

Barbour Health Department Offers Telehealth Service

By Penny Carter / The Eufaula Tribune

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A new Telehealth program being instituted at county health departments across the state will allow patients and providers to talk across long distances in streaming real-time video where they can see each other.

Corey Kirkland, with the Alabama Department of Public Health, County Health Departments, stated that the Telehealth medicine carts will allow providers, with assistance of a nurse or other assistant at the patient's location, to monitor vitals, to look in a patient's ears, check your heart, check a rash along with many other applications, and can even be used for things like counseling. He said, "It doesn't replace the nurse or the doctor; it's just basically a delivery method. It gives them another tool to keep patients from having to travel a long distance to see a doctor.

"We haven't used the cart at the Barbour County Health Department yet, but I have a feeling once people know we have it that it won't be long. Our partners range from UAB, Auburn University, Children's Hospital, the University of South Alabama and several more; it can be used with one of these partners that identify a patient that they need to see, whether it is monthly or quarterly – whatever the basis is – there would be no need for that patient to travel a long distance to go see the doctor...everything can be done over the telemedicine equipment at the health department. We expect to see other partners coming on; there has been talk of dermatology being one of them, and the counseling is being explored quite a bit. The VA is actually running a pilot in north Alabama in one of those counties.

"The service could come from one of our private providers, or it could come from one of the federal government providers," commented Kirkland. "We will just have to see which provider identifies a particular need in the area.

"Essentially, it's available to anyone," Kirkland said. "If you fit the role of the partners we have right now, it wouldn't matter if you have private insurance, Medicaid or anything like that. It would just be if you are in that role of care that they are providing at this point. We hope in the future that this is available to everyone that decides to partner with us no matter what type of care it is. We want it to be open to everyone."

A telemedicine cart is equipped with a computer with video and audio capability and the encryption necessary to satisfy the patient confidentiality portion of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). It has a hand held cameras with three lenses – a general viewing lens, a dermatology lens and a lens for viewing inside ears and mouths.

Kirkland noted that the equipment is also useful for the health department personnel. The equipment is used for training sessions and classes, staff meetings, and video conferencing. "This will help cut down on time lost to traveling for staff to meetings and for training," he said.