

Coming together for a common cause: saving seniors

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Challenge

It’s fair to say that the town of Del Rio, Texas is geographically challenged — at least when it comes to accessing the services of a psychiatrist for a population whose mental health needs can sometimes go unnoticed. With the nearest largest city of San Antonio being 150 miles away, many elderly adults have neither the resources nor the means to travel that distance for the psychiatry services they need.

“People think that the vast population of people who suffer from depression, anxiety and suicide are young, but the elderly population is off the charts,” says Cynthia Menchaca, RN, who would eventually play a critical role in helping Del Rio’s elderly. “And I can tell you firsthand that their family physicians don’t want to touch psychotic or psychotropic medications — which leaves many people untreated.”

Solution

After a needs assessment performed in 2000 revealed a severe lack of geriatric mental health services, VHA-contracted supplier Diamond Healthcare Corporation, specializing in behavioral health services, approached Val Verde Regional Medical Center with a solution. The Heritage Program for Senior Adults is the result of the partnership between Diamond and VVRMC.

Since its launch in November 2000, the psychiatric outpatient mental health program has continually evolved to meet the needs of its geriatric population — including a transition to telepsychiatry when its Air Force Reserve physician moved away. Nearly all initial psychiatric evaluations and some follow-up treatments are conducted via interactive video conferencing with Arturo Rios, MD, who is located in Houston and is part of Diamond’s telemedicine physician group.

“Dr. Rios is from Laredo and is fluent in Spanish, so he has that to build rapport with the patients,” says Menchaca, who

Val Verde Regional Medical Center Del Rio, Texas

Val Verde Regional Medical Center is a 93-bed rural health care provider serving a two-county area in southwest Texas. It also serves Laughlin Air Force Base and its military community.

helped the Heritage Program for two years, including co-facilitating individual and group sessions. “His Hispanic background allows for extremely open communication with patients.”

Jaime Ortiz, Diamond’s Heritage Program director, admits that some were skeptical about whether seniors would accept the telemedicine concept. “It was a concern, but it has turned out well,” he says. “Dr. Rios comes to visit patients personally every eight to 12 weeks, and that makes it even easier for him to connect with them. Over time, patients have seen how this works and they’ve become extremely engaged in the process.”

Menchaca agrees, calling the telemedicine process “amazingly personal. On the days when Dr. Rios comes in person, you would be amazed at the welcome he receives from patients.”

Results

Over time, a program has emerged that VVRMC’s staff members depend on as a resource for access to mental health experts, including both Dr. Rios and licensed counselors. The outpatient geriatric clinic serves as an invaluable resource for the hospital’s medical units, as well as the area’s three nursing homes and five skilled home health agencies.

Diamond’s staff members participate in the hospital’s bi-weekly discharge planning meetings, and have daily access to inpatients. “Our physicians regularly request Heritage consults, and our nurses know that they can discuss getting patient referrals with the doctors,” says Menchaca. “We have geriatric, suicidal patients who come in through the emergency department and go through the ICU and the day after they’re discharged, they’re consulting with a psychiatrist. And Diamond has made that type of follow-through possible.”

According to an American Hospital Association case study, outcomes data shows statistically significant improvement from admission to discharge for a sample of more than 160 cases treated through the program over a four-year period using telemedicine physician services. In comparisons of telepsychiatry to face-to-face interactions, there were essentially no differences in outcomes.

“Just the fact that there is such a program to service this population is incredible,” says Menchaca. “If it were not for this program and our being able to assess these patients, bring them into group therapy and give them access to a psychiatrist, I honestly don’t know where they would be.”

On the Net:

<http://www.aha.org>



Founded in 1985, Diamond Healthcare Corporation is the national leader in the planning, development and operation of high-quality behavioral health services in partnership with health care organizations. Diamond offers a comprehensive range of health care services, including behavioral health services; child, adolescent, adult and geriatric psychiatric services; sleep and pulmonary services; and employee assistance programs.

For more information, please contact VHA at 800.842.5146 or vhacustomerservice@vha.com.

