

Telehealth Partnership Improves Access to Care for VA Patients in Alabama: Ribbon Cutting Held

A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held November 21 to announce a new collaborative agreement with the Alabama Public Health Telehealth Network, Birmingham Veterans Affairs Medical Center, and the Cullman County Health Department to provide telehealth services to veterans.

Veterans can now go to the health department and connect remotely for a health care visit with their providers at the Birmingham VA, using a secure audio-video internet connection.

Telehealth is a major benefit to patients who face difficulties in accessing needed health care due to barriers such as lack of transportation or requirements to spend time away from work or family obligations to get to appointments at distant locations.

The importance of telehealth to the department has been emphasized by the creation of a separate Office of Telehealth located in Field Operations. According to Office Director Michael Smith, 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.

The collaboration with the VA began with a chance meeting between Chuck Lail, director of the Office of Primary Care and Rural Health, and a former colleague, Dr. Daniel C. Dahl. The support of Dr. Randall Weaver, Deputy Chief of Staff with the Montgomery/Tuskegee VA, sparked and supported this initiative from the beginning. Telehealth program coordinator Murray Lewis was also very instrumental in launching this partnership that helps ensure veterans' access to health care in rural areas.

"As you know, the veterans give so much of their lives to protect us and this country and have done so through the ages," said Congressman Robert Aderholt at the event. "One of the commitments that we make to them is that we are going to provide health care. Not only will telehealth cut down on the veterans' travel, it will allow them to see a doctor quickly. They risk their lives on a day-to-day basis, those that are serving and those who have served, and this is a way for us to try to make sure we help our veterans."

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.

Northern District Social Work Manager Tammye Brammer assists VA patients and the health care provider at the Birmingham VA Medical Center. Ms. Brammer said, "As a social worker, I believe that telehealth will serve as a major benefit to patients who face difficulties in accessing needed health care due to barriers such as no transportation or lack of funds to purchase gas for transportation to get to appointments at distant locations. Telehealth will provide a local resource that will allow the patient access to important care that they greatly need, but may have difficulty accessing due to it being too far away from their home."

She added, "I believe this will be a positive component/service for local county health departments once a pay structure is established among insurance companies that encompasses both an origination site fee as well as coverage for the clinician or services that are being provided from the distant location. Because telehealth is fairly new, there are many things that need to be ironed out, but overall it is going to be a huge benefit to patients statewide to have these carts in their local health departments. The possibilities are endless."

ADPH presently has telehealth services available in 35 county health departments. In addition, the department recently received funding from several grants including the Appalachian Regional Commission, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. With the combined funding from these three grants, the ADPH will have 60 county health departments with telehealth capacity by June.



Northern District Social Work Manager Tammye Brammer demonstrates the way telehealth is used with Congressman Robert Aderholt at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Veterans are able to overcome many barriers as a result of this partnership.