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Carla Stout (far right), a patient at Johnson County Community Hospital, and her family connect with Dr. Jeff Farrow in Johnson City via telehealth.

Mountain States looks to the future with use of telehealth

For many people, the concept of telehealth may seem like something from the future. But for patients at Mountain States Health Alliance hospitals, the future is now.

Telehealth is being used regularly to connect patients in one location with specialists in another, for live consults or exams through a two-way video feed. The service is especially valuable in rural communities where patients would have to travel a long distance to see a specialist. Outside of seeing a patient in person, telehealth is the closest thing to being there for a hands-on exam – without the expense and time required for travel.

It is making a difference, especially for Mountain States' rural hospitals. Just ask Donna Teague and her patients at Johnson County Community Hospital, located in Mountain City, Tenn.

"I love doing telehealth with our patients," said Teague, an LPN with Mountain States for 15 years. The hospital has several telehealth consults a month, and sometimes even a few per day. "This service and this hospital are so important to Johnson County and the patients who live here. Not everyone who needs a specialist can make it to their office, and telehealth helps our patients get the care that they need, close to home."

Carla Stout from Mountain City recently had a tracheotomy done by Dr. Jeff Farrow, a pulmonary and critical care specialist in Johnson City, Tenn. But she had problems when it was time for a follow-up visit with Farrow to check on her progress. Her insurance didn't cover the two-hour round-trip transport to Johnson City and she couldn't go in a private vehicle because of her need for suction every 15-20 minutes.

But, thanks to telehealth, she was able to see Dr. Farrow and get examined in her local hospital with the assistance of Teague and Carla's primary care provider.

Telehealth has become a regular part of health care at Mountain States. It helps connect patients with specialists within the system, but can also connect them to specialists with other health care systems. Franklin Woods Community Hospital in Johnson City and Sycamore Shoals Hospital in Elizabethton, Tenn., partner with Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville for teleneurology services through their large staff of board-certified neurologists.

Telehealth is used in various ways across Mountain States, most commonly for behavioral health. All MSHA facilities use video consults in their emergency departments to assist with these cases, and it can help get a patient quickly transferred and admitted to Woodridge Hospital in Johnson City when the need arises.

The connections are made using an iPad, Cisco Equipment, HP Touchscreens or Microsoft Surface. Mountain States' priorities for telehealth expansion include neurology, pediatrics, behavioral health and regular physician visits for minor issues.

Mountain States has a telehealth committee. Sean McMurray is CEO of Johnston Memorial Hospital in Abingdon, Va., and is co-chair of the committee, along with Steven Godbold, CEO at Niswonger Children's Hospital.

“As a health care system, Mountain States is very committed to implementing telehealth solutions whenever and wherever it makes sense,” McMurray said. “Given the geography of our region and how far patients must sometimes travel for treatment, telehealth often offers a wonderful option for patient care.

“It appears to be especially helpful in connecting patients with specialists who may be in short supply. Ultimately, we hope to provide excellent care as close to our patients’ homes as possible. Telehealth is a platform that can help us achieve that goal.”

Teague, who sits on MSHA’s telehealth committee, is very proud and excited about the future of telemedicine at Johnson County Community Hospital, which has been doing telehealth regularly for over a year with specialists in surgery, osteoporosis and psychiatry. And the program is being enhanced to incorporate various kinds of equipment to let the doctor on the other end see and hear what is going on internally with the patient.

“The success of this program is all about the team here at Johnson County and Mountain States’ commitment to providing the best care for our patients,” Teague said.

