## Illinois agency achieves multiple goals as it grows telehealth offerings

A telehealth initiative that began as an effort to improve access to care for some rural residents served by North Central Behavioral Health Systems, Inc. in Illinois, has evolved into meeting numerous other goals for the community mental health organization and its clients.

Administration at the organization, which serves a seven-county region southwest of Chicago, have found that offering telehealth services also has improved staff productivity and now is opening up new possibilities for direct-to-consumer services. These benefits have justified the organization's decision to pursue telehealth service development absent outside funding support for the effort.

"We didn't approach it from the perspective of 'technology will solve our issues' but that it will help us achieve our strategic objectives," Jodi Mahoney, North Central Behavioral Health Systems' chief operating officer, told *MHW*.

### Evolution of idea

Technological solutions have been a priority area for the Illinois agency for some time: About 11 years ago it became an early adopter of an electronic health record (EHR) system vis-à-vis other behavioral health organizations. Telehealth services were initially seen by administrators as a strategy fro enhancing access to care for clients in the more rural areas served by the agency.

Rather than focus solely on telepsychiatry, or using technology to gain expanded access to a psychiatrist's time, North Central Behavioral Health Systems quickly turned its attention to making its group services more widely available via an online component. In this fashion, specialized treatment programs being offered at one service site now could be accessed by clients who normally visit other service locations, Mahoney said.

This now meant that specialized programs such as an intensive outpatient addiction services program and a Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) group could become more widely available across the organization. The groups are still run under the same state regulations and other guidelines that apply when participants in situated in the same room, Mahoney said. For example, the addiction groups are always limited to a maximum of 16 participants per facilitator.

The availability of this technology has significantly improved staff efficiency in the organization. Now when a therapist calls in sick, the agency does not automatically have to cancel the that day's group sessions facilitated by that person, as another staff members elsewhere is likely to be available to fill in using online technology, Mahoney said.

Facility-based teleconferencing became the organization's first, not last, phase of technology-driven services. Since the introduction of that service, the agency has

progressed into acquiring the capability to offer individual-to-individual services over the Internet, available to anyone with access to a computer with a broadband internet connection and a webcam.

Under its Health Directions initiative, North Central Behavioral Health Systems uses a telehealth software platform called TherapyLiveVisit to allow a client to participate in real-time interactive sessions with his/her clinician. This means that the goals for telehealth services overall in the agency have evolved from expanding access to improving efficiency to now maximizing convenience, North Central Behavioral Health Systems CEO Don Miskowiec told *MHW*.

Along the way, the organization has made some surprising discoveries, particularly related to which clients would embrace the online service option. Administrators assumed that there would be a generational pattern, with clients from their late teens to about age 40 being the most comfortable with the remote service option, but that has not been the case. Some younger clients have refused the online services, while some older clients have said they want to use telehealth services exclusively, so the responses have been all over the board, Mahoney said.

**Educating staff, clients**

Miskowiec believes the greatest key to success with telehealth services involves making sure that the staff person uses the technology enough to become comfortable with it. Once that happens, he said, that the staff person can in turn allay any fears the client might have about receiving services in this format.

In implementing the Health Directions initiative using the TherapyLiveVisit platform, North Central Behavioral Health Systems initially worked with a pilot group of about 10 clinicians in the organization, selected mainly on the basis of their role in the organization and their proficiency in using technology. Mahoney added, "Our primary clinical specialist was very innovative in his approach to using technology. He wanted to be the first adopter and to be able to assist his peers in overcoming any of the barriers they were facing."

Clinicians have to pay attention to some basics in using a laptop computer and a webcam to conduct a session with a patient, Miskowiec said. For example, the clinician must remain mindful of simple but forgettable details such as where to look on the computer to make sure the proper image is being conveyed to the client at the other location, he said.

In implementing Health Directions, North Central Behavioral Health System adheres to the American Telemedicine Association's Guide for Telemental Health Services in the effort's operations, Miskowiec said.

In moving more aggressively to direct-to-consumer telehealth services, North Central Behavioral Health Systems realizes that it needs to market these services to consumers and to get them more comfortable with the online format. To that end, the agency has developed a video presentation and webinars to familiarize the clients with the process; clients can go to the agency's website and witness how a typical session is conducted.

In summarizing how we would advise other mental health agencies interested in pursuing expanded telhealth services, Miskowiec cited three important factors: realizing it will take time to achieve acceptance among both staff and clients; making sure staff

training is thorough and intensive enough to ease their use of the technology; and adhering to very clear processes in the implementation and management of telehealth services. *