



Norton County Hospital Improves Community Wellness and Positions Itself for Growth with an Electronic Health Record

SUCCESS STORY

Introduction

According to the American Hospital Association, small community hospitals account for over 40 percent of today's U.S. hospital market. These hospitals not only play an important role in the economic conditions of rural communities, they are critical to the overall healthcare of Americans. According to the non-profit organization Health Affairs, over 60 percent of U.S. citizens receive healthcare from small rural providers.

"If you have a strong hospital in a rural location, you have a strong community," said Scott Sproul, Economic Development Executive Director of Norton, Kansas. "The hospital in Norton is the nucleus of the community because healthcare is essential for our elderly population and as well as our growing younger population."

For community healthcare providers, like Norton County Hospital, technology solutions designed specifically for the rural environment is essential to success. The staff at Norton County was looking for a healthcare IT provider with a rural focus as it worked to upgrade its existing technology.

Background

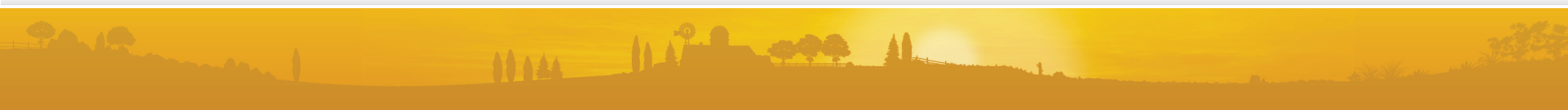
For many rural hospitals, maintaining independence has become increasingly important. For Norton County Hospital, it was the impetus for the implementation of its own EHR solution. Norton, Kansas is home to a 25-bed critical access hospital and a rural health clinic which provide the medical services for residents in Norton County and the surrounding communities in both Kansas and Nebraska. The healthcare provider has a medical staff of four physicians, three mid-level practitioners and 137 dedicated employees offering all levels of inpatient care, a full range of outpatient ancillary services and a significant number of visiting physician specialty clinics.

"Norton County Hospital is very dedicated to their patients and dedicated to allowing the medical staff to practice at a very high level," said Dr. Martin Griffey, Norton County Hospital. "We are a critical access hospital in a rural area and most people believe that we would not be capable of becoming a highly technological organization, but the hospital has been very dedicated in keeping up with technological advances - even comparable to that of many larger facilities. As an internist I order a lot of laboratory and x-ray studies and having the technology in those areas greatly allows me to practice a high level of medicine."

That wasn't always the case at Norton County Hospital. Previously, the hospital relied on regional healthcare provider for its technology and medical records. Unfortunately, this left hospital staff in Norton with little control over their medical records and at the mercy of another provider. Eventually, the regional facility decided to update its own technology leaving Norton County with three options: stay with the regional facility and its new EHR solution, partner with another hospital, or make an independent decision.

"Under our previous arrangement, we were completely dependent on another facility," said Pam Cuthbertson, IT Director, Norton County Hospital. "We wanted to change that and we wanted a system that is more in line with the needs of a critical access hospital. We made the move to EHR with the primary objective of improving patient care and safety. We also wanted to be able to compete with the services offered at larger facilities - our area of Kansas is very rural and the closest urban hospital is over 100 miles away. We needed to advance our technology to properly serve patients and provide the services they need."

The team at Norton began their search for an EHR provider with a team including staff from IT, finance and nursing. The group utilized vendor fairs



and focused on five healthcare IT providers. After reviewing the offerings, they narrowed the search down to three vendors, brought back their findings to the supervisors and staff, and invited the vendors to demonstrate their solutions.

The selection and review process of EHR solutions can often be a daunting one. The EHR market is both extensive and complex. From multiple data interchange and reporting standards, to formatting and encoding standards, to clinical processes and procedures – not to mention the complex government organizations and legislation – it can be difficult to get it right. For rural community hospitals, selecting a technology partner becomes even more important because their needs are unique and their budget is limited.

“One thing in the smaller, rural hospital is that people wear a lot of different hats,” said Richard Miller, Norton County Hospital Administrator and CEO. “Our staff is asked to do a lot of things because we just don’t have the same resources as an urban facility. We ask people to pick up the challenge and do several things. We’ve been fortunate, because our staff has always been willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done.”

Challenges

As Norton County looked to deploy technology to improve patient care and expand its services, they had many factors to consider. Although the majority of the staff understood the benefits upgraded technology would have on the community and patient care, the changes weren’t always easy. The healthcare provider faced challenges during the process including: limited technology infrastructure; use and maintenance of paper health records; the level of IT literacy among hospital personnel and employee resistance to new technology.

Technology and Interfaces:

Initially, Norton County had only a few computers and very basic technology. “We only had a financial package and we needed a clinical solution,”

Cuthbertson said. “We wanted one complete solution and didn’t want to deal with interfaces.”

Norton’s selection criteria required technology with strong clinical applications, integrated financial applications, limited interfaces, and one patient chart for hospital and clinic data.

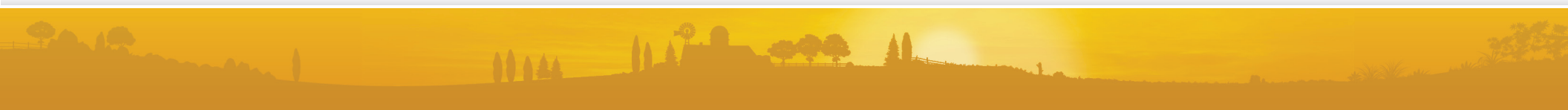
Maintenance of Paper Health Records:

“When we were paper charting, one of the biggest challenges that we found was that the nurses were constantly charting and taking time away from their patients,” said Julie Campbell, Norton County Hospital Director of Nursing. “We were losing charts, we were losing pieces of paper in the charts and our charts were spread out in different locations. We had our vitals at the patient bedside, but didn’t have complete medical histories on our patients. We weren’t able to see what was going on with our patients at our clinic, so we really didn’t have a complete picture of our patients when they were in the hospital.”

Access to a patient’s health records is important in any healthcare environment; however, there are additional concerns in a rural healthcare setting where patients do not regularly see the same physicians due to rotating schedules. It’s a reality that can be incredibly trying for both the patient and healthcare provider. In addition, the storage and maintenance of the paper creates a substantial expense for the hospital in both storage costs and resources required to maintain the records.

IT Literacy and End-User Buy-In:

IT literacy among rural hospital employees can also be an issue as an organization looks to upgrade technology. Management at Norton County Hospital faced resistance at the beginning of their EHR implementation. However, through preparation, organization-wide communication and the offering of additional training, they were able to retain their entire staff.



“Our training room was very helpful during implementation,” said Cuthbertson. “We provided computers and allowed the staff time to practice. We also had a team of super users on the nursing staff. We held weekly meetings and provided training with our super users. We all worked together. No one was left behind.”

“There’s always a learning curve,” said Dr. Griffey. “But by and large this system has given us the ability to view past notes, to retrieve previous x-ray studies, to review laboratory studies, and to share notes immediately. I’ve actually incorporated a voice activated device into our EHR system so that when I dictate my charts they are immediately put into the patient’s medical record. This type of immediate access to critical clinical information is vital to patient safety. If another physician sees one of my patients later the next day, they would see my notes and that does nothing but improve patient care.”

Buy-in from hospital staff – particularly physicians – is essential in EHR implementation “Norton County did the right thing involving its staff during every phase of implementation,” said Angie Franks, Healthland president and CEO. “Physicians, in particular, are crucial to achieving meaningful use. If a hospital has a reluctant staff, their stimulus funds could be at risk. And, that’s why usability is so important.”

Achieving Meaningful Use:

The ability to increase technology and demonstrate meaningful use of certified EHR technology to reduce long-term costs and improve patient care is one of the most important goals of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. As part of ARRA, the stimulus funds of \$19 billion to drive the adoption of electronic health records between 2011 and 2015 are expected to increase the adoption by physicians from 17 percent today to 90 percent by 2015. Yet, that adoption rate will greatly depend on the usability of the EHR solution.

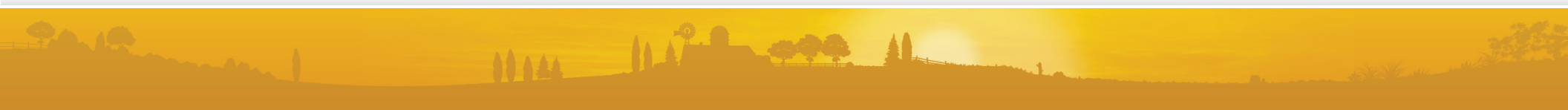
“I’ve worked with many types of electronic health record solutions,” said Dr. Griffey. “And, there’s definitely a difference between the ease of use. If you have a EHR solution that has ease of use, it allows you to take much better care of your patient in the fact that, you can pull up laboratory studies, you can pull up imaging studies, you can pull up old notes, you can pull up prior histories, you can pull up notes from other physicians in that same medical record and it allows instant access to their entire file which makes caring for that patient so much easier. If you have a non-user-friendly EHR solution, it is going to be very frustrating. Ultimately, the solution would likely fail if the providers are frustrated with the system or if the ease of using that system outweighs the benefits.”

The administration at Norton is confident they will achieve Meaningful Use in early 2012. For others looking to implement an EHR, they recommend 5 key strategies for successful EHR adoption:

1. Allow staff members sufficient time to learn each module
2. Implement the EHR components in a phased implementation approach
3. Utilize a cross-functional team with key staff members from the beginning of the process
4. Make additional efforts to gain buy-in, particularly with your physicians
5. Consistently communicate the benefits of EHR use

The Healthland solution

Today, Norton County Hospital is live with all of the Healthland clinical modules including clinical documentation, computerized provider order entry (CPOE), pharmacy, laboratory, therapy, radiology, dietary, transcription and eMAR.



Hospital officials are extremely pleased with the Healthland EHR implementation and say Healthland's rural focus and its integrated solution were key factors to their success.

Staff Training and Client Services:

"During implementation, Healthland provided us with all the needed preparation prior to our go-live date," said Cuthbertson "Everyone was very comfortable and we were ready to go live. Healthland was with us every step of way – they became part of our super user team. We still work very close with the services team and we always take advantage of Healthland's complimentary training and support resources."

Rural Focus:

"One of the reasons we chose Healthland was because we felt it was geared toward the rural market," added Miller. "Our other options were larger but we felt Healthland was more geared to us. Plus, we closely evaluated the user-friendliness of our options and we felt like the people associated with Healthland knew the rural situation and it was a match for us. It's hard to believe that was seven years ago, and to see the advancements we have made in that time reassure that we made the right decision."

"At Healthland, we focus on meeting the needs of rural hospitals with technology that enables them to provide the best care for their communities today and in the years to come," said Franks. "Our certified EHR is designed to help rural hospitals achieve meaningful use, deliver quality patient care; receiving incentive payments in the short term and positioning the healthcare provider for success and growth long term."

Future Growth:

Norton County Hospital has recently started the construction for a new 9,000-square-foot medical clinic adjacent to the hospital. It will house the

four physicians on the medical staff and three medical practitioners with 17 exam rooms and two procedure rooms. With the Healthland EHR, Norton saved square footage in the clinic because they did not have to designate an area for patient records.

Results

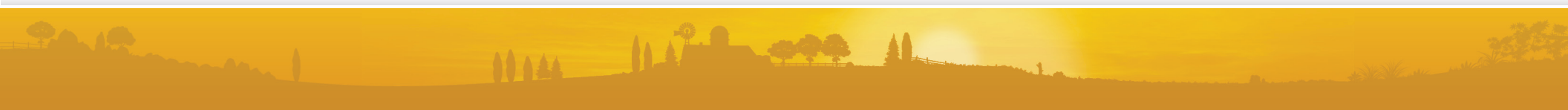
Norton County officials report that Healthland met all the criteria they required in an EHR solution. For Norton, it all comes down to providing what the patient requires – convenience, personalized patient care, optimal patient safety and better service overall.

Access to Clinical Information:

"The continuity of care is so much better for our patients now," said Cuthbertson. "Physicians can access information so much easier and the physicians have the patients' history at their fingertips. The system also helps remind us to do things – like make sure tetanus shots are updated. Now, we can keep patient demographics and insurance info in the system and it's always up-to-date. Plus, our nurses can focus on the patient and not tracking down patient information. The system also helps physicians make better and faster decisions with immediate access to patient data. We can now treat our patients the way we want to and the way they expect, like a neighbor."

More Time with Patients:

The nursing department has integrated the EHR into everything they do, and due to process improvements and gained efficiencies, Norton County has been able to reallocate portions of their clinical staff. "Our nurses enjoy taking the computers to the patients' bedside," said Campbell. "We're able to take our computers anywhere in the hospital. We use them for meetings, we use them just to get the patients' history while their getting their admissions assessment. Physicians can bring the computers to the bedside to show the patient lab results, x-ray results and we've really enjoyed that aspect of the EHR."



Community Wellness:

With the Healthland EHR, there not only is more one-on-one time with patients, but there is also a renewed focus on preventative care and overall community wellness.

“As an internist, I am very interested in preventative care,” said Dr. Griffey. “When we talk about hypertension, when we talk about diabetes, lipid management, it is important for an EHR system to have the ability to pull up all a patient’s past profiles and their past medications so we can maintain a very aggressive outlook for their preventative medicine. We’ve also just started a community-wide educational program where we can go out into the community and teach the community - enabling them with knowledge of the medical illnesses they suffer from. I think any time you can raise awareness and increase patients’ education level on their given illness, you’re going to have more success in caring for those patients.”

Return on Investment:

“The community benefits in many ways from the strength of the technology that we bring,” said Ryan Stover, Norton County Hospital CFO. “Economically, it draws people from surrounding communities. That’s one of our strengths, we know that as economic impacts are measured for our county that healthcare is right at the top of the reasons that our county is economically stronger than the counties that surround us. We know that EHR use creates more efficient workers, with less time spent documenting away from patients, eliminating handwriting on the patient chart, and much more face-to-face time with the patients; and that’s what we really get excited about.”

When it comes to measuring the return-on-investment, it’s much more than dollars and cents for the staff at Norton County Hospital. “Our hospital is more than just a line item in a county budget,” Sproul concluded. “Our hospital is more about caring for the community and making sure they have what they need in the most caring and compassionate way.”



Want to learn more about the successful EHR implementation at Norton County Hospital, visit www.healthland.com/norton