



Pembina County Memorial Hospital Takes Proactive Approach to Meet Meaningful Use Requirements

SUCCESS STORY

Today's Healthcare IT Environment

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 – which will allocate billions of dollars to fund health information technology projects, including \$17.2 billion in Medicare and Medicaid incentive payments for “meaningful use” of electronic health records (EHR) systems – has created unprecedented opportunity and confusion for many small community and rural hospitals. A recent Healthland survey reports:

- 44 % of participants still need to figure out how to get IT funding under the ARRA
- 37 % believe funding is coming, but they will never see it
- 28 % say they have no idea how to qualify for ARRA funding

According to a 2009 survey published in the New England Journal of Medicine, cost is listed as the number one factor for 74 percent of hospitals without an electronic records solution. Though it would appear that the ARRA financial incentives will be key to EHR conversion in the United States, many providers are continuing to look for clarification surrounding the ARRA reimbursements and new certification requirements as well as definitions around “meaningful use” of EHR systems. In addition, many healthcare facilities – particularly those in the rural community and critical access environment – are failing to see the positive impact EHR technology can have on their bottom line.

The Certification Commission for Healthcare Information Technology (CCHIT) Chair Mark Leavitt, MD, PhD agrees that more information, communication and encouragement around the ARRA's EHR initiative is needed to help risk-averse newcomers to health IT. In a June 2009 column in iHealthBeat, Leavitt says, “We need more clinician champions who can motivate their colleagues by example, spreading the news of how they successfully harnessed EHR technology to practice higher quality, safer, lower cost care.”

Robert Heidt, Information Systems Service Officer at Pembina County Memorial Hospital, takes Leavitt's thoughts one step further, saying that ARRA funds should really be tied to a mentor program. “It would be very helpful if you could work with a facility that's done this before – for questions, suggestions and insight,” Heidt says. “We didn't have any sort of electronic system at Pembina County Memorial,

so we didn't even know what type of questions to ask in the beginning of our EHR installation.”

Though Pembina County Memorial Hospital implemented an EHR system before the ARRA legislation was passed, the healthcare provider did take advantage of a federal grant to implement its EHR solution – one with exceedingly stringent timelines. “We knew we would have to implement an EHR solution eventually and we wanted to be proactive and be ahead of the curve, but frankly we couldn't comprehend the value EHR would bring us,” said Heidt. “What we've found has been substantial gains in employee satisfaction, improved patient safety and care and increased efficiencies that is not only saving us money, but also bringing it in.”

Background

Based in Cavalier, North Dakota, Pembina County Memorial Hospital Association includes three facilities: a 25-bed, critical access hospital, a long term care facility and a rural health clinic. In 2005, officials at the hospital, which serves a community of 1,600 in North Dakota's Northeast region, created a clinician group to begin research on EHR solutions. The group, comprised of physicians, medical records professionals, nurses and IT staff, was tasked with indentifying potential EHR vendors and researching the various solution options: a one-vendor integrated solution, best-of-breed or a piece meal system of various components.

“We knew an EHR mandate was coming, so we started the process early,” Heidt said. “Once we received the grant, we decided to move forward.” In October 2007, Pembina County Memorial Hospital Association was one of three facilities in North Dakota to be awarded the \$1.6 million federal grant for a pilot EHR project. Under the stipulations of the grant, Pembina County Memorial had just 12 months to complete installation. “We took the process very seriously and looked hard at it,” Heidt said. “We had many options to consider and looked at several IT providers. We decided a vendor focused on small community facilities with interactive and integrated capabilities made the most sense for us. In the end, we selected Healthland.”

Solution Implementation

A Healthland Financial Suite client since 2002, Pembina County Memorial selected several of The Healthland EHR software applications including: order communications for pharmacy, radiology, therapies, transcription, ancillary and clinical documentation. Healthland's centralized approach to patient data was vital to Pembina County Memorial Hospital when considering software providers during its four-year EHR planning and selection process. Healthland's solutions provide a single patient chart for the entire community including data from a hospital visit, clinic appointment, long-term care stay or home health call. The information is stored electronically and available to all attending clinicians, functionality crucial to a healthcare provider operating three different types of facilities.

Pembina County Memorial also selected the healthcare IT provider's Ambulatory EHR (Physician Practice Documentation) solution. The Healthland Ambulatory EHR is used to electronically document patient visits made within the clinic environment. Tasks associated with charting patient exams and assessments are automated, designed to follow the workflow of a typical visit, and ultimately create a single document summarizing care received. The Healthland Ambulatory EHR enables physicians to easily review notes made during prior clinic visits and again, provides access to their patients' medical records from visits to other environments such as inpatient, outpatient, long-term care and the emergency department. All diagnostic results are presented in a format that's sortable, filterable and easy to use.

"Our determining factors for selecting Healthland included cost, integration and availability of applications such as long-term care," said Heidt. "Not many providers have the long-term care application; the integration with all of our facilities is a necessity to provide quality care."

After a 12-month implementation process, Pembina County Memorial Hospital Association was live with The Healthland Inpatient and Ambulatory EHR solution in November 2008. The facility reached the milestone within both the project's designated timeline and budget. "Healthland really did pull through in 12 months," Heidt said. "Of course we had struggles moving so quickly and keeping up with timeframe was certainly a challenge, but we pulled off and I'd say it was a successful project."

Challenges

Pembina County Memorial cites the aggressive timeline as the top challenge during its EHR implementation project, particularly coming from a paper-dependant organization. Pembina County Memorial approached this project from a completely paper-based system. The only electronic solution the healthcare provider used was its PAC system.

"I would've really liked a three-year process for the EHR implementation, allowing us to work gradually through each application," Heidt said. "Yet, on the other side, the tight deadline didn't give us a lot of time for resistance. We also didn't change our application's functionality as sometimes occurs when you add additional modules. We all learned how to use all of our applications the "right way" from the very beginning."

Batch scanning of patient charts began in the summer of 2007, starting with historical patient charts. Current clinic charts are now being scanned; this remains an ongoing project. The process entails scanning documents, verifying back-up, then shredding the original documents. At the outset of the batch-scanning process, a total of 450 linear feet of medical records required scanning; approximately 220 feet have been scanned thus far.

In addition to the tight implementation schedule, Pembina County Memorial faced obstacles in the lack of planning for the project as well as the overall process for installation – another reason Heidt recommends a mentor when moving to EHR.

Employee resistance was also an issue at the beginning of the project. But hospital officials reveal that much of the staff were extremely supportive of the project. "Our staff is now recognizing the benefits of the system," said Heidt. "It was a long road and we experienced quite a lot of resistance, but the more the team uses the technology, the more they like it. We initially expected some turn-over due to the changes and challenges new technology can bring to an organization, but we didn't experience any of that."

Benefits

Pembina County Memorial has only been live with The Healthland EHR solution since November 2008, but the facility has already recognized benefits including the elimination of large volumes of paper records; increased accuracy of patient information and increased record access. The result is a measurable improvement in patient safety and care. The hospital's medical records, which now exist on a small database that can be backed up off site, are more accurate and medical errors have been reduced because handwriting interpretation is no longer necessary. In addition, the hospital now has immediate availability of records – including lab results – which facilitates department transfers and improves the continuity of patient care.

Today, the site is 95 percent electronic in the clinic and – with The Healthland EHR solution – Pembina County Memorial has the ability to share patient data with facilities in the Park River and Northwood areas of North Dakota, creating operational efficiencies, improving patient care and eliminating duplicated lab results and patient information.

The facility's physicians are also providing positive feedback on The Healthland Ambulatory EHR solution; finding the level of access to patient information extremely beneficial. Although the healthcare facility can't point to ROI figures at this point in time – they expect to have documented figures in the next year – officials do cite many benefits that you can't put in terms of numbers. Unexpectedly, the facility has also found a new revenue stream with the new order entry system. The facility is now charging for services that they missed prior to the EHR implementation.

“Right now, it's tough to point to a figure in cost savings. We are experiencing gains but we still have a long way to go. We're still living in a paper and electronic world. We have a way to go in being efficient. I think we'll really experience the full benefits in the next year.”

Future Projects:

“Right now we're just trying to get our head to stop spinning,” said Heidt. “Our next big step is to be able to exchange data with all other hospitals in the area. Right now we're making plans, gathering ideas and prepping but everyone's waiting to see how the money will be dispensed with ARRA funding. We hope to utilize funds for data exchange.”

Again, Pembina County Memorial seems to be ahead of the curve. Many experts – including those cited in the May 2009 edition of the industry publication, *For the Record* – say that interoperability with EHR implementation will be crucial. The article goes on to state that EHR adoption alone will not be enough for healthcare reform, but having all systems interconnected will be the definition of success with the ARRA legislation.

Officials at Pembina County Memorial confirm the difficulty navigating through the new ARRA legislation, particularly because all of the guidelines are not yet in place including “meaningful use” and required certifications. Heidt commends Healthland for taking a leadership role in helping small community hospitals understand the provisions and enabling them to take advantage of new funding. “I've utilized the Healthland web events and have found them to be very helpful,” he said.

“Our goal is to go completely paperless,” Heidt added. “We have been a long-time partner of Healthland and they really understand the specific needs of rural hospitals, particularly in the critical access arena. We have proactively developed new work flow processes that will facilitate EHR in all areas and fully expect Healthland to be part of our move to be a completely paperless organization.”



If they can do it, you can too. To learn more about our products and services and how Healthland can help your hospital become paperless, contact us at info@healthland.com or 800.323.6987.