

New Direct Technology Enables Tennessee Providers to Transition from 'Pony Express to 100 Mbps' in Hours

Health eShare Direct Project Delivers Promise of Secure Exchange of Patient Information to State's Healthcare Workers and Then Some

As the structure of Tennessee's healthcare system takes shape around healthcare reform legislation, providers and patients have new opportunities to improve the way services are coordinated, funded and delivered to patients. This new focus on changing the ways healthcare gets delivered is already expanding opportunities for preventive care, management of chronic conditions and community-based care options for older Tennesseans.

But like peers in other states, physicians and other healthcare providers in Tennessee have –at least in part – been held back from fully embracing 21st century technology due to the lack of a usable, robust and secure electronic communications infrastructure that is easily accessible and allows communication of patient data across providers.

After years of waiting for such a system, many Tennessee healthcare providers will be surprised to learn such a system is already in use and available now.

Through a program called Tennessee Health eShare Direct Project, health care providers and their staffs are using of a newly available, secure messaging protocol being piloted in Memphis, Chattanooga and Hickman County, with each community testing and developing use cases of the platform.

The technology, known as Direct Messaging, was developed by the federal government and is being implemented nationwide. Direct is a protocol for secure exchange of health information from point to point. Direct improves workflow and increases efficiency for health care providers, administrative staff and healthcare organizations.

For those who have taken the simple step of enrolling in the program, the advantages to their daily practices have included workflow and efficiency improvement – and then some.

Tommy Preston is one of those individuals. As the assistant director of the Southeast Tennessee Area Agency on Aging and Disability, Preston knows the inefficiency of the healthcare system better than many of the health care providers he works with every day. Preston and his staff are tasked with pulling together the federal, state and local alphabet soup of available programs, resources, providers and facilities into a coherent continuum of care the agency's elderly clients can easily access.

As a participant in the Community-based Care Transitions Program (CCTP) in Chattanooga, Preston's agency is responsible for connecting his agency's high-risk clients who are discharged from hospital inpatient care settings with the community care, rehabilitation and ancillary services they need to recuperate, recover, and avoid costly hospital readmissions.

CCTP is just the type of intervention that healthcare regulatory, payor and systemic structures are being shaped to support. Since the initial 48 hours following a patient's discharge are especially crucial for preventing hospital readmission, Preston's agency needed rapid access to patient discharge summaries and health data.

Yet before enrolling in the Direct pilot, Preston's staff, like the overwhelming majority of healthcare providers in Tennessee, had no means of securely sending or receiving patient discharge information or exchanging patient information electronically with its multiple hospital system and health care provider partners.

The solution? Frequent road trips to retrieve patient charts and discharge summaries from hospitals were the only option. Staff hours that should have been spent arranging home health visits, securing transportation to dialysis centers or scheduling visits to specialty care physicians were spent...in traffic.

Preston's staff routinely drove from one area hospital to the next, physically retrieving discharge summaries and patient charts. As a result, the critical window of time between a patient's discharge, and first contact with a designated "health coach" were significantly delayed. Health Coaches are clinical case managers responsible for ensuring patients receive appropriate follow-up care post hospitalization. Because Health Coaches spent a significant amount of time chasing patient data, the wait for patients was measured in days. It was like hearing the starting gun hours after the race had started.

But once enrolled in the project and using Direct, the impact on Preston's staff and the patients they serve was immediate. Preston says his staff began receiving patient discharge notifications and patient relevant information from clinical charts almost instantaneously. As a result, Tommy's staff can immediately engage health coaches to reach out to patients, usually within hours of their discharge.

Preston cites the system's web-based login as another key benefit of Direct. It allows staff to login to the system remotely to transmit or receive patient data – a process that just a few months ago would have meant a drive across town and a waste of staff hours and agency resources.

And because Direct messaging requires no alterations to existing IT infrastructure or network connections, Preston points out he and his staff were able to make the transition from Pony Express to 100Mb/s in a matter of hours.

Today Southeast Tennessee Area Agency on Aging and Disability staff login to Direct from wherever they are – identify information send from one provider and send referral information onto an orthopedist, confirm ICD-9 codes, transmit patient clinical information, or confirm an address for the referral.

In explaining the advantages of Direct for his staff, Preston hits on one of its most crucial features: Direct has become "by far the easiest way we have been able to communicate with hospitals," says Preston. "Especially since we're not a health care entity per se – we're social services."

Direct is gaining traction in the state thanks to the increased visibility it's receiving through Tennessee Health eShare.

Access to the Direct technology is available now, the cost of using Direct technology is more than covered by an incentive program offered by the State of Tennessee Office of eHealth Initiatives.

That's why a growing number of health care providers and eligible individuals across the state are signing up and using Direct through Tennessee Health eShare. Several healthcare organizations, including Erlanger Health Systems, have also signed up.

If you work in healthcare and routinely handle patient information, chances are you can too.

Direct secure messaging technology is being implemented and supported by Qsource, a Tennessee-based nonprofit healthcare quality improvement and information technology company, working in cooperation with the Tennessee Office of eHealth Initiatives.

To learn more about how you can get started using Direct, visit the Tennessee Health eShare Direct website at <http://www.healthsharetn.com/>.

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