Inc. in Howard, hosted a press conference Wednesday that showed off the features of the new system for local representatives, officials from the USDA Rural Development office, Dakota Network of Community Health Centers and Sen. Tim Johnson.

The network was funded through a combination of grants from the USDA Rural Development and a special appropriation made possible by Sen. Johnson.

"We're ready to roll out telemedicine," Mengenhausen said.

The network allows the 26 health centers to talk to one another, and also for connection to larger health care facilities for consultation purposes to determine if it's necessary to transfer a patient to a larger facility.

The network started as a pilot project with the 10 facilities association with Horizon Health Care, Inc., and this past year expanded to include facilities from Rural Health Care, Inc., Prairie Community Health, Inc., Community Health Care Association, Family Health Care Center, Sioux River Valley Community Health Center and Union County Health Foundation.

"It's all about pooling resources," said Tom Olson, executive director for Dakota Network.

"No one of us had the resources to do this alone," Johnson said. "It took a lot of resources and a lot of partners to make this happen. In South Dakota, that's how things usually happen if they're going to be successful."

Through the network, simultaneous calls can be made to as many as 24 locations. The equipment allows personnel to talk with each other, and they can share documents, view X-rays and view live video or still shots of an injury or a specific area on a patient.

One official at Avera McKennan said an important piece of the partnership was building a network that could connect to and work with existing networks at the larger health care facilities.

Mengenhausen said another feature being looked at is making mental health services available through video conferencing. They've been working with providers at other sites who are willing to try, he said, and have a basic Internet connection set up to see how it is received.

In a quick video conference with one psychiatrist, those present Wednesday were told about his excitement with having the video conference resource available so they can provide a direct service to consumers especially when it's difficult for some to drive to the places they can get the services.

One difficulty, however, is getting the proper paperwork on the new clients before the video conferencing takes place.

While the connections between the facilities are stable, the connection for the psychiatric portion is a simple Internet connection and isn't as stable, resulting in some static in the conversation. But, Mengenhausen said, if patients feel comfortable with the televised consultation feature, they will look to provide a more stable connection.

"We're really close to making it work," Mengenhausen said. "We're reaching a level where the connection will provide some real value."

Johnson said the implementation of this system is "a huge step" which "can only grow from here."

This connection, Johnson said, will allow the smaller communities access to new technology and cutting-edge issues.

USDA Rural Development State Director Lynn Jensen said this equipment will also allow for smaller communities to retain some of the elderly population who tend to leave communities when needed medical resources are unavailable.

"Those with primary care people available will sustain residents in assisted living facilities," he said.

Personnel at other sites said they were looking forward to different aspects of the system. While some are looking forward to the ability to avoid travel and hold meetings through a video conference, others are anxious to be able to talk with a doctor at another site and get a second opinion about an X-ray.

Mengenhausen said the only concern now is ironing out reimbursement issues with insurance companies. In response to that, Johnson said he would do what he could in Washington when it comes to reimbursement issues for the Medicare program.