

Complementing Services Before and During COVID

Rural Provider Relies on Telehealth Technology to Deliver Better Care

Author: Pam Malinoski

Unity Medical Center based in Grafton, North Dakota, is no newcomer to telehealth. Since the facility is located in a rural area and serves patients throughout a wide geographical area, it relied on telehealth technology years before the world ever heard of COVID-19. As a result, it was well versed and positioned to be able to adapt to the global pandemic during the last year, always putting the care of its patients first.

Unity Medical Center participated in a survey project conducted by the Great Plains Telehealth Resource Assistance Center (gpTRAC) and the Primary Care Office in North Dakota.



Photo description: Unity Medical Center, Grafton Family Clinic

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Connecting With Specialists for Years

About seven years ago, Unity Medical Center began a partnership with Altru Hospital in Grand Forks, North Dakota, to provide specialty care as needed to patients in the Grafton area.

“For instance, we could connect our patients with a pediatric psychology provider located in Fargo through Zoom,” said Kari Novak, clinic manager at Unity Medical Center. “The technology has really helped us meet many mental health needs for our patients over the years, and that continues today. That means that a teenage patient may be seen virtually in two or three days instead of two or three weeks, and we can work with these specialists to continue providing ongoing care and medication management.”

Just a few months before the pandemic began, Unity Medical Center started a telehealth obstetrics service, which allowed its patients to be seen by their doctors in Grand Forks. About six or seven providers are currently participating. “Some patients are driving 60 miles to get to us, not to mention another 45 miles to get to Grand Forks,” Novak said. “Now, they can connect virtually for prenatal appointments and have ultrasounds done at our facility.”

Unity Medical Center has also tapped specialists in nephrology, wound care, pulmonary care, and other areas.



Photo description: Unity Medical Center

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COVID Applications

When COVID-19 began in early 2020, many healthcare providers were concerned about their elderly patients. “One thing I really noticed when we started down this journey during COVID was the ability to use telehealth to deliver routine care to our nursing home patients,” said Jennifer Holland, chief nursing officer at Unity Medical Center.

“We had a severe outbreak in our nursing homes here locally,” Novak explained. “For a while, no providers were allowed into the nursing homes for weekly or biweekly rounds. I know our providers were thankful to be able to lay eyes on their patients through virtual visits.” The nursing home staff helped patients connect with providers who had access to stethoscopes that would allow them to do virtual exams.

In addition, Unity Medical Center used the technology to allow distant family members to connect into weekly swing bed conferences. “During our weekly rounds that included the patient, a main provider, and other members of the care team that might involve occupational therapists, dieticians, respiratory therapists, or others, we were able to have family members connect virtually. That allowed everyone to discuss concerns, discharge instructions, or ask questions in one place.”

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