Making Rural Health & Well-Being a Reality Through Telehealth is Possible with Fiber

Internet connectivity is impacting how we access healthcare. One such advanced practice that shows promise for rural communities is telehealth. According to the Mayo Clinic, telehealth is "the use of digital information and communication technologies, such as computers and mobile devices, to access healthcare services remotely and manage your healthcare." Every sector of healthcare is utilizing telehealth in one way or another, but not every healthcare provider has the connectivity needed to deploy telehealth services. Aspire Indiana is a fully integrated health system that addresses behavioral health, primary care, substance use disorders, and the social determinants of health, including housing and employment.

With 20 facilities in five Indiana counties and 500 employees serving 20,000 patients per year, it's imperative that Aspire's healthcare staff be able to communicate with one another and with their patients.

WANTED: FASTER, MORE RELIABLE SERVICE

For years, Aspire Indiana had been running on a Multiprotocol Label Switching (MPLS) network. The MPLS network was not reliable, it was expensive, and it was hard to fully understand. The company signed up for rural health association funding through the Indiana Rural Health Association (IRHA) – an organization dedicated to improving the health of Hoosiers in rural communities – to receive help in funding fiber builds to their many locations. IFN was on IRHA's list of providers and took a simple approach to design Aspire's point-to-point network.

"Others were overthinking it," said Aspire Indiana CTO David Speicher. "The process with IFN went smoothly."

IFN laid fiber for Aspire and built 10 circuits for eight facilities in two stages. After funding was completed, the process took 90 days to build the fiber for five circuits. A few years later, IFN did the construction and built another five circuits, again in 90 days.

"Our high quality, reliable internet has helped change our culture," said Speicher. "We do nearly 1,000 video calls a month for both meetings and telehealth. That would not have been possible before IFN."

Since working with IFN, Aspire has saved over $100,000. They pay for the circuits, but with funding and by working with IRHA, they have better fiber for less than the cost of the old MPLS.

"The true ROI is how fiber enabled us to really leverage the cloud in ways that are unique to Aspire," explained Speicher. Aspire has moved to utilizing native Google cloud services, allowing all tools to be delivered over the internet. This means the quality of the connection is even more vital. "We're moving all our tools to modern architecture cloud services. We're down from just over 100 servers that we had to watch over, power, cool, endlessly patch and plan on replacing to just 25. We celebrate every time we turn one off."

Fiber allows modern cloud architecture to work quickly and smoothly. "I would absolutely recommend other healthcare groups take the steps to serve rural communities and work with IRHA, says Speicher. This program has allowed us to move faster than any other tech infrastructure project. Every single healthcare facility should be looking at telehealth and applying for that funding."

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> Chief Technology Officer, Aspire Indiana

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