

Palo Pinto General Hospital

Information technology is seen as a critical part of this rural hospital's ability to operate efficiently and provide quality care.

The IT Factor



As an organization, Palo Pinto General Hospital aims to promote community wellness through quality healthcare in a safe environment. That approach relies on the provision of customer-centered healthcare and working with the community. Similarly, the hospital has been focused on improving its IT infrastructure over the last few years to improve quality and efficiency. Making that transition has required a user-centered approach and internal collaboration.

“This is a very technologically savvy hospital. We’re the biggest hospital between Fort Worth and Abilene, and we are an integral part of this community,” said Chasity Wilcox, IT director. “Our leadership recognizes that IT investments will not only get us ready for meaningful use, but also help us provide the best care for patients and help clinicians to do their jobs effectively.”



Chasity Wilcox

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Palo Pinto General Hospital is a 99-bed nonprofit community provider. It is among the leading employers in the county and has a significant impact on the local economy. The hospital may be small and rural, but it has demonstrated a penchant for coming up with innovative solutions to common problems.

For example, the hospital has employed unique staffing models and focused on profitable service lines to ensure viability. In 2005, it completed a major construction and modernization project that included a 24,000-square-foot addition and doubled the hospital's day surgery and OR capacity. In 2009 after a quarterly retreat, it created a flexible staffing system whereby all hospital departments are staffed according to the daily census, not just the nursing department. The hospital also added to its stable of specialists, bringing in an orthopedic surgeon and its first full-time cardiologist, in the last few years.

These maneuvers have all been critical pieces of Palo Pinto General Hospital's plan to improve the quality and breadth of its offerings while solidifying its economic situation. In fact, the staffing system alone allowed the facility better flexibility and control over cash flow, while the physical improvements and specialist additions have enhanced the quality of care.

Much like it took time to get people aligned behind the staffing model, it took time to get people comfortable with the idea of transitioning from paper to digital because of the impact it had on workflow. Wilcox said clinicians were able to get on board with the initiative because new tools at the clinicians' fingertips would make it easier and faster to provide care.

"We've looked to the users to give us ideas about what they need. When we test software and hardware, we invite them to

provide us with feedback before we jump in with both feet," Wilcox said. "Also, adding a clinical component to our department has helped us better understand concerns coming from the clinicians we serve."

Key to the future

As a strategic principle, the hospital has given a great deal of attention to its IT systems. Palo Pinto General Hospital has already completed the installation of a PACS and moved on to phases of an EMR implementation that includes a CPOE system. Careful management finances and smart investments spread out over time have allowed the hospital to develop a system that can manage its needs now and into the future.

Most recently, in December the hospital partnered with NorTex Technology Services, based in Weatherford, Texas. Wilcox said the hospital was having trouble with bandwidth related to transmission of PACS images. NorTex evaluated Palo Pinto General's system, pinpointed the problems, and came up with a way to remedy it.

"We added a second broadband provider and increased our available bandwidth to users by 500%," said Wilcox. "That is not an exaggeration, and it changed how we were doing business in other areas so we could improve our overall turnaround time for all PACS images, whether a radiologist was onsite or not."

The hospital is also making a concerted effort to put tablet PCs into the hands of physicians. This is part of a move to boost the CPOE functionality of the provider order management system. Wilcox said the hospital tested several different tablets and laptops. As the hospital narrowed its choices toward the right solution, usage percentages skyrocketed.

“Our test group of physicians went from an overall utilization percentage of 3% to 35% within a two-week period. That is a significant and drastic improvement,” Wilcox said, adding that wireless connectivity was seen as critical to efficiency. “When looking for a wireless provider, we were adamant that all wireless devices would have coverage from everywhere. We found a vendor who could provide us with coverage wherever a physician needed it, even in elevators and stairwells.”

As it continues along its path, the hospital will strive to attract more primary care and specialized physicians and continue investing in the latest technology. Wilcox said the priority, from her point of view in IT, is health information exchange. Patients are becoming wiser about the healthcare industry and have expectations that healthcare should be as easy to access online as something like banking. Part of stage one of meaningful use is the ability to conduct electronic exchange of information, so this next step is of the utmost importance to

NORTEX TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

Being a valued technology partner, NorTex is available to provide all types of information technology services to both large and small hospitals. We are proud to have assisted Chastity Wilcox and her team with the technology advances implemented at Palo Pinto General Hospital.

Wilcox, her department, the hospital, and the entire industry.

“For example, in a perfect world, we would be able to get a new patient’s information electronically instead of a fax. We must be receptive to electronic health information exchange and prepared to engage in that with other facilities,” said Wilcox. “That is why we are focusing on developing our core set of data records so we can exchange them with other facilities in that manner and receive similar files back from them. That will be a big project for us over the next year.” +

—Eric Slack



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