

Executive Summary

The Department of Health and Welfare (DHW) Division of Behavioral Health (BH) nominates the Division of Information and Technology (IT) for a Group Category, Collaborative Partnerships award for the outstanding work accomplished on the Telehealth System Implementation (TSI) project. This innovative, best practice project uses information technology to assist government efforts to increase efficiency, reduce costs, and improve health and behavioral health access, services and education to Idaho citizens.

Under the leadership of Director Richard Armstrong and Administrators Kathleen Allyn (BH), Michael Farley (IT) and Jane Smith (Public Health), the TSI project involved partnering between Divisions and with private psychiatrists to expand service capacity to deal with a potential increase in mental health needs due to a catastrophe. Videoconferencing equipment allows for efficient mobilization and communication in the event of increased mental health needs related to a disaster. Priority use is the need for telemedicine to expand psychiatric service access to prevent crises and maintain client stabilization.

The Division of Public Health's Health Preparedness Program secured initial funding for videoconferencing equipment costs through a federal grant. Eleven high definition videoconferencing sites were established in regional offices, central office and state hospitals (State Hospital South, State Hospital North and Idaho State School and Hospital).

Although installed for less than a year, the videoconferencing equipment has been used for a multitude of purposes by a variety of agencies. Purposes include availability to coordinate statewide communications in the event of a disaster, provision and enhancement of psychiatric services, site reviews, hospital discharge planning, statewide meetings, supervision, training and education. The Behavioral Health program has expanded access to psychiatric care and services to adults with a serious mental illness in rural and frontier areas through high definition videoconferencing. The Self Reliance program used this system to facilitate implementation of the Idaho Benefits Information System. Medicaid found it useful for provider trainings on new mental health rules. Idaho State School and Hospital used the system to evaluate drug wholesalers.

The cost savings related to the TSI project as measured by reduction in travel costs has exceeded installation costs in less than a year. The total equipment costs of \$189,000 included cameras, monitors, carts, routers and a Multi-Channel Unit (MCU) device that enables simultaneous linkages to more than two connections. From September 2008 through May 2009, the total savings across all users was \$197,873.

The TSI project has proven its worth as an innovative, cost-effective solution to facilitate communication in the event of a disaster and to improve health and behavioral health access and education to Idaho citizens. Many areas within the Department have benefitted from this equipment. Users include Behavioral Health, Public Health, Family and Community Services, Medicaid, Self Reliance, Hospitals, Welfare, the State Mental Health Planning Council, the Second District Drug Court and the Idaho Supreme Court. The use of videoconferencing telehealth as a cost effective means of extending health and behavioral health access and services is also recognized by the federal government.