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# PROMISING PRACTICES



## Rural behavioral health agency uses technology to enhance service delivery and operations

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[Integrated Family Services, PLLC](#) (IFS) is a behavioral health agency established in 2003 that provides outpatient therapy, psychiatric care, mobile crisis management, and intensive in-home and foster care services. Currently, it has four locations providing behavioral health treatment for the citizens of 22 rural counties in eastern North Carolina. Serving rural areas presents challenges such as a limited number of available licensed professionals and extensive travel time between office locations. As a result, technology has become an integral element of the day-to-day operations of both administrative and clinical functions within the organization.

### Telepsychiatry

Telepsychiatry is one of the primary technological methods IFS utilizes to increase its capacity to provide outpatient and psychiatric services to clientele in remote locations while expanding the accessibility of the limited number of licensed professionals. The use of technology in healthcare to span geographic distances is generally referred to as telehealth or telemedicine. The use of this type of technology specifically to deliver outpatient and psychiatric services is called *telepsychiatry*. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services defines telepsychiatry as “the use of two-way real-time interactive audio and video between places of lesser and greater psychiatric expertise to provide and support psychiatric care when distance separates participants who are in different geographical locations.”

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Behavioral Health,  
Child and Youth Services, and  
Opioid Treatment Program  
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Volume 7, Issue 1  
June 2016

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Telepsychiatry is not a service but an innovative method of delivering behavioral health services. It does not replace traditional face-to-face outpatient therapy and psychiatric services provided by IFS. Every location is a fully operational site where both service delivery modalities are provided.

IFS has set up at least two telepsychiatry stations at each of its four locations. Each station consists of a 40-inch or larger high-definition monitor and teleconferencing equipment to project the audio and video. IFS selected equipment that met its individual requirements for stereo and video quality; however, there is a range of products and pricing options that could be used to provide telepsychiatry services.



*A telepsychiatry station at IFS*

When clients are served via telepsychiatry, they travel to the designated office location to meet with their assigned provider who is located at another office. Upon arrival, the individual checks in with the office manager at the front desk to complete or update any required documentation. The office manager or a designated administrative staff member escorts the individual to the assigned telepsychiatry station and connects with the licensed professional at the other location.

The same privacy measures are taken as with a face-to-face visit. The sessions are conducted in a private office behind a closed door. The individual in treatment can adjust the volume on the equipment if necessary. In addition, IFS utilizes noisemaker machines, which are placed outside of the office doors when a treatment session is in progress to ensure that the conversations cannot be overheard by anyone in the hallway.



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Telepsychiatry has increased IFS' capacity to serve its geographic area. There was an increase from 7 to 18 percent of outpatient services appointments rendered through telepsychiatry from 2014 to 2015. In addition, there was a 10 percent increase in individuals served by IFS.

#### **Survey data collection**

Another element of IFS' technology program focuses on optimizing the collection process of consumer and stakeholder feedback. iPad and other mobile devices are used to gather immediate feedback through surveys. IFS researched and chose a program that can be downloaded to Android™ and Apple® devices and used in areas without internet. The data can be collected and stored in the application and then automatically uploaded when the device connects to the internet. The individuals served by IFS are educated on the survey process and provided the opportunity to complete a survey at any time during treatment. There are other mobile survey or collection programs and applications that can be researched and downloaded from app stores. Utilizing mobile devices to administer surveys has increased IFS' survey participation of individuals served by 50 percent within the past two years.

#### **Organizational connectivity**

IFS utilizes teleconferencing to connect employees and stakeholders across its service delivery area. Teleconferencing equipment is used at the locations for training opportunities and meetings between groups of staff members and/or community stakeholders. Teleconferencing has reduced travel between locations, saved time, and enhanced efficiency.

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In 2015, IFS received exemplary recognition from [CARF](#) for its technology program, which includes telepsychiatry, electronic survey collection, and teleconferencing capability. IFS is committed to seeking out new and innovative ways to provide continuous qualitative care. For additional information regarding IFS' technology program, contact Joylet M. Mercer, Quality Improvement Director, at [jmercerc@integratedfamilyservices.net](mailto:jmercerc@integratedfamilyservices.net) or (252) 209-0388, or visit [www.integratedfamilyservices.net](http://www.integratedfamilyservices.net).