SUCCESS STORY

How HMSA Significantly Expanded Behavioral Health Services in Hawaii

“Telehealth has allowed HMSA to bring specialty care to the Neighbor Islands where it can be very difficult to get timely care for behavioral health issues.”

- Natasha Richards, Business Analyst

Challenge
With steady growth over the last few decades, Hawaii’s population of about 1.4 million has seen a new rise in concerns about access to healthcare. Healthcare providers—specifically mental health specialists—tend to be clustered on Oahu, which has the bulk of the state's population. Nearly 350,000 people living on the other islands often have limited access to care. If specialty care is available on the Neighbor Islands, transportation can be a challenge for those in remote areas due to a lack of well-maintained roads and public transportation.

Understanding these issues, the Hawai’i Medical Service Association (HMSA) searched for a way to expand access to behavioral health services to residents on all islands.

Solution
1. Bring behavioral health services to members in their homes or other convenient locations by providing a platform for providers to reach patients.
2. Equip medical practices with the tools needed to successfully extend their practices to other islands through telehealth.
Success

- Expanded behavioral health services to nearly 350,000 people on the Neighbor Islands.
- More than 65 percent of HMSA's telehealth visits are for behavioral health services.
- Excellent patient satisfaction with an average rating of 4.9 out of five stars.
- Received such positive results that one behavioral health practice discontinued its brick and mortar office to focus on telehealth and reduce administrative costs.

Challenge: Extending specialty care to the Neighbor Islands

HMSA, an independent licensee of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, is the largest insurer in the state of Hawaii, covering more than half of the state’s population. HMSA's mission is to provide the people of Hawaii with sustainable, quality healthcare. The mission became particularly difficult for specialty healthcare services like behavioral health due to specialist shortages, a high incidence of serious mental illnesses in the state, and expensive and limited options for patients. HMSA wanted to find a way to provide its members—who live on separate islands—with fast, affordable, and convenient behavioral health services that support its commitment to quality care.

Solution: Allow behavioral healthcare providers to deliver care via telehealth

HMSA launched its telehealth service, HMSA’s Online Care®, in 2009, originally offering only urgent care services to its members. From 2013 to 2014, HMSA more than doubled the average number of daily telehealth visits and looked into expanding services beyond urgent care. In 2014, HMSA opened its telehealth services to include behavioral health.

- Tailored care for behavioral health
  In 2014, HMSA changed the reimbursement rate for behavioral health to a parity rate. This meant that HMSA was now offering the same level of benefits for mental illness as it was for physical disorders or diseases. Concurrently, HMSA made changes to its telehealth service to be more applicable to behavioral health, such as extending the visit length to one hour. In addition to allowing behavioral health providers to practice on HMSA's Online Care, they added a feature that allowed behavioral health practices to add their own branded online practice to the mobile app.

AmericanWell® is an independent company providing hosting and software services for HMSA’s Online Care platform on behalf of HMSA.
Word-of-mouth marketing
At the time, HMSA's Online Care had a small marketing team and wasn't prepared to support a large campaign for its behavioral health offering. But what began with one behavioral health provider on Hawaii Island who wanted to offer telehealth services quickly grew into more and more providers who wanted to learn about HMSA's Online Care. “The provider would tell all her behavioral health associates about telehealth and then I'd go and do large-scale trainings,” says Natasha Richards, business analyst for HMSA's Online Care. Before she knew it, Natasha was getting more than 15 requests a week from behavioral health providers on Hawaii Island who were interested in providing telehealth services. “We couldn’t keep up! It spread like wildfire,” she says.

Success: Behavioral health visits have doubled every year because of telehealth
At the end of 2016, behavioral health visits on HMSA's Online Care accounted for 65 percent of the total visits. Since launching in 2014, the number of behavioral health visits has doubled every year. “In just three years, behavioral health has completely transformed online care for HMSA,” says Natasha. One medical practice in HMSA’s network, Ho'okupu Counseling Services, has been a shining testament to the overall success of HMSA’s behavioral health services offering.

![Behavioral Health Visits Have Doubled Each Year](Customized rack cards)
Hoʻokupu Counseling Services: 
A behavioral telehealth success story

The husband and wife team of Steven Nagasaka, a licensed marriage and family therapist, and Deanna Mirzai-Nagasaka, a licensed clinical psychologist, are founders of Hoʻokupu Counseling Services on Maui. In 2015, after some patients had difficulty getting to their brick and mortar facility, they decided to try telehealth to improve access for their patients. They had learned about telehealth from another therapist who was using the platform.

Nagasaka and Mirzai-Nagasaka heavily promoted telehealth to their patients. They first told patients about the service through email, then extended their efforts with rack cards, brochures, and referrals from local providers. On their website, they included online enrollment instructions and promoted telehealth throughout the site.

Hoʻokupu patients were quick to adopt telehealth and after only six months, Hoʻokupu closed its office and exclusively offered online care. With telehealth, they’ve expanded their patient base beyond Maui to residents on other islands. To ensure a smooth transition for their patients from their traditional practice to telehealth, they developed a new process that includes online consent forms and an introductory “getting to know you” session to make sure that online services are the right fit for patients.

Since adopting telehealth, patients have rated Hoʻokupu five out of five stars on HMSA’s Online Care and given both Nagasaka and Mirzai-Nagasaka perfect scores for provider satisfaction. Hoʻokupu’s success with online care has had a significant impact on the overall success of HMSA’s behavioral health services and will continue to serve as an inspiration to other providers and to HMSA.