Mobile Applications in Community-Based Mental Health: The Time is Now
Executive Summary

Behavioral health providers face increasing challenges to support larger caseloads and productivity goals, regulatory and paperwork requirements. As our industry transitions to value-based reimbursement models with higher emphasis on collaborative documentation, coordinated care and field-based service delivery, behavioral health agencies must consider the role of mobile technology for both clinicians and clients.

Implementing a comprehensive and fully integrated Electronic Health Record (EHR) is a necessity to meet the clinical and financial goals of today’s ever-changing mental health care climate. Federal and state initiatives, such as Meaningful Use and Health Homes, continue to create incentives and mandates for the use of EHRs. Mobile health applications, or mHealth, should be part of your strategic information technology plan, supporting staff ability to access and update clinical records, tasks, and schedules regardless of location. Additionally, client adoption of self-help apps will enable providers to engage clients in new ways. Mobile application solutions meet the changing patterns and behaviors of today’s workers and clinicians and are essential for the healthcare provider working in the field.

This white paper will examine the benefits and challenges of using mobile technology in the behavioral health field, and discusses approaches, best practices and useful applications for mHealth.

The Growth of Mobile

In a few short years, smartphones and tablets have evolved from a photo-snapping curiosity to an essential business productivity tool. The global smartphone market continues to grow at a steady pace and currently, in 2015, nearly two-thirds of Americans own a smartphone, up from 35% in 2011 (Pew Research Center, Internet, Science & Tech, April 1, 2015). As mobile users now outnumber personal computer users, businesses and providers alike are re-aligning to this new mobile landscape. While it took considerable time to embrace the potential of the Internet, businesses are adopting mobile technologies and applications much more rapidly across the enterprise.

With its compact design and ease of use, it is clear that clinician adoption of mobile technology will undoubtedly grow. These small, lightweight tablets and smartphones have become the preferred tool for business and personal use. Walk down any aisle on a bus or airplane and you see how mobile devices are meeting the needs of our new style of work and life. Staff, including clinicians, are no longer tied to desks but perform work in our non-stop, 24/7 world, and not just during normal business hours.

Even for providers who have yet to implement an EHR, the adoption of mobile devices and continued growth of mHealth apps will have a positive impact on the quality of information available to both clinicians and clients as well as the care delivered to clients. How quickly and effectively provider organizations are able to adopt and integrate these technologies into their operations will become a competitive advantage.
High Quality Care Delivered When and Where It’s Needed

Mobile health is clearly the wave of the future in healthcare delivery and is particularly important in behavioral healthcare. When John F. Kennedy signed the Community Mental Health Act of 1963, his goals were to reduce admission to institutions and treat people in their own communities, shifting resources from large institutions to community-based mental health treatment programs. Although the deinstitutionalization movement led to great gains in treatment options for people living with mental illness, the full promise of community-based care has not yet been achieved. With mHealth, we can get closer than ever to offering services to people in need regardless of their location or severity of illness. We now have the ability to provide treatment to increasing numbers of people who may previously have been untreated, socially isolated and/or homeless. At the same time, we can significantly improve the quality of the care these individuals receive through full-time availability of accurate, up-to-date information.

Since 2009, state Medicaid funds throughout the country have supported these goals by increasing reimbursement amounts for Home and Community Based Services (HCBS). Most of the fifty states have HCBS funds built right into their Medicaid budget as community based services are now seen to be a viable treatment option. This initiative puts service delivery in locations other than the traditional community-based office clinic.

When practitioners adopt mobile technology, paper charts, computers, desks, and outlets are no longer required, allowing for more direct and seamless intervention in a more comfortable setting for those suffering from the stigma of mental illness. Client information, including treatment history, is available to clinicians who are on-the-go. As mobile devices and apps continue to evolve and offer more capabilities, the transition of existing processes from paper records to these devices will expand, as will new functions which were not previously possible. Additionally, the number of apps targeted to clients and consumers is exploding and opens possibilities to engage clients in new ways, as active participants in their own care.

mHealth Features and Functions

For providers adopting mHealth, mobile solutions work best when they don’t try to reproduce the functionality of an entire EHR. They simply need to provide the right information at the right time. When implemented effectively, mHealth solutions can support both strategic initiatives and enhance daily clinical functions. As part of an integrated EHR-mobile solution, mHealth will enhance staff productivity whether in or outside the office. Here are a few features to consider when implementing mobile solutions.

Accessibility and Flexibility

Community-based clinicians who use mobile apps can start their workday without driving to an office location or sitting at a desk. A well-thought out mobile solution should include the ability to access caseloads, client records, diagnosis and treatment histories, clinical and administrative reminders, and clinical decision support information at any time, from any location. Applications should ideally support access to caseload and other information both with and without Internet connectivity.
Calendars and Scheduling

A feature ideally suited for mobile, clinicians should be able to easily access their calendar of appointments and schedule subsequent appointments right from their device. Mobile applications should have simple, easy-to-read design for an at-a-glance review of day, week or month schedules. Custom and color-coding appointments can help clinicians easily distinguish different clinical appointments from administrative meetings. From the field, clinicians can efficiently complete notes and schedule future visits, enhancing their productivity.

Clinical Process, Care Coordination and Reminders

One of the most useful tools for clinicians is the ability to easily review previous assessments, treatment plans, and progress notes prior to clinical encounters. At any time before, during or after an appointment, mobile forms can be completed and client records immediately updated with the most current information. Clinical staff can be reminded about their own specific caseload and automatically receive alerts for overdue progress notes, treatment plans, periodic reviews, and annual updates. Because this information is accessible by the clinician at any time, mobile applications can increase efficiency. Mobile devices are also ideally suited to support field-based communication and care coordination, an important foundation of health reform initiatives.

Screening Tools and Outcomes Measurement

There is mounting pressure on agencies to measure and demonstrate outcomes and submit periodic reports on data. Using a mobile device, clinicians can use screening tools while meeting with clients to gauge severity of symptoms, determine diagnoses, best placement, and track progress. When done collaboratively and concurrently, screening and assessment can lead to the most reliable and valid results and appropriate treatment recommendations. Some of the more common tools used by behavioral health clinicians are amenable to mobile implementation. These include the GAD-7, PHQ-9, Primary Care PSTP Screen, ASI and ASAM. These tools are brief with well-validated measures to help the clinician determine the need for further diagnostic assessment.

Administrative Support and Reminders

Mobile solutions help facilitate state and federal compliance by administrative staff. Reminders include client eligibility and service authorizations, updates to client payer information and compliance with required paperwork and legal consents. Real-time alerts should ensure that the agency has required administrative information it needs to submit claims for reimbursement for all clients and to be compliant with all state guidelines and billing obligations.
Considerations for Adopting Mobile Technology

While mobile health solutions can be valuable tools to support the effective and efficient delivery of care, providers should consider a few key areas before implementing any mHealth strategy. Don’t get lured into picking a mobile platform because it simply seems cutting edge, instead select a solution that fits with your agency’s particular needs and will provide the most value to your clinicians and clients. Just like implementing any other IT project or strategic initiative, your mHealth strategy should be well thought out, deployed effectively and properly evaluated. Here are several things to consider when implementing a mobile solution.

Keep Functionality in Mind

Avoid thinking that your mobile solution should be a small version of your agency’s EHR. An ideal mobile solution should provide specific features which are both designed for the device format and that address specific functional needs. Software will vary from vendor to vendor; some offer too few features in their mobile solution, while others try to serve their full EHR on screens smaller than recommended by the vendor. Remember that, different staff have different needs and a “one-size-fits-all” strategy may fail to appreciate unique information needs and clinician workflows. When adapting clinical documents and screening instruments to a mobile format, remember that these tools should be practical and easy to use in a mobile setting.
Internet Connectivity

While Internet-ready mobile devices enable clinicians to access, share and update client records in real time, dedicated wireless or Internet access is required to ensure your staff are able to stay productive. In order to avoid downtime, ensure that your mobile solution can be used both with a dedicated Internet connection and off-line, without Internet access. Solutions should ideally permit your clinicians to download their caseload, go off-line and enable staff to access and capture new data from the field. Once an Internet connection has been re-established, the data can be synchronized with your EHR.

Security, Privacy and PHI Issues

As you develop your mHealth strategy, it is essential to address the privacy and security issues which are unique to mobile platforms. Mobile solutions present additional challenges to provider organizations to ensure that data is secure and encrypted at all times. Prior to deploying any mobile strategy is a good time to review current organization privacy and security policies to ensure compliance. New policies may need to address appropriate use, device loss or theft precautions, shared device policies, use of devices over public Wi-Fi, and password management among other issues. Any mobile solution should ensure that client data is always encrypted, both at rest on the device and when being transmitted. And best practice dictates that only minimal amount of data be stored on the device at any time and then be cleared from the device on a routine basis, ideally daily.

New Tools and Documentation Types

Because new mobile devices offer features not available in traditional EHRs, providers should anticipate how staff may utilize these new tools. Cameras, video recorders and voice memos provide new documentation media which can expand and enhance existing EHR documentation. Global Positioning Systems (GPS) permit clinicians to navigate to unfamiliar locations and provide a sense of security in unfamiliar locations. As you evaluate mobile devices, consider how new media will impact your EHR storage requirements and how staff may use these new technologies.

Deployment Strategies

As mobile technology spreads, more and more clinicians will expect their provider organizations to integrate mobile solutions into their clinical operations. Provider organizations will have to address Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) trends as mHealth continues to grow and evolve. However, the risk of clinicians carrying PHI on personal devices requires providers to plan and prepare. Revising existing policies is a good start, however, provider organizations should evaluate Mobile Device Management (MDM) software to help deploy, configure, secure, and manage mobile applications. These systems can be used to streamline mobile application deployment while minimizing the risk of data breaches. Lastly, staff need thorough training on devices, applications and mobile device usage and privacy policies, especially as technology changes.
Conclusion

The mobile health platform for behavioral health has arrived and is changing the way we work. As you look to your staff and see how they have already adopted mobile technologies, it’s no longer a question of whether mobile is important to your clinical operations. As devices and applications continue to evolve, they will continue to transform how clinicians access information and resources, complete documentation, and communicate with staff and clients. Selecting an appropriate mobile device and application for your behavioral health practice can be challenging, however integrating these new tools into your agency is an investment. The financial and clinical rewards more than justify the costs of adopting a mHealth solution for your agency.

About Welligent

Welligent provides a cloud-based electronic health record to behavioral organizations. Welligent has successfully implemented some of the largest, multi-state organizations in more than 30 states. Wherever you are, Welligent provides documentation, scheduling, and medication and caseload management access from your desktop, tablet, or smartphone. Welligent provides the software tools needed to manage all programs, services, payers and meet your reporting requirements. Our software is fully configurable and includes features including clinical records, treatment plan libraries, forms management, ePrescribing, electronic billing, dashboard reporting and integrated mobile application.

To learn more about how Welligent can help your organization plan and implement a mobile solution, contact info@welligent.com or 888-317-5960.