



Hospital Reduces Staffing Costs, While Improving Quality and Increasing Revenue

Overview

Many hospitals in rural America are challenged with how to offer timely and efficient care with a lack of providers and medical specialists. Prior to 2009, Wagner Community Memorial Hospital Avera, located in the community of Wagner, S.D., faced similar challenges.

Mission is integral to Avera Health as a faith-based organization, and part of that mission involves offering high quality services to all residents of its service area — both urban and rural. This vision gave rise to transformative telemedicine services known as Avel eCare, a program which offers 24/7 on-demand access to specialists who support patients and clinicians in emergency rooms, critical care units, hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, clinics, prisons and schools.

Wagner Memorial developed a “Grow Your Own” program to help with recruitment and implemented Avel eCare to expand access to board-certified emergency physicians and hospitalists to improve care to those served in their community. Since implementing Avel eCare Emergency and Avel eCare Hospitalist services, Wagner Memorial continues to see improvements with provider retention, patient satisfaction, and average daily census, while reducing direct emergency room costs by 25% .

Background

Wagner Memorial is a 20-bed critical access hospital, located over 120 miles from the closest tertiary hospital. Adjacent to the Yankton Sioux Reservation, Wagner has a diverse mix of patients and payer sources. Over half of services provided by Wagner Memorial are for Native Americans and members of the Yankton Sioux Tribe.

In the Wagner community, the median income of population served is \$9,118 and the percent of children under 18 years of age living in poverty is substantially higher at 33.8% than the statewide average of 18.5%. Wagner Memorial serves a mix of over 80% public pay, of which 45% is Medicare, 22% is Medicaid and 13% is Indian Health Service.

“Telemedicine has such potential for communities similar to Wagner. Access to expertise at a push of a button improves patient outcomes, saves health care dollars and makes for happier providers.”

—Bryan Slaba, CEO, Wagner Memorial

The priority of Wagner Memorial is ensuring access to care while considering the population’s formidable social determinants of health.



Wagner Memorial experiences around 2,100 emergency encounters per year, which is high for a community of nearly 1,500. The need to manage critical cases that are typically too extreme for an ordinary community hospital was obvious.

In 2009, Avel eCare Emergency was implemented and the facility quickly saw the benefits of having immediate access to board-certified emergency physicians and critical care nurses through real-time audio and visual technology.

Wagner Memorial later implemented other Avel eCare telehealth services, including Avel eCare Hospitalist, which provides access to trained hospitalists and experienced nursing staff who support the local care team.

Results

Previously, physician recruitment efforts generated minimal success, and often with staggering costs to the facility. In 2012, Wagner Memorial started the "Grow Your Own" program in the hopes of retaining local talent as a long-term solution. Through this program, Wagner Memorial sponsored employees who sought to become Advanced Practice Providers (APP) through their education. In return, the employee was expected to work in the community for a minimum of three years. Since 2014, Wagner Memorial has supported five registered nurses in becoming nurse practitioners, complementing the emergency services strategy to utilize APPs for a greater percentage of time.

To date, Wagner Memorial uses APPs for 60% of emergency department call coverage, with the goal of utilizing APPs 80% of the time. This change in staffing has reduced direct emergency department costs by 25%, back to 2012 levels.

Within the first three years of using the APP model and Avel eCare Emergency, Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) scores for inpatient care increased from a low of the 24th percentile to the 99th percentile, while HCAHPS scores related to the emergency department increased from a low of 60th percentile to the 95th percentile.

In 2018, Wagner Memorial implemented Avel eCARE Hospitalist and within six months, the hospital nearly doubled its daily census, from 1.89 to 3.69. The additional support from Avel eCare Hospitalist strengthened the comfort level of Wagner Memorial APPs and the Chief Medical Officer, while creating additional revenue from the increase of the average daily census (ADC).

"I truly believe that it's the additional support received from Avel eCARE Hospitalist which increased the comfort level of both our APPs and Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Jeffrey Pinter, that has created the increased ADC results Wagner Memorial is experiencing."

—Bryan Slaba, CEO, Wagner Memorial

Avel eCare's telemedicine solutions and forward-thinking leadership at Wagner Memorial have made this hospital one of the most technologically advanced critical access hospitals in the region, if not the nation.

HCAHPS SCORES

INPATIENT CARE
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HCAHPS SCORES

EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT
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