

Monroe County Health Department Showcases Maternal-Fetal Telemedicine Capabilities

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Participants shown, left to right, are Administrator Chad Kent, Southwestern District; April Golson, Telehealth Program Manager; Cynthia Martens-Lamont, director of pharmacy/interim CEO, Monroe County Hospital; Dr. Lindsay Harbin, Family Practice/Obstetrician; U.S. Senator Doug Jones; Dr. Angela Powell, Family Practice/ Obstetrician; Danny Rickert, Chief Policy Officer, USA Health System; and Ashton Hennig, Manager of Outreach and Special Projects, USA Health System.

U.S. Senator Doug Jones and his associates visited the Monroe County Health Department July 26 to learn more about the new maternal-fetal telemedicine program, a collaborative partnership of the department with the University of South Alabama Health System, Monroe County Hospital, and local physicians.

Presenters discussed challenges in providing maternal-fetal medicine service in rural areas of southwest Alabama and ways the telehealth program allows patients to avoid traveling long distances from their communities for follow-up visits. These maternal-fetal telehealth clinics started several months ago and are held every other Wednesday at Monroe County Health Department. Patients have expressed their appreciation for these important prenatal services, and plans are now underway to open another maternal-fetal telemedicine clinic at the Escambia County Health Department.

Telehealth is a major benefit to patients who face difficulties in accessing needed health care because of barriers. These include social determinants of health such as a lack of transportation or requirements to spend time away from work or family obligations to reach appointments at distant locations. Telehealth provides a local resource that allows the patient convenient access to important health care that they greatly need, but which they otherwise may have difficulty accessing due to its distance from their home.

Southwestern District Administrator Chad Kent said, "This event gave us an opportunity to showcase our public health partnership and our capabilities to provide specialty care to women at high risk for pregnancy complications. Senator Jones asked a lot of questions, and our local referring physicians spoke positively about the importance of this new service provided by our department."

The Office of Telehealth works to promote telecommunications technologies for administrative, educational, telehealth and telemedicine services throughout the state. With this technology, patients can simply go to their county health department to have a medical appointment with a health care clinician who may be located hundreds of miles away. Patients receive the same level of care without distant trips for medical appointments.

The telehealth carts are equipped with a high definition video camera and codec, a computer, two 24-inch monitors, a Bluetooth stethoscope, and a handheld examination camera with three lenses. All telehealth sessions are HIPAA compliant and encrypted. For these specialty appointments, an ultrasound specialist from the University of South Alabama goes to Monroe County Health Department for each of these clinics and connects the ultrasound equipment to the ADPH telehealth cart so that the specialist at USA in Mobile can see the ultrasound exam while it is being performed and talk with the technician and the patient. This simulates the same quality of care as if the patient were in the specialist's office.

The Office of Telehealth provides training and technical support staff on the proper use of the custom-built telehealth carts. For the maternal-fetal telemedicine appointments, a county public health nurse assists the "distant" specialist and follows the provider's instructions according to the ADPH Maternal-Fetal Medicine Nursing Protocol. ADPH nursing and social work protocols have been developed to provide specific guidance to ADPH staff about what will be required for these specialized telehealth appointments.