

A Technology-Based Hub-and-Spokes Approach to Treatment

On a recent night, a young man entered a 24-hour crisis service site operated by River Edge Behavioral Health Center in Macon, Georgia. He was tremulous. His palms were sweaty. He clearly needed medical detoxification services but refused help. What to do?

The staff person on duty called Shannon Harvey, River Edge's CEO. Shannon holds State credentials that empower her to commit someone to involuntary detox. From her home, 70 miles away, Shannon opened her laptop, logged into the telehealth application, evaluated the man, and had him committed to involuntary detox. With a blood alcohol level of .459, he likely would have died that night without treatment. After detox, the man was transferred to a rehab program and is now working toward recovery.

River Edge—in partnership with ViewPoint Health—has adopted a hub-and-spokes telemedicine approach to extend the reach of this 63-year-old provider agency. Since its launch, the program has successfully promoted access to recovery for people across 15 locations, mostly rural, throughout Georgia.

Shannon credits Ali Yallah, the grant's project director and a credentialed IT professional, with River Edge's "entrepreneurial, forward-thinking, and solution-focused approach." Ali's expertise helped River Edge choose Veamea, a low-cost, easy-to-use, secure application, as their telehealth solution. Now, clinical staff routinely consult remotely to provide diagnosis and intervention services to clients. With a laptop, Internet connection, and Webcam, a clinician can assess and treat a client from practically anywhere.

River Edge has adopted several other technology-based strategies to serve its clients. For example, its Smoke Signal system provides digital telephonic reminders to clients about upcoming appointments. Rolled out in 2013, Smoke Signal has already reduced client appointment no-show rates by 12 percent.

River Edge has incorporated computer labs at each site to help clients cross "the digital divide." With staff assistance, clients can use self-paced goal-setting and tracking software. They can also learn to build resumes and connect with employment services. The availability of onsite technology is transforming lives. For example, one client had lost everything as a result of alcoholism. After receiving services and getting sober, she began believing in herself again. She got her GED and learned new computer skills, including Photoshop. She now publishes a magazine.

River Edge's iCareRecovery Web portal promises to be "the Facebook for recovery." Upcoming enhancements include chat features, blogs, and peer support services for clients when a counselor is unavailable.

Shannon and Ali are passionate about technology. As Shannon says, “We believe treatment is effective, recovery is to be expected, technology is treatment, and technology is health care.”