

Buffalo Valley, Inc.: Collaborating and Coordinating Care Through a Shared EHR Network

For more than 3 decades, [Buffalo Valley, Inc.](#) (BVI), has been providing alcohol and substance abuse treatment to its 19-county service area in rural Tennessee. In July 2012, a Technology-Assisted Care grant funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration enabled the creation of *BVI Connect*, which has helped BVI adapt to the changing needs of clients and the health care arena. *BVI Connect* uses emerging technologies to provide effective health care through Web-based outreach, smartphones, and other electronic applications.

BVI Connect's growing menu of online tools to complement its substance abuse treatment efforts compelled staff to upgrade their current management information system (MIS) to a certified electronic health record (EHR) system for ease of integration. Project director Deborah Hillin noticed EHR systems are often too expensive for smaller agencies to join, especially in rural areas where Internet access is limited. Deborah, who also serves as the president of the Statewide Association of Alcohol and Drug Prevention Providers in Tennessee, wondered how she could make these systems available to smaller agencies that do little Medicaid business or do not yet have an MIS system.

She decided to create a nonprofit organization called *Tennessee Behavioral Health Network* that enables smaller agencies to gain access to the negotiated rates Deborah confirmed with BVI's EHR provider NetSmart. By joining the network, cost would no longer keep agencies from reaping the benefits of improved, coordinated care and compliance with the Affordable Care Act. Agencies pay a small monthly fee and EHR providers are able to expand their networks to reach new clientele.

Some critics wondered why Deborah would give competing agencies an advantage they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford. She doesn't see it that way: "In Tennessee, the number of people that need services far exceeds any of our capabilities. The resources we need are inadequate in our State. For [other agencies] to be able to have this EHR system, it's just a win-win situation."

As with all trailblazers, the journey hasn't always been smooth. "Because NetSmart is the first company that jumped off this boat with us, they have learned lessons through this process, too," said Deborah. "It's all new ground; we're all trying to find our way through it." For others who want to follow her path, she recommends doing plenty of research into available EHR systems, using existing connections to target partner agencies, and being flexible with time lines.

For Deborah, the possibilities of collaboration and integration of online systems are limitless. BVI has already had two agencies join the *Tennessee Behavioral Health Network*, and four others have started the process. "I would like to have anyone who wants to participate," she said. "It's an open door—no limitations!"