

# Increasing Efficiency Through Telepsychiatry: The TeamBuilders Counseling Services Profile

As many communities know, providing health care services in a rural environment can be a difficult task, from the cost and inefficiencies of delivering services to patients who are spread across a wide geographic area, to the difficulty of attracting specialists. TeamBuilders Counseling Services of Santa Fe, New Mexico is one of a growing number of organizations that have turned to telepsychiatry to conquer this issue within their community. As New Mexico is a predominately rural state, with many of the counties classified as “frontier” by the U.S. Census Bureau, TeamBuilders found that telepsychiatry was a far more cost effective means of providing psychiatric services to many of their rural patients.

## Why Telepsychiatry

Founded in 1995 on a Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP) community needs assessment and planning grant, TeamBuilders Counseling Services provides family-centered wraparound services to children and their families throughout the state of New Mexico. To serve their predominately rural population, TeamBuilders had, in the past, contracted with psychiatrists who traveled from place to place. Shannon W. Freedle, TeamBuilders’ Chief Executive Officer, noted that as TeamBuilders expanded its geographic service area to include more frontier communities, “the lack of psychiatry and the inability to recruit psychiatrists to serve those areas became a problem.”

Faced with the inefficiencies and costs associated with a “traveling psychiatrist” and the difficulties of recruiting and retaining psychiatrists in areas they served, TeamBuilders made the decision to begin a telepsychiatry program in 2005. TeamBuilders began developing the infrastructure and contracted with a group of psychiatrists to begin the provision of telepsychiatry to some of its most remote locations. With the telepsychiatry system in place, Mr. Freedle said that TeamBuilders can “have doctors who see patients in a small town for a couple hours in the morning, and then log into a site in another town 100 miles away to serve patients there for a couple hours. If he or she were driving, it would have taken hours just to get from one place to the other.”

## Telepsychiatry In Practice

The telepsychiatry program, which serves both children and adults, allows TeamBuilders to serve a greater number of patients in a more cost effective matter. The company is currently providing telepsychiatry services in 22 of New Mexico’s 33 counties, and served approximately 3,000 patients last year.

TeamBuilders now employs or contracts individually with approximately 10 psychiatrists who then provide services through a network of originating sites throughout their geographic service area. The originating sites are responsible for all scheduling of patients and for billing. While TeamBuilders prefers their psychiatrists to live in-state, they have found that regardless of where they are located, the services can be provided effectively. They have had success with professionals located in both the contiguous United States, as well as Hawaii. “We’ve tried it with psychiatrists from all over and haven’t had problems” said Mr. Freedle.

Polycom video conferencing equipment is used to connect the psychiatrists to their network of originating sites. No grants or

special outside funding was secured for the purchase of the technology; TeamBuilders made the decision to make the investment in the technology with the knowledge that the efficiencies achieved through the telepsychiatry program would allow them to recoup their costs in the long run. Additionally, the Polycom videoconferencing equipment is utilized for staff development, education, and training. In the frontier communities, there are a limited number of licensed supervisors, so the videoconferencing equipment enables TeamBuilders to conduct clinical seminars.

The telepsychiatry program has allowed the organization’s professionals to focus more on service delivery and less on travel and scheduling. The organization has also found that telepsychiatry allows them to be more flexible with their services. Previously, when there was only one psychiatrist traveling from town to town, opportunities for patients to schedule appointments were few and far between. With the technology in place, there is a greater chance that patients will be able to get appointments.

## Financing And Reimbursement

According to the Center for Telehealth and e-Health Law, 39 states have some type of reimbursement for services provided via telehealth, with New Mexico reimbursing “for an extensive range of medically necessary services provided via telemedicine at the same rate for which face-to-face encounters are reimbursed.” In TeamBuilders telepsychiatry program, it is the originating sites that manage all of the billing for services, with the majority of services being paid for by Medicaid. TeamBuilders then charges the originating site an hourly rate for the use of the psychiatrist. “I think one of the big challenges we’ve found in getting into telepsychiatry is that a fee for service structure doesn’t translate easily to telehealth,” said Mr. Freedle. “As a distant site provider we don’t have any control over scheduling and verification, and all the other pieces that happen at the originating site.”

By setting up an hourly rate and having the originating site bill for services rendered, TeamBuilders was able to minimize risk, and hold originating sites responsible for scheduling, benefit verifications, and getting patients to keep their appointments. In this situation, Mr. Freedle noted the extreme importance of managing the relationship between the provider and the originating site. It is vital that the originating site understands both the technology and the finances before engaging in a telepsychiatry program. If an originating site has a high no show rate or have a lot of billing errors, then they are paying for services that they cannot maintain.

Over the past five years, TeamBuilders has found that a telepsychiatry program allows them to increase their cost effectiveness and to serve more people in their community across a wider geographic area. “We have actually saved money with the investment in technology, we can see more patients and it ends up being more cost effective,” said Mr. Freedle. With the great success they have found in their program, TeamBuilders plans to continue providing telepsychiatry services and to possibly expand into other areas in the future.

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