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A New Telecommunications Solution Enhances Productivity and Patient Care

By Keith Szymkiw, Controller, Oakland Psychological Clinic

The Oakland Psychological Clinic, P.C., provides a full-range of mental health and chemical dependency services to children, adolescents, adults, families and organizations. We are a private, for-profit corporation based in Bloomfield, Michigan. Over the past 28 years, we've grown in response to the needs of the communities we serve, now operating eight clinics in southeastern Michigan.

Our recent growth could be due in part to the 'Great Recession' the country has been plagued with during the past few years. The dueling affects of job losses and home foreclosures has resulted in escalating depression, anxiety and suicide. Nine state mental health agencies have reported increased emergency-room visits for psychiatric care since the recession began, and five more reported higher suicide rates according to the State Mental Health Association.

This increase in patients comes at a time when state funding is being cut. Over the past two years, states have cut a combined \$1.8 billion from the public mental health system, according to a recent report by the National Alliance for Mental Illness, an advocacy group that tracks mental health spending in all 50 states.

We are in the position of literally having to do more with less. We have to balance reduced reimbursements and increased costs with the need to run a profitable practice. In the process, it's important for us to ensure that the quality of care and overall patient experience is not compromised. One way we have found to improve practice efficiencies and at the same time enhance patient care is by replacing our outdated telecommunications system.

Our Outdated Telecommunications System Hampered Productivity

For some time, inefficiencies related to our telecommunications were a growing concern. We were utilizing disparate phone systems in each office, which was compromising the effectiveness of communication between staff, counselors, and patients.

Calls from patients needing counseling sometimes went unanswered when call volume was too high or phones were left unattended at remote sites with limited staff. Inter-office communication between on-staff mental health professionals was also difficult. Staff needed to dial an outside line and the full phone number, making quick consults cumbersome, and making it impossible to transfer an outside call from one clinic to another.

Beyond these communications challenges, our phones were affecting our bottom line. The continual interaction between offices resulted in high phone bills each month. Staff resources were also being allocated inappropriately. Instead of focusing on patient care, we had staff at each location doing billing, insurance processing and other administrative tasks.

Oakland Psychological Clinic founder Barry Tigay, M.D., agreed there was a problem, “The existing system simply was not answering our needs. We had to improve responsiveness to patient calls and increase collaboration among counselors.”

A Single Network Solution Saves Time & Money

After recognizing the problem, we contacted our local business telecommunications provider, Telcom Corp, and they recommended we install a modern, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)-enabled system by Samsung. Using Samsung **OfficeServ**™ systems as the backbone for our three primary locations and IP phones at our remote sites, we have a technology backbone in place with features that help to enhance productivity for our entire organization.

Using the system's Auto Attendant and Samsung's proprietary networking software (SPNet) to integrate the platforms, all Oakland Psychological Clinic offices can have calls directed from any site to a central location. This has allowed us to centralize inbound calls, including before and after normal business hours, to one single location with a dedicated

receptionist. This capability also allowed us to greatly simplify billing and insurance processing, as we were able to designate an insurance processing manager in our main Bloomfield office.

Overall, our staff responded very positively to the new system. Now they're able to dial a four-digit extension to make calls to any clinic location, which has reduced our monthly carrier service costs. Allowing staff to receive calls and access voicemail from any location is extremely important as many of our mental health professionals move between offices to treat patients.

"Maximizing the productivity of our staff was essential in today's environment of stretched resources," said Tigay. "Any tools we can utilize to make everyday business tasks easier is a win for us, and lets the entire organization focus on what's really important – helping our communities fight chemical dependency."

Beyond internal communications processes, our new Samsung system also helped to make patients feel their needs are being addressed in a timely manner. Inbound call routing allows calls to be quickly and efficiently directed from one extension to the next if call volume is high or the receptionist is momentarily unavailable. That way a patient in need can always reach somebody.

We are also considering adding the Samsung mobile extension feature so that incoming calls to certain individuals can simultaneously ring at up to five locations, including mobile phones for our on-the-go workforce. That way, our staff can always be reached by patients and colleagues, and they do not have to give out personal cell phone numbers.

Lastly, the convergence of voice and data through VoIP allows us to be more responsive to patients once they're on the line. Automatic pop-ups of patient files on staff computer screens give us the ability to provide immediate counsel based on the patient's previous medical history, providing a superior level of customer care.

Any Healthcare Organization Can Experience These Results

Any organization that deals with patients via phone will benefit from an investment in a modern, converged phone system. With our new technology, we know that with one call our patients will have their needs addressed quickly and efficiently. Our staff is now able to spend more time working with patients, and less time on administrative functions like billing, appointment scheduling, or tracking down a colleague. And the best part is that the reduced monthly phone bills and the operational efficiencies we've achieved have already justified the investment we made in the new system!

"I never thought something as simple as a phone system could make such a difference in our everyday business operations. If you want your phone to do more than ring and hold, consider upgrading to converged telecommunications. You may be surprised too," commented Tigay.

When you're ready to upgrade your communications system, I recommend partnering with a local business communications provider, like Telcom Corp, who has experience in this industry and can present healthcare-specific testimonials. Like us, you'll want someone who can customize a solution for your unique needs. Remember that installation should be simple with the technology easily integrating into existing facility infrastructure. You should also look for an equipment provider that offers advanced telecommunications solutions that are easy-to-use with little to no specialized training, such as our Samsung system. And lastly, in anticipation of future growth, make sure the platform is flexible enough to accommodate evolving needs. By recognizing your organization's communications needs and installing industry-leading technology, patient care can improve.