

Enhancing rural medicine through telehealth

By Kaci Jansma

As colder temperatures and poor travel conditions settle in around Montana, the value of medical access for those living in the rural areas is more palpable than ever. Frozen water lines, hungry livestock, icy roads and kids' school events mean that many rural families don't always have time to seek medical care almost an hour away.

Luckily, the patients I see in eastern Carbon County at the RiverStone Health Clinic locations in Bridger and Joliet can conveniently access primary care from our staff at a local clinic, as well as telehealth options that broaden the scope of their healthcare.

These two clinics are generally staffed by four friendly locals: a provider, a nurse, a nurse manager, and either a medical assistant or patient access specialist. Beyond the family medicine provided in person, telehealth allows patients to access a wide range of care without the time or cost of traveling to Billings.

Telehealth visits connect RiverStone Health patients in Bridger, Joliet and Worden with providers and resources that further optimize their health. In Billings, RiverStone Health services include behavioral health providers, nutritionists, clinical pharmacists, dentists, WIC, a public health team and care managers. These services help build a patient-centered access point that is unique and comprehensive.

The contribution to the general wellness of these communities from telehealth access is undeniable. It's no secret that Montana is desperately in need of better mental health access and resources. This is one of the most frequently utilized telehealth services at Bridger and Joliet. For someone in a small, rural community suffering from depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, addiction or any other mental health diagnosis, having the personalized care and advocacy from a behavioral health specialist is nothing short of lifesaving in many cases.

Additionally, access to clinical pharmacists who provide specific education about medications puts patients at ease when they are geographically disconnected from hospital campuses and communities. The pharmacy team at RiverStone Health is approachable and compassionate, spending time with the patients and the local providers to ensure medication safety and patient understanding. This improves medication use and reduces readmission to the hospital for misunderstandings after illness, hospital stays, surgeries or medical procedures.

Access to this sophisticated medicine from these small-town clinic locations is only available through telehealth and if it were not locally available, would likely be skipped by patients due to the inconvenience of travel.

Despite their small size, the access to care and prioritization of well-rounded patient centered medicine remains top notch at RiverStone Health's rural clinics. This is thanks to the team of nurses, assistants, and providers within the walls of those clinics, and to the care from the main clinic that remains accessible to patients through telehealth.

The telehealth options enhance the sophistication of high-quality care that is easily accessible to patients from their hometown clinics and will continue to emphasize the importance of rural health care in Carbon County and across Montana.

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