Members in ACTION

RAPID DEPLOYMENT OF TELEHEALTH SERVICES FOR RURAL HOSPITALS FIGHTING COVID-19

Riverwood Healthcare Center | Aitkin, Minn.

How Riverwood Healthcare Center (RHCC) in Aitkin, Minn., quickly deployed Zoom for Business to virtually treat patients amidst the coronavirus pandemic.

Although the county had not seen any positive COVID-19 cases at the time of writing, Riverwood Healthcare Center in Aitkin, Minn., a 25-bed critical access hospital located about 130 miles north of Minneapolis, is actively preparing.

To continue to meet the needs of its community, RHCC quickly implemented a telehealth network that offers patients virtual care in their homes. Health care leaders chose Zoom for Business as its platform, partially because they currently because are currently licensed with Zoom for virtual meetings but also, it's reasonably priced, easy to implement quickly, and HIPAA-compliant.

After two successful weeks of executing the virtual care model at their hospital, RHCC can share some lessons for other hospital and health systems looking to do the same.

Use Project Management Skills

Project managing during any time of crisis is key, said Liz Dean, Riverwood Healthcare Center's director of strategy and business development. "You want to focus on dividing and conquering tasks, removing barriers and supporting each other," Dean said. "We realized immediately that at a time when people are wearing multiple hats, we had to have a strategic, streamlined process to make this happen smoothly."

Plan Structured, Daily Huddles

The virtual care program took off quickly, and health care leaders had to accommodate to this new model of care. The staff conducted daily meetings and used all forms of communication to check in on staff to ensure they were prepared.

"In hindsight, I think it would have been beneficial to have one morning huddle for logistics/workflow and one afternoon/evening huddle with everyone to keep the group up to date and discuss next steps, said Gina Henderson, Riverwood's manager of health information coding With a background in process improvement, Henderson was a natural fit to help launch this effort.

Train Providers in Advance

While there was some resistance to telehealth and virtual care before the COVID-19 pandemic, health care leaders at RHCC have now embraced this emerging model of care. Now, they can train a provider-nurse team to treat patients via its virtual care network in less than 10 minutes. After the first day of the launch, leaders learned that it was best to train clinicians the day before they were scheduled to treat patients.

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"We started thinking ahead, asking the providers to look ahead and took a more planned approach." Henderson said. "That worked out well and we found the providers were excited and anxious to start working."

Find a Physician Champion

Finding a physician to serve as your program's champion can go a long way and provide a "tremendous voice in how successful this can be," Dean said.

At Riverwood, that voice comes from Tim Arnold, M.D., chief medical and information officer and a family physician who has led information technology implementation, including electronic medical record use, at the hospital for 15 years. During the two-week launch of the program, Arnold has conducted several virtual appointments for patients ranging from 1 to 96 years old.

"The physician champion is essential," Dean emphasized. "Just to hear his enthusiasm for the care he has been able to offer patients while in the comfort of their homes through Zoom has been great and really enhances the patient experience."

Focus on Partnerships

Getting your own hospital to think about partnerships locally, statewide and nationally is critical to the success of surviving this global pandemic and ensuring patients get the care they need.

"This is a rare time when we're all trying to accomplish the same thing," Dean said. "We're all fast and furiously trying to come up with solutions and there is no need to do it on your own."

RHCC leaders found it helpful to collaborate and use other resources, particularly from the AHA and AVIA, the digital health innovation platform, as well as other hospitals, to share best practices for resources. "There's no other way to do this, in my opinion," Dean said.

"We would not have been able to do this without the AHA and AVIA," Dean said. "They gave us reassurance we were on the right track. And when we faced skepticism in how we were doing things, to have our CMIO be able to say, 'I just got off the phone with AHA, and other hospitals are implementing similar platforms,' that offered a level of reassurance."

Look to the Future of Health Care Delivery

On a big-picture level, health care leaders across the nation are embracing innovation right now as they embrace the crisis and turn it into opportunity, said Dean.

"I believe this is transforming healthcare and hopefully for the longer term," she added.

So far, Riverwood's health care leaders have rolled out the new model of care to its family and specialty providers and rehabilitation therapists. Using Zoom has also allowed them to connect families during a time of isolation, which RHCC saw when one of its oncology providers was able to connect with patient in the nursing home and include a family member in the visit virtually as well.

"Being able to connect families at this time has also brought a lot of comfort to patients, caregivers and providers," Henderson said.

In addition, RHCC is researching artificial intelligence options that could expand its options and help manage volume.

"I did not think our small critical access hospital would be exploring AI quite yet," Henderson said, "but we are excited to embrace the opportunities of digital solutions to enhance medicine, and some of these tools will be linked directly to manage a potential surge of COVID-19 cases."

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