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Horizons

A Golden West Customer Newsletter

Healthcare at Home

Telemedicine Saves Time & Money, Improves Quality of Care

Katie Jane Biggins
Director of Patient Care Services,
Avera Gregory Hospital

Golden West
We're everywhere people connect.

Healthcare at Home

Telemedicine Saves Time & Money, Improves Quality of Care

This is the first in a two-part series about telemedicine options available in Golden West communities thanks to advanced broadband connections. This article looks at Avera's telemedicine services, and an article on page 4 covers Horizon Health Care. Stay tuned to the May issue of this newsletter for information about Sanford and Monument Health.

Everyone has likely heard about someone's struggle to receive medical care. They drove hours for a quick appointment, experienced long wait times and endured cancellations. Or maybe they suffered a medical crisis in a community without emergency care.

Thankfully, these stories are becoming old news due to the rise of telemedicine which allows for the remote diagnosis and treatment of patients using telecommunications technology. For rural communities, telemedicine means reduced time and money spent on care, easier recruitment of professional medical practitioners and most importantly, a significant improvement to the quality of medical care.

"Telemedicine is a great tool for both urban and rural healthcare," says Jessica Gaikowski, communications specialist with Avera eCARE. "As telemedicine becomes more mainstream, people recognize this and want to receive care where they are most comfortable – that's in their community, in their home."

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Jessica Gaikowski
Communications Specialist
Avera eCare

Hospitals & Telemedicine

Three out of four U.S. hospitals connect and provide care using video or other remote monitoring technologies, according to the American Hospital Association. With providers like Sanford and Avera Health, hospitals in South Dakota adopted telemedicine practices early on as a way to provide rural residents the same care as those in urban settings.

Telemedicine professionals with Avera eCare serve patients across the country 24/7/365 from a virtual hospital hub located on the northeast edge of Sioux Falls. Avera started providing remote care to rural hospitals within the Avera Health System about 25 years ago. Today they provide services both inside and outside their system to hospitals, long-term care facilities, schools, correctional facilities and more.

> ❝ **T**elemedicine is the greatest advancement to saving lives and improving outcomes that I've seen in my career. ❞
>
> ■ *Katie Jane Biggins*
> *Director of Patient Care Services*
> *Avera Gregory Hospital*

Advanced Broadband Connections

To be successful, advanced broadband connections are required in all locations Avera eCARE serves. Government health-care policies also impact Avera's ability to provide care. Avera continually addresses these areas through advocacy and partnerships.

"We continue to work with the government and partners like Golden West, to advocate for better Medicare reimbursement and connectivity for telemedicine, so providers have greater incentives to offer it," says Gaikowski. "We do a lot of testifying when these issues come before Congress, trying to help them understand how telemedicine can improve healthcare while saving costs."

In South Dakota, Avera eCARE services 145 facilities in 77 communities. This includes the Golden West communities of Dell Rapids, Freeman, Gregory, Hot Springs, Martin, Murdo, New Underwood, Pine Ridge, Scotland, Springfield and Winner. Let's look at a couple of them.

Gregory Hospital

At rural Avera Gregory Hospital, Director of Patient Care Services Katie Jane Biggins calls telemedicine "the greatest advancement to saving lives and improving outcomes (at Avera Gregory Hospital) that I've seen in my career."

After rolling out eCARE services in 2009, Avera Gregory Hospital patients have experienced firsthand the positive impacts of telemedicine.

"Our patients can 'see' specialists in infectious disease, pulmonology, cardiology, oncology, and more," says Biggins. "It saves our patients about six hours on the road. They are always grateful if they don't have to travel for a 15- to 30-minute physician visit."

Another benefit of telemedicine to a rural community is the ability to attract and retain medical personnel.

"Being a physician or nurse practitioner in a rural community far from higher levels of care can be isolating," explains Biggins. "Having the telemedicine options that we do (in Gregory), our staff knows they have access to immediate support in emergencies and for critically-ill patients."

Dell Rapids Hospital

Avera eCARE has been providing services in Dell Rapids since 2008.

"We were the pilot site for their emergency service," recalls Karla Carstensen, director of patient care services at Avera Dells Area Hospital. "Now, there isn't a day that goes by where we don't use telemedicine. These services have become integrated into our workflow."

Telemedicine has improved the quality of care in Dell Rapids, but not by replacing the interactions between providers and patients. Telemedicine supports the face-to-face practice at Avera Dells Area Hospital.
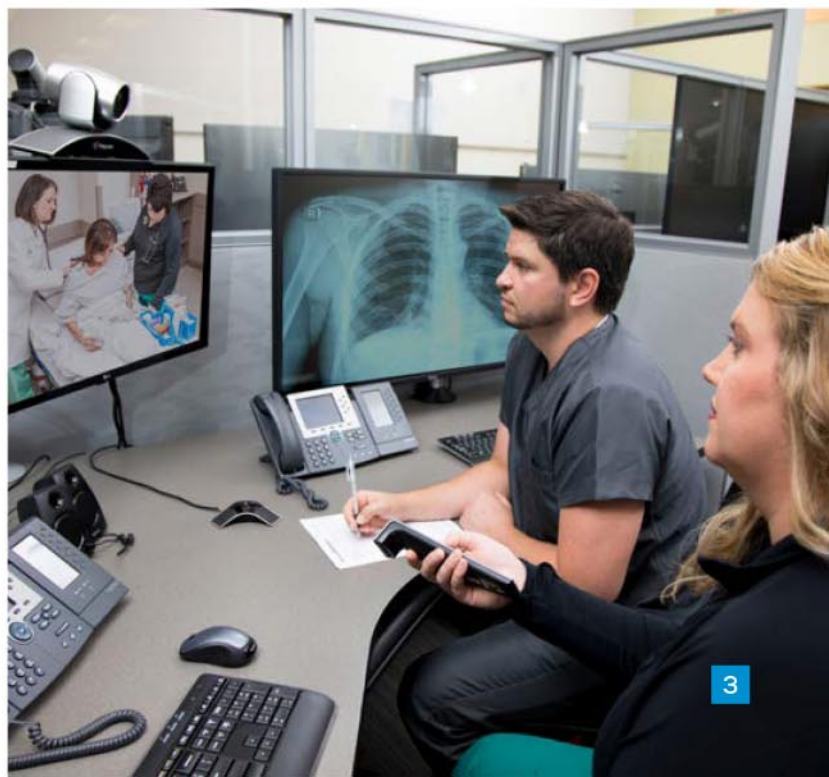
"eCARE assists us with documentation, security, emergency response, drug calculations, intubations, traumas and orders," says Carstensen. "Because telemedicine supplements the care we provide, we can respond quickly to our patients and reduce costs."
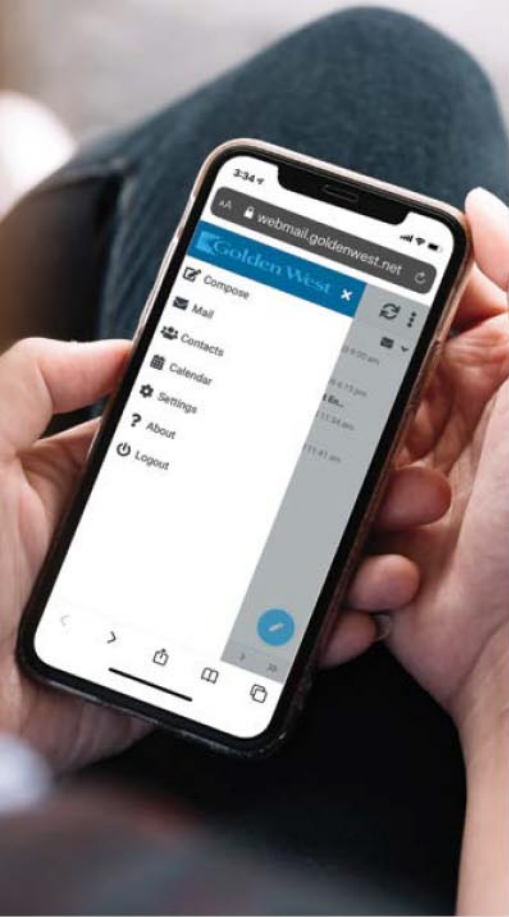
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> *Director of Patient Care Services*
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For more information on Avera Health's eCARE, visit **averaecare.org**.

Horizon Health Care Expands Rural Telehealth Services

Another South Dakota healthcare provider is expanding its use of telemedicine, thanks in part to a federal grant with matching funds from local telecommunications cooperatives.

As a rural, community-based healthcare provider, Horizon Health Care Inc. (Horizon) operates Community Health Centers in 32 locations in underserved areas across South Dakota. This includes Golden West communities of Faith, Martin, Mission, Plankinton and White River.

With a focus on whole health medicine and wellness, Horizon provides high-quality, affordable medical care, as well as dental care and mental health services. Horizon relies on its broadband network to provide health services to rural areas and to communicate between its sites.

USDA Grant

Recently, Horizon was awarded a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Distance Learning and Telemedicine program to implement their proposed Emergent Medical, Behavioral and Acute Care Telehealth Project (EMBRACE).

"The EMBRACE Project centers on accomplishing two goals – addressing the needs of rural South Dakotans struggling with behavioral health disorders, and using telehealth services to expand acute care and emergency services," explains Horizon Health Foundation Executive Director Tracy Pardy.

Effectiveness of Telehealth

Horizon has studied the effectiveness of telehealth in rural communities, listing the following reasons to illustrate the importance of the EMBRACE Project.

- 74% of patients prefer easy access to healthcare services over in-person interactions with providers.

> "Technology will increase access in places that otherwise would not have it, which is a huge benefit to our patients."

Tracy Pardy
Executive Director
Horizon Health Foundation

- Telehealth increases the number of after-care appointments kept because patients are not required to travel long distances for short visits.

- Telehealth reduces unnecessary non-urgent ER visits and eliminates transportation expenses for checkups.

- Patients in rural or remote areas benefit from quicker and more convenient specialist access.

"Our mission as a health center is to offer access to these services for all patients served," says Pardy. "Technology will increase access in places that otherwise would not have it, which is a huge benefit to our patients."

Telecommunications Partners

In support of Horizon's grant application, Golden West partnered with fellow South Dakota Telecommunications Association members Alliance Communications, West River Cooperative, Midstate Communications, Interstate Telecommunications and SDN Communications to provide matching funding.

For more information on Horizon HealthCare, visit horizonhealthcare.org.

Access Golden West
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Golden West web mail users can now conveniently access email accounts on mobile devices like phones and tablets.

Golden West web mail has been redesigned with mobile access in mind. The new, upgraded web mail features a more appealing visual design for easier navigation, as well as a number of general security updates.

To check out the new, mobile-friendly web mail site, log in to goldenwest.com/webmail from your favorite mobile device and start exploring!

Choose a Career That Keeps Your
HOMETOWN CONNECTED

After testing out the waters of a four-year college and a few other career paths, Golden West Technician Gaige Odenbach found his career. As a bonus, it also brought him back home to Gregory.

"If I knew back then what my career path would be, I would have started it sooner," says Odenbach. "I love working in my hometown and helping the people I know, the people that helped me when I was growing up."

Odenbach completed Mitchell Tech's Telecommunications program, now called Wi-Fi and Broadband Technologies. This two-year program prepares students to work with and configure modern broadband networks that carry voice, video and data traffic across South Dakota and the world.

Many Golden West Technicians, like Odenbach, have attended Mitchell Tech and offer positive reviews for the program and the career it provides.

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>
> ■ *Gaige Odenbach*
> *Golden West Technician*

"All the teachers were great, it has hands-on learning and high career placement," says Winner-based Golden West Technician Jonah Beck. "I love the great people I work with and how this job keeps me on my toes – dealing with cut fiber one day and rewiring a house the next."

Students in the Wi-Fi and Broadband Technologies program learn about Wi-Fi, data switching and routing, fiber optics, Voice over IP (VoIP), streaming video, IoT (Internet of Things) and other emerging technologies. The program also teaches math, electronics and more.

Students in the Wi-Fi and Broadband Technologies program are eligible to apply for a Build Dakota Scholarship. Applications for next year are due April 15, 2020.

For more information on the Wi-Fi and Broadband Technologies program and the Build Dakota Scholarship, visit MitchellTech.edu and BuildDakotaScholarships.com.

WATCH YOUR MAILBOX
For U.S. Census 2020 Information

Invitations to respond to the U.S. Census 2020 will begin hitting mailboxes any day, and it's easier than ever to respond this year. While some residents will receive paper forms to return in the mail, every resident will have the option to respond online, by mail or by phone.

However you choose to respond, you should do it sooner than later! If you do not, census workers will keep attempting to reach you – eventually in person – either until you respond or the July 2020 deadline passes.

Why Participate?

There are many reasons to participate in the census, foremost among them:

- Completing the census is required. Taking part is everyone's civic duty.

- The census is only nine questions and should take less than 10 minutes to complete.

- Census data determines how and where more than $675 billion will be spent in support of state, county and community programs.

- Census results are used to determine the number of congressional seats each state will have in the U.S. House of Representatives.

- Federal law protects your personal census responses from being shared. The census can only use your responses to produce the statistics and data used to determine funding and representation.

- Local governments use census data to improve public safety and emergency preparedness.

- Businesses use census data to help determine factory locations and offices, leading to job creation and growth.

Key Dates to Remember

- **March 12** – Invitations will begin to be sent out to respond online.

- **April 1** – This is "Census Day" or the date to use when answering the census questions.

- **Mid-April through July** – Census workers will conduct non-response follow-ups.

Remember, taking part in the census helps your family, community and country! For more information on the U.S. Census, visit **2020Census.gov**.

Long-Term Commitment

Renner Receives NTCA Director Life Award

NTCA – The Rural Broadband Association awarded Golden West Board Director Rodney Renner with an NTCA Excellence Award for Director Life Achievement at their rural telecom industry meeting and expo in Phoenix, Ariz., on February 19.

Renner's 47-year tenure on the Golden West board makes him the organization's longest-serving board member, and he continues to serve as a director today. Renner was quick to share the honor with his fellow board members and others within Golden West.

"The way I look at it, this is more of an honor for all of us on the board and at Golden West," said Renner. "We're like a big family that works together for a good outcome."

Committed to the Cooperative

He also expressed his gratitude to the members of Golden West for their patience and cooperation as the cooperative expanded and rolled out new technology.

"We all work together to bring updated technology to all our members as quick as we can, given the size of the territory we serve. It's taken time, but we made sure to be as fiscally responsible as we could."

Renner was recognized for his deep commitment to growing the Golden West Telecommunications Cooperative and for showing exceptional commitment to his community and the rural broadband industry, according to a release from the NTCA.

Golden West CEO/General Manager Denny Law nominated Renner and detailed the many ways he has influenced and led the cooperative.

"Rod has played an immense role in the success of Golden West and has shown an unwavering, interminable commitment to the independent telecommunications industry," said Law.

Things Have Changed

Many things have changed since Renner first came on the board in 1972. The highlights of his time as a director

Rodney Renner was recognized for serving on the Golden West Board of Directors for 47 years, and he continues to serve as a director today.

include championing the acquisition of dozens of rural exchanges to serve more members, being an early supporter for internet access, and meeting with policymakers to advocate for the technology needs of rural Americans.

"Perhaps his most profound accomplishment over the years is his dedication to Golden West employees," said Law. "Few people have been as devoted to the individuals who work day in and day out serving the members of the cooperative as he has."

Rod, congratulations and thank you for your outstanding service and dedication to the members and employees of the Golden West Telecommunications Cooperative!

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