



Digital Health: Building Bridges to Enhance Rural Health

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In recent years, the role of technology in healthcare has continued to grow with digital health interventions emerging as a promising tool for care transformation. In this climate, a variety of healthcare organizations are defining their role in supporting the growth of digital health. Rural providers, especially hospitals, can benefit greatly. Digital health solutions have increasingly become an important element of the diagnosis, treatment, and management of care for patients. Spanning the topics of virtual care, wearables and connected health, digital patient engagement, advanced analytics, and artificial intelligence, digital health is a broad concept.¹ However, these innovations can impact the care delivered in rural settings in a profound way.

1 Priya Gaur and Camille Boler, "[The Growing Role of Digital Health and How It's Shaping Patient Engagement](#)," Avalere Health Podcast, February 14, 2019.

Key Board Takeaways

- Invest in innovation: Execute pilot projects to test the integration of digital health solutions in care processes before large-scale investment and rollout.
- Generate evidence: Ensure that digital health interventions meet outcomes that matter most to decision makers for funding, utilization, and implementation.
- Collaborative approaches: Engage the right stakeholders (providers, payers, patients) early and often in selecting and implementing digital health solutions.

In the rural hospital environment, digital health solutions have the ability to predict, diagnose, monitor, and assess adherence to care; engage patients who may face access barriers; and identify opportunities to enhance operations and workforce deployment. While the promise of digital health is large, there are also hurdles that necessitate thoughtful focus on testing new programs, supporting new evidence generation, and co-development among stakeholders.

This article looks at several digital health technologies that are directly applicable to rural hospitals and health systems.

Advanced Analytics and Artificial Intelligence

Healthcare and health-related data has grown exponentially in the last few years allowing innovation in the collection and analysis of medical data to support the delivery of quality care. Data can be used to systematically access unmet needs in rural communities and support the deployment of targeted interventions to specific patient populations to address local community needs.

Wearables, Connected Health, and Digital Patient Engagement

Digital watches, connected scales, smartphone applications, and online portals give patients and providers new tools to manage chronic conditions like diabetes, hypertension, and obesity. These tools can support the review and storage of screening results as

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well as the ongoing monitoring of lifestyle changes and medication adherence. The opportunity exists to address rural primary care provider shortages by giving patients and providers tools to track and monitor progress outside of individual office visits.

Virtual Care

Telehealth/telemedicine, the delivery of healthcare services through digital platforms (e.g., telephone or video), offers innovations that will benefit rural providers immediately. Recently, the Medicare program expanded access to additional telehealth benefits to Medicare Advantage enrollees. (Medicare Advantage is a Medicare health plan offered by a private company that contracts with the federal government.) The new telehealth benefits will be treated as basic benefits covered under original Medicare—not supplemental benefits offered to Medicare Advantage enrollees. The actions by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) will increase opportunities for incorporating telehealth into Medicare not only to streamline services, but also to help provide necessary access and care management to individuals who live in rural areas or face transportation barriers. In a rural setting, telehealth offers opportunities for hospitals to manage volume, improve quality,

Key Questions to Consider Before Investing in Digital Health

- What is the primary goal of adopting this digital health solution? And how is it aligned with the organization's overall strategy?
- How will the return on investment be measured and evaluated (e.g., financial, employee engagement, customer satisfaction, patient outcomes)?
- What will the ultimate impact be to patients' care?
- How will existing resources (people, IT, and process) be involved in the implementation and management?
- Are adequate and dedicated resources (funding and expertise) deployed to support this initiative?

and potentially reduce costs. Telehealth could reduce patient transfers to tertiary care centers and keep patients in local facilities by increasing access to specialty care. By using telehealth to expand access to specialty services, the need to hire specialty and subspecialty providers for rural healthcare facilities is dramatically reduced as they can engage patients virtually.

Digital health can enhance care, improve patient engagement through health-centered platforms, and increase access through telehealth services.² Rural hospitals and health systems need to consider a number of factors when deciding to invest in digital health services. The first is alignment with overall strategy and needs

of the population you are serving. The second is creating appropriate funding and return on investment metrics to guide implementation and evaluation of digital health solutions. Finally, when selecting an implementation partner for digital health solutions, ensuring flexible approaches that allow for staff engagement and opportunities to integrate with and improve the existing process is vital.

The healthcare industry is continuing to move toward prioritizing value-based care and hospitals, especially rural hospitals, have an opportunity to explore emerging digital health technologies to add value to their existing systems and improve how they engage patients. As the potential for digital health increases, it is important that rural providers leverage these technologies to transform care.

² Reginald Williams and Kristi Mitchell, *A Conversation on Digital Health*, Avalere Health Webinar, April 17, 2019.

The Governance Institute thanks [Reginald Williams](#), Managing Director, Center for Healthcare Transformation, at Avalere Health for contributing this article. He can be reached at rwilliams@avalere.com.

