



How One Rural Hospital Uses Telehealth to Expand Access to Inpatient Psychiatric Care

Based in rural West Texas, Shannon Medical Center struggled to recruit staff psychiatrists for 24/7 coverage of its 22-bed inpatient unit. An expanded partnership with Amwell enabled the health system to provide around-the-clock acute behavioral health coverage, giving the system's sole staff psychiatrist a better work-life balance and providing patients with faster access to high-quality care.

Shannon Medical Center includes a 22-bed inpatient psychiatric unit. While the health system traditionally had two staff psychiatrists to provide coverage, in 2020 Shannon was down to just one.

For more than two years, Shannon struggled to recruit psychiatrists to work in rural West Texas; the medical center's location in San Angelo is a three-hour drive northwest from Austin and a four-hour drive southwest from Dallas. In addition, Shannon also found that locum tenens psychiatrists—psychiatrists that filled in on a temporary basis—weren't a good cultural fit. This contributed to increased stress for Shannon's staff psychiatrist.

Extending a Partnership from the Emergency Department to the Psychiatric Unit

Shannon initially partnered with Amwell Psychiatric Care (APC) to provide emergency department (ED) coverage. Patients in the ED are evaluated by a remote Amwell psychiatrist and, if appropriate, are admitted to the inpatient psychiatric unit.

About Shannon Medical Center



Based in San Angelo, Texas, Shannon Medical Center serves a rural 25-county region of 300,000 people in the Concho Valley area of West Texas. The 407-bed locally owned health system includes the main medical center, a designated Level III Trauma facility, as well as the Shannon Women's & Children's Hospital and the Shannon Clinic. Shannon has more than 4,000 employees, including more than 300 physicians and advanced practice professionals.



Once admitted, inpatient staff members review the assessments from the remote Amwell psychiatrists. It was during this assessment review that Shannon's staff psychiatrist and other providers saw the high level of care being provided by these remote psychiatrists.

"We already knew that the APC partnership was going well," said Heidi Sauer, director of behavioral health at Shannon Medical Center. "But this helped initiate conversations around how they could address our inpatient psychiatric needs."

In extending the partnership with Amwell to use APC to cover the inpatient unit, Shannon's staff psychiatrist is able to maintain a Monday-through-Friday schedule, with on-call hours Monday through Thursday evening. Amwell psychiatrists cover weekends, holidays, and any of the staff psychiatrist's time off. These remote providers are able to assess and treat patients with a range of diagnoses, including depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and polysubstance abuse.

When staff in the inpatient unit need a remote psychiatric consult, they conduct it through a telemedicine cart using a monitor and camera. The inpatient psychiatry unit also has a dedicated telehealth exam room.

This workflow represented a slight change for staff members, who were used to the staff psychiatrist rounding in person. But it was easy for staff to catch on, Sauer said: "There's no buttons to push as long as the cart is on. The psychiatrist just pops up."

Better, Faster Access to Care – and a Better Work-Life Balance

By using APC, Shannon can provide 24/7 coverage for its inpatient psychiatric unit — and provide its staff psychiatrist with a better work-life balance. "It's very helpful for her quality of life. It has taken a lot of stress off her," Sauer said.

Patients quickly adapted to the new model of providing care, Sauer said. "We thought it might be difficult for a patient with schizophrenia, or for someone in a manic state, but in this day and age, and with everything over the past year being online, it doesn't even faze them."

Meanwhile, to address the learning curve for staff members in the inpatient unit, Shannon scheduled a virtual meet-and-greet session with an Amwell psychiatrist. That enabled staff to see how easy it was to use the monitor — and how accessible remote psychiatrists would be.

"Our staff members know each remote doctor, and they know the doctor is going to call or text to say they're ready for the next patient," Sauer said. "That has really helped us build trust."

About Amwell Psychiatric Care



Amwell Psychiatric Care (APC) offers 24/7 telehealth access to national board-certified psychiatrists, with a specific emphasis on psychiatric crises in emergency departments and acute inpatient medical floors. APC manages medications, risks, and legal status changes, freeing on-site providers to focus on medically critical patients. Backed by 20 years of experience, APC has received The Joint Commission's Gold Seal of Approval® for Behavioral Healthcare Accreditation.