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Pre- and Post-Hurricane Harvey: Healthcare Providers Rely on Health IT to Mitigate Disruptions to Care

October 24, 2017 by Heather Landi | Reprints

Two months ago, as Hurricane Harvey approached Southeast Texas, healthcare provider organizations around the Houston area made preparations to try to mitigate overall disruptions to care in the midst of what was forecasted to be a devastating storm.

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VillageMD-Houston, a primary care medical group operating 11 clinics across Houston with approximately 80 to 90 physicians, saw an opportunity to use its health IT tools to communicate with its more than 160,000 patients across Houston, in advance of the storm. Dan Jenson, chief financial officer of VillageMD-Houston, says health technology can play a critical role before a storm, and in the wake of disaster, keeping patients not only informed, but also with access to care.

"Even before the storm, we have done a lot of work around identifying high-risk patients and

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reaching out to those patients and building a relationship with those patients. So, as the storm was approaching, we had those high-risk patients in mind, as well as all our other patients," Jenson says.

"We first stepped back and thought about the different scenarios that could play out," Jenson says, noting that the medical practice leaders had a historical view of the flooding caused by Tropical Storm Allison in June 2001. "We thought about the different scenarios—if we lost power at the main clinic site, if we lost our phone system. What would it look like if we had multiple days of people not being able to get into the clinics? We really played out each one of those scenarios and thought about ways that we could mitigate the loss of patient care," Jenson says.

In the days before Hurricane Harvey was forecasted to make landfall, which it did August 25, VillageMD leaned on its cloud-based electronic health record (EHR) system to send out messages to all the practice's patients to alert them of the severity of the storm and inform them about how they could get in contact with their provider, or an on-call physician.

"If our phone lines were up, that we gave them our normal on-call physician number that they could call in. We also let them know that if, for any reason, our phones went down, we'd still have our answering service line available for folks to call in and be able to speak to an on-call physician. And then, we did our best to get facilities ready for the storm, so we could recover as quickly as we could following the storm."

As Hurricane Harvey was churning its way up the Gulf of Mexico, Jenson credits the group's EHR vendor, athenahealth, for working with medical practice leaders to get messages out to patients, whether via text, email or phone calls, two days before Hurricane Harvey's forecasted landfall. "athenahealth has a pre-built way, through its communicator application, to reach 10,000 of your patients a day through campaigns. We've got over 150,000 active patients that we needed to reach out to at one time. So, we called athena on Wednesday, and overnight, by Thursday, they built an application for us that could process all of our patient applications, so we could get out more than 150,000 messages via text, email and phone."

Dan Jenson

He also notes that the practice used the tools available within its EHR to reach out to high-risk patients with specific needs.

"We have that high-risk patient list; a cohort of patients that we know have complicated, multiple chronic diseases. So, they might need special assistance, such as they might need oxygen or they are on dialysis, and it's a situation where, once a month, we are reaching out to these patients anyway to see how they are doing. We reached out to those patients before the storm, telephonically, to give them some words of comfort and let them know what numbers to call to reach a provider. I think that was really helpful, just getting our patients ready," Jenson says.

In the Aftermath of Hurricane Harvey

Electronic communication and cloud-based tools enabled many healthcare providers to continue

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to deliver patient care, whether in-person or remotely, during and after the storm.

Advanced Diagnostics is a small, eight-bed hospital and specialty surgical center in east Houston that operates an active emergency room, and organization leaders made the decision to stay open throughout the hurricane. "We saw patients in the ER as well as the inpatient operations and we ran the operating room all the way up until Friday (August 25) and then shut the ORs down due to travel, but our inpatient and ERs stayed opened throughout," says Rob Turner, CEO of Advanced Diagnostics Hospital and Clinic System and chief operating officer of Advanced Diagnostics, the parent corporation.

Turner stresses the importance of preparing and reviewing disaster preparedness plans and then carefully evaluating the options—whether to close or stay open—when faced with a severe weather threat. Based on the local geography, Turner and other organization leaders felt confident that the facility would not flood or be an issue for patient safety.

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