

2014 Shirley Ann Munroe Leadership Award winner reshaping rural health care

As CEO of Chadron (Neb.) Community Hospital & Health Services, Harold Krueger has harnessed the power of broadband communications to reshape rural health care in western Nebraska, eastern Wyoming and southern South Dakota, while extending his hospital's reach deep into the rural communities it serves.

That commitment to enhancing care and communication through information technology (IT) and building healthier communities through outreach has helped earn Krueger the AHA's 2014 Shirley Ann Munroe Leadership Award, the association announced last week.

Named for the first director of the AHA's Section for Small or Rural Hospitals, the award recognizes the accomplishments of small or rural hospital leaders who have improved health care in their communities. In addition to announcing the award winner, the AHA named three award finalists: Michel Perry, M.D., president and CEO of FHN Memorial Hospital in Freeport, Ill; John Gardner, CEO of Yuma (Colo.) District Hospital; and William Sexton, CEO of Crossing Rivers Health in Prairie du Chien, Wis.

Krueger spearheaded the creation of the Rural Nebraska Healthcare Network, which offers broadband connectivity to rural providers. Broadband networks enable the transmission and sharing of medical images, electronic health records (EHR) and remote consultations and training of rural medical personnel.

The Nebraska network secured an \$18 million Federal Communications Commission grant in 2007 to help construct an 800-mile fiber optic, high-speed network that connects Chadron Community Hospital with eight other hospitals. It has improved the transmission of information, such as transmitting X-ray images from hospitals throughout the region and to



Krueger

Denver facilities where they are interpreted.

"It's of major importance for our emergency department, for our critical care programs, and we are continuing to build on that technology," Krueger says.

Chadron Community Hospital in 2011 converted completely to EHRs. For example, the system enables clinicians to query state records to find immunization information on patients. Also, images from its digital radiological system are accessible from the EHR. In July, the AHA's Hospitals & Health Networks magazine for the second consecutive year recognized the hospital as a "Most Wired" award recipient.

In announcing this year's Shirley Ann Munroe Leadership Award winner, the AHA cited Krueger's IT and other initiatives to improve patient safety and quality, and his hospital's participation in the national Hospital Engagement Network to reduce preventable readmissions and hospital-acquired conditions.

The AHA also noted the hospital's longstanding commitment to community outreach. It is built on a number of local and regional partnerships and alliances that provide a range of health care services to underprivileged and uninsured residents.

The hospital has three different food banks, partners with two community action agencies to provide low-cost dental services, and has collaborated to create "Closer to Home," a soup kitchen for the

area's homeless population. The hospital works with the local college and primary school systems to provide various nursing services, in addition to developing an alcohol education program with area law enforcement agencies.

Krueger recalled that when he first joined the hospital more than 20 years ago, "I convinced my board that I was in the people business and not the illness business."

"How do we keep people housed? If we can do that, I can keep them out of my emergency department," he says. "How do we take immunizations to them and say, 'you don't have to come to my castle?'"

The hospital has a successful employee wellness program, with more than a 70% participation rate. Employees are eligible for benefits, such as on-site fitness equipment, yearly lab profiles, confidential employee assistance programs, walking routes for all hospital facilities, formal group exercise sessions with a personal trainer, healthy vending machine options, immunizations and assistance with smoking/nicotine cessation. The hospital became a tobacco-free campus in July.

The hospital's latest health risk assessment shows the wellness program has contributed to a nearly 10% drop during the past year in the number of employees at high risk for developing diabetes. "If we can keep our employees disease-free, the benefits become immeasurable to the employees, their family and to our workforce," Krueger says.

Asked what has been key to his success as a rural health care leader, Krueger is quick to commend others. "I've got a board that will let me try new and different things," he says. "I have a very motivated department head structure and a quality medical staff. I've got all the keys lined up in a row for me. It's pretty hard to fail when you've got that much support."