

Feature on
Palmetto Care Connections Telehealth Network – Bamberg, SC

Palmetto Care Connections Executive Director Kathy G. Schwarting, MHA, sums up their network in these words. “We are a statewide telehealth network for South Carolina. We are neutral and non-biased. We work with all providers to care for rural patients”.

Palmetto Care Connections (PCC) is a statewide telehealth network designed to increase active collaboration in telehealth services. Their mission statement reads: “Facilitate health care access across South Carolina through the utilization of innovative technology to promote the provision of qualified medical professionals of various disciplines.” The network’s mission is supported by the following ten objectives:

1. Improve access for all South Carolinians to quality healthcare
2. Attract providers to underserved areas by facilitating telehealth programs that offer access to specialists and distant medical colleagues
3. Assist in navigating the steps of Telemedicine for the health care provider
4. Provide networking opportunities with others engaged in telehealth activities, information sharing, and facilitation of working clinical relationships between providers
5. Work with rural communities and/or providers to ensure they have access to quality health care through telehealth/telemedicine
6. Advocate for Telemedicine Reimbursement by all payers and the utilization of Standard Equipment throughout the state
7. Serve as a Clearinghouse for Up to Date Telehealth Information
8. Consult with communities on funding opportunities for Telehealth projects
9. Coordinate and Sponsor an Annual Telehealth Summit for providers across the state
10. Build a Sustainable Telehealth Network

Organized in 2010, PCC is a vertical network whose membership is comprised of Hospitals and Health Systems, Rural Health Clinics, State Departments, State Associations, a Health Education Consortium, Federally Qualified Health Centers, Telehealth Resource Centers, a Telehealth Alliance, Medical Schools, and payors. In 2014 the network received a Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Rural Health Network Development Grant. This award is being used to help strengthen the network and launch a tele-endocrinology pilot project, which includes home monitoring of diabetic patients and specialty tele-consults. This project is intended to overcome the limitations and barriers created by the lack of providers in the rural communities of South Carolina.

Network member benefits outlined on PCC’s website (palmettocareconnections.org) include:

- Thorough Needs Assessment Consultation based on data analysis

- Assistance with Telemedicine Program Design, Implementation, and Sustainability
- PCC Staff will apply for USAC Funding on your behalf for Broadband Services
- Telehealth Equipment Support & Training
- Annual Telehealth Summit
- Online Telehealth Certification Classes
- Marketing of Telehealth Services for Organizations
- Clinical Workflow Analysis of New Service Lines through Telehealth
- Centralized Credentialing for Telehealth Providers
- Consulting/Assistance with Telehealth Grant Opportunities
- Educational services such as webinars and monthly newsletter
- Cloud based virtual meeting space
- Source to broadcast news about your organization's Telehealth Services using PCC Website and Inventory of Telehealth Services

According to Ms. Schwarting network members' most significant benefits are education and the expansion of providers. The network provides a large amount of education to rural and hub providers on the topics of broadband and telehealth. Many providers are unaware of the bandwidth requirements necessary to operate tele-health equipment. Often time facilities do not have the proper connection capacity, specifically bandwidth, to participate in telehealth services. The network assists these providers in understanding the technological needs and the benefit to providers and patients in investing to address those needs. With the proper technology in place, facilities can move forward with the installation of telehealth equipment which provides access to an expanded pool of specialty providers. This results in better and more-timely care for patients.

Ongoing sustainability is a challenge faced by all networks. How they meet this challenge varies depending on the size, legal structure, leadership, location and service or product of the network. PCC is successfully addressing this challenge by obtaining a HRSA Rural Health Network Development Grant and providing revenue producing services. Obtaining and maintaining the business financially is the only way for the network to continue to help rural providers and communities. From the onset, network leaders must have a business mindset and make monitoring of the network's financial position an on-going priority. Networks, like all businesses, must continually monitor their financial position and examine the financial impact of all new developments, expansions and reductions.

Networks providing services in the rural areas face many unique challenges compared to their urban counterparts. Some of the larger challenges faced by PCC include obtaining access to care, provider education needs, obtaining equipment, demonstrating the need and value of telehealth, and making telehealth an everyday part of providers' work flow. PCC is currently tackling all of these challenges simultaneously, something that could not be done by a single entity. It requires the collaboration and cooperation of the numerous network partners that make up PCC to address these various challenges.

As Ms. Schwarting wisely states, "building trust and establishing relationships is key." She advises to make the time to identify and build needed relationships. Building key relationships and establishing trust do not happen quickly. Many times network leaders are attempting to build relationships with leaders of competing organizations and asking them to trust in a shared vision and purpose. This relationship development work is time and energy consuming but also absolutely necessary.

When asked about the health care challenges the network is facing and the uniqueness of the rural environment in which they work and what that might mean for the future of the network Ms. Schwarting shared the following, "In order for us to be successful and viable we need to meet the needs of providers as well as patients." The market area of the network is the entire state of South Carolina. The network performs needs assessments to locate target areas where telehealth is not presently being utilized. One strong and motivating evidence of success to share with network members as well as potential members is the network's 95% patient satisfaction rating. To watch a patient testimonial please visit <http://palmettocareconnections.org/patient-testimonials/>.

Ms. Schwarting was asked for advice to offer developing networks. She responded, "Create relationships among members and partners and find ways to show them you can do better together. Be patient. Don't go for gusto. Find small successes and grow into larger ones."

Palmetto Care Connections Telehealth Network has been a member of the National Cooperative of Health Networks since 2012.

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