

Telehealth Keeps Behavioral Health Services Going at Volunteers of America

Virtual Visits “Single-handedly” Helps Organization Serve Those in Need

Author: Pam Malinoski

For Volunteers of America, Dakotas in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the ability to offer telehealth services to its clients during the COVID-19 pandemic was critical to keeping the organization's behavioral health programs going and serving clients in 2020.

“Although we had experience providing small telehealth groups as far back as 2014, I would say that this year, telehealth has single-handedly kept us providing services to clients,” said Amy Hartman, managing director of behavioral health at the Volunteers of America in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. “It’s allowed us to meet a critical need for our patients; they can continue receiving care while staying safely at home.”

Personal Training Prepares Staff

The team at the Great Plains Telehealth Resource & Assistance Center (gpTRAC) has worked with Volunteers of America, Dakotas over the years to help them implement telehealth programs successfully.

“We started working with gpTRAC in 2014 and had been running virtual small groups since then,” Hartman said. “About six months prior to the pandemic, we had gpTRAC conduct additional training. We learned about proper equipment set-up, lighting, and how to conduct high quality telehealth visits. Each staff member then met with gpTRAC instructor Mary DeVany to conduct a mock telehealth visit to make sure the technology was working and to practice before earning a certificate of completion.”

The serendipitous timing of this training was extremely beneficial. “This training and experience helped us essentially ‘flip the switch’ when the pandemic began,” Hartman said. “For example, we were able to transition more than 400 outpatient clients to telehealth services by March 15.”

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Although it took the patients a little time to adjust to the technology, telehealth visits are now running smoothly and additional advantages are apparent.

“We’ve noticed a better attendance rate in our outpatient services,” Hartman said. “It’s helped reduce barriers like transportation problems, which are common in our rural communities, as well as decreased the amount of anxiety some patients experience sitting in a waiting room before an appointment. Because South Dakota is so rural, we can reach more people who may not be able to normally receive services otherwise.”

Caring for Pregnant Women in Quarantine

Besides running its outpatient clinic, Volunteers of America, Dakotas also has a three-unit residential program called New Start, which is designed to help pregnant and parenting women with substance use disorders. Although New Start has occupancy for 42 women at one time, they are currently maintaining no more than 30 to accommodate social distancing protocols.

New Start runs a high-intensity program that provides about 30 hours of individual, family and group therapy per week for residents. In addition, a low-intensity treatment program is available, which offers about 10 hours of therapy per week. Women in the low-intensity program are allowed to check out of the residential facility to go to work or attend other appointments. Although the average stay is around four months, some residents are part of New Start for a year in total, depending on individual needs.

“We are only one of two programs in the state that allows the children of these women to stay with their moms while in treatment,” Hartman said. “During periods of restricted visitation, we were able to allow residents to connect with loved ones using virtual services. In addition, if residents need to quarantine due to the virus, we can easily conduct virtual visits and provide services to continue their treatment while keeping staff and other residents safe.”

Virtual Group Sessions Keeps Criminal Justice Initiative Running

The third area of service for Volunteers of America, Dakotas is providing substance use services to those involved in the criminal justice system.

“The state selected our organization and one other agency to provide telehealth services to individuals on parole or probation,” Hartman said. “Most of that work is virtual group therapy. We use evidence-based treatment to help with substance use disorders.”

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Head Start Allows Volunteers of America, Dakotas to Help Others

Since the gpTRAC training occurred before the pandemic hit, the Volunteers of America staff was able to hit the ground running. Word spread, and soon, the organization was fielding calls from other agencies for advice.

“We had transitioned our telehealth services so quickly in March that we were getting calls from others for help,” Hartman said. “They wanted to know how we were doing things, what forms we were using, and how things worked. We felt very blessed that we had that training ahead of time and were ready to roll when COVID hit.”

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