



WIND Brings Education About Telemedicine

Telehealth in Wyoming: Not Ancient History

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If the future is online, Wyoming patients are in good hands, thanks to early adoption and the advent of handheld tech that most Wyoming patients have access to.

The management of a contract for telehealth connectivity services now lives within the University of Wyoming in Laramie. Among the work is delivering educational opportunities to Wyoming physicians and healthcare providers, says Corey Jenkins, Project Coordinator for the Wyoming Telehealth Network. It's a division of Wyoming Institute for Disabilities (or WIND), and it's through WIND that the Office of Rural Health extended a contract for the continued development of access to telemedicine in Wyoming.

Created in July 2016, the Wyoming Office of Telehealth Network or WyTN took over supporting telehealth and telemedicine work from a Sheridan-based contractor, Ptolemy Data Systems, a manager of IT systems. Prior to that, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center had a role in telehealth's emergence, too. Much has changed in telehealth since CRMC was involved in what was then an emerging technology with a bright future but an unclear method for achieving affordable and serviceable hardware.

"When we began WyTN, telehealth was a major dashboard item," Jenkins says. "More and more articles in professional journals were discussing it, and the writing was on the walls. It's in professionals' best interests to adopt it and use it with their patients."

Wyoming had a good footing, but it needed the support of a

well-established institution to keep moving forward.

WIND's work serves communities throughout the state, ensuring that people with disabilities, families and professionals have access to education, training, early interventions and other services. WIND also had established roots in telecommunications and connectivity throughout the state.

In this case, the footing was in video communications.

"WIND had adopted Zoom well before we had this other work with WyTN," Jenkins says. "It's probably part of the reason we were chosen for the contract."

Zoom is a cloud-based service creating high-quality audio and video connections across mobile devices, desktops, telephones and conference room systems. Anyone with a smartphone can use it, which is great news for patients. More importantly to healthcare experts however is that Zoom is a HIPAA-compliant connection.

While the contract is relatively new to WyTN, the work is hardly new to Wyoming.

More than a decade ago, Dr. James Bush began serving as Wyoming Medicaid Medical

Director with the Wyoming Department of Health.

"I had no budget, no staff, but I was asked to work on telehealth in Wyoming," Bush said. "If the state were going to be involved, we needed to create an electronic road system but not dictate where patients received care."

First step? A bridge.

That's a costly device that allowed patients anywhere in Wyoming to connect with specialists and primary care physicians.

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Because the cost of the equipment was high at \$500,000 per bridge, Bush said, it was installed sparingly but strategically in state offices to create private access points for patients.

That included the Wyoming Department of Family Services, with its field offices throughout the state. DFS already had privacy practices in place as well as the space. The effort required legislative support to get going in the mid-2000s.

A Rock Springs patient, for example, would set up an appointment with a neurologist in Casper and go to the DFS field office, where the visit would take place in a conference room behind a closed door and with a secure video camera and voice connection as well as a large screen TV.

That technology is now obsolete with the adoption of smartphones and far better Internet connectivity, Bush said. Patients don't have to leave their home, though they do sometimes need to visit another clinic for access to a specialist.

That might be the case for a stroke patient in need of a follow-up visit, explains Dr. David Wheeler of Wyoming Medical

Center. His area of expertise is in neurology, and he's been a longtime supporter of telehealth for specialists in Wyoming.

"With affordable audio video solutions, we've been able to see patients (via video link) closer to home," Wheeler says. "That saves a lot of time – sometimes two to four hours – for what is a relatively short visit."

Physicians also use it for educational training and staff meetings, Jenkins says.

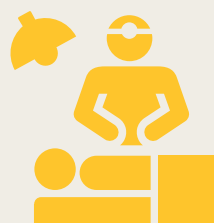
The Zoom license not only makes it accessible, but also means the connection is HIPAA-compliant. Today, more than 280 physicians, specialists and other healthcare professionals in Wyoming hold a state-funded Zoom license.

With telehealth being increasingly adopted by patients, primary care and specialists in Wyoming, Medicaid has since allowed for full reimbursement at Medicaid rates, Jenkins said, even when the patient is sitting at home.

"We've taken down as many barriers as we can," Bush said. "And physicians are using it." 

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