Overview

Situated on San Juan Island, PeaceHealth Peace Island Medical Center is a 10-bed critical access hospital with primary care and specialty clinics, a cancer center, and a 24-hour emergency department. PeaceHealth Peace Island is part of the not-for-profit health care system PeaceHealth, which has approximately 16,000 caregivers, a medical group practice with more than 900 providers, and 10 medical centers serving both urban and rural communities throughout the Pacific Northwest.

After conducting a community needs assessment in 2014, leaders at PeaceHealth Peace Island were compelled to develop an integrated behavioral health program in collaboration with primary health care providers on San Juan Island. Before this, no psychiatrists practiced on the island. Given the challenging location of the medical center, a telepsychiatry approach offered the most promise.

Thus, with a four-year grant awarded in 2012, PeaceHealth Peace Island created a successful telehealth network that included a telepsychiatry program incorporating behavioral assessments within the primary care clinic, complemented by psychological follow-up of behavioral health care services. The program, which offers weekly psychiatric services that would otherwise not be available, serves all patients who access primary care at PeaceHealth Peace Island.

Impact

Access to psychiatric services has improved dramatically for San Juan Island residents. Before the telepsychiatry program, residents had to endure a 90-minute ferry ride to the mainland and, once there, often travel 40 additional miles north or south for an appointment. Further, with a shortage of psychiatrists

Merry-Ann Keane (left), chief administrative officer of PeaceHealth Peace Island Medical Center, and Dr. Amanda Focht, psychiatrist and medical director of the Outpatient Psychiatry Clinic at the University of Washington, connect with Kate Penney, PeaceHealth Peace Island's telehealth coordinator, via technology that supports the organization's telepsychiatry program.

nationwide, the wait for an appointment could span as long as eight months. The difficulty in accessing psychiatric services could easily dissuade San Juan Island residents from seeking the treatment they needed.

"With our telepsychiatry program, island residents have better access to psychiatric care than some patients do on the mainland," says Merry-Ann Keane, MSN, BSN, NE-BC, FACHE, chief administrative officer of PeaceHealth Peace Island. "We contract with University of Washington psychiatrists for four hours per week, which means that the longest our patients have waited for an appointment is seven days. We have approximately 200 patients seeking

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consultations per year, most of those belonging to new patients. The impact on island residents has been tremendous."

Assessment and follow-up services help with care coordination and facilitate access to services. For example, many patients do not need a telepsychiatric appointment first; instead, a behavioral health social worker who is part of the telepsychiatry program assesses them. A collaborative care plan is established with the primary care provider, the behavioral health social worker, the psychiatrist and the patient. Such assessments were previously conducted by one of the island's primary care doctors, who would then refer patients to mainland physicians for further treatment. With the behavioral health component integrated into the telepsychiatric program, Keane estimates that 325 hours of primary care physician time are freed up annually. In addition, all chart notes are documented in the same electronic medical record, which helps maintain continuity of care.

Lessons Learned

One reason PeaceHealth Peace Island's telepsychiatry program has met with such success has to do with its University of Washington partnership.

"Partnering with a psychiatry department that has a deep bench has been very important in terms of ensuring that providers are available to our patients," says Keane. "They are also truly committed to our program and are interested in educating our primary care physicians on issues such as medication. It's been a win-win for everyone involved."

Keane and her team also note that they quickly learned how critical a talented coordinator is to any telehealth initiative. The telepsychiatry coordinator for PeaceHealth Peace Island's program plays a complementary role to the rest of the team by focusing on follow-up, scheduling appointments, and fostering bonds between the patient and the hospital experience.

"We are fortunate in that our coordinator has helped create an empathic environment for our patients so that they feel that we're not just about providing convenient care, but that we truly care about them as individuals," says Keane.

Future Goals

In addition to the telepsychiatry program, PeaceHealth Peace Island also provides teleoncology and telegenetics. In the future, the organization hopes to offer telepalliative care as well as a telehospitalist program.

"We have many more plans and ideas that may or may not come to fruition," says Keane. "But telehealth in this geographic setting is extremely important. We want to do everything we can to provide care closer to home."

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