

FCC chief witnesses Barton's leap into telemedicine

By Rebecca Wass

Using a multi-disciplinary leadership group called the "Telehealth for Tahoe Task Force" to guide and advance its telehealth efforts, Barton Health hopes to export specialty services to distant medical facilities, and further expand access to additional specialties to improve healthcare for its patients.



To witness some of what the South Lake Tahoe medical facility is doing, Julius Genachowski, FCC chairman, took a tour of facility last week. Joining him was Wireline Competition Bureau Deputy Chief Carol Matthey.

Genachowski and his team observed best practices in telemedicine and how Barton has implemented and utilized funds from the Federal Communications Commission for the Rural Health Care Pilot Program through their telehealth program.

Genachowski participated in a mock consultation with a physician located at UC San Diego through a telehealth video monitor.

Barton has made significant progress in telemedicine, while providing patients access to specialties such as cardiology, endocrinology, infectious disease, dermatology, adult psychiatry and neurology at Barton Memorial Hospital, Barton Community Clinic, Barton Family Medicine, Internal Medicine, Urgent Care and Family Practice. By providing these specialties to patients via telehealth, the healthcare system

has provided an average of 75 patients a month, cost and time-effective, alternatives to seeing physicians outside of the Basin.

“Through Barton’s telehealth equipment, and with its CTN connection, local patients can ‘visit specialists’ from their local doctor’s office, without the need for travel,” Greg Bergner, Barton board of directors member and Barton doctor, said. “Although not all health visits can be accomplished using telehealth, many can, and the time saved, along with the improved efficiency, and the cost savings is wonderful.”

Ann Truscott, telemedicine coordinator, said patients save them time and money by eliminating travel expenses to urban areas for care.

In August 2011, Barton was chosen as the lead agency partner for ACCEL and received three telemedicine carts, as well as a dual monitor computer to support its telehealth efforts.

The network is a separate, off-Internet, statewide broadband pipe dedicated to healthcare purposes. The CTN network is optimized to allow the upload of Blu-Ray quality video, with guaranteed transmission speeds not available on the commercial Internet. It also facilitates the back-and-forth communication and secure transfer of electronic medical records.

“I think these types of site visits are very important to better inform our Washington, D.C., policy makers how current federal funding is being utilized and provide them input on how federal resources can be improved,” Eric Brown, CEO of CTN, stated.

CTN is the product of an unprecedented statewide coalition of healthcare, technology, government, and other stakeholders which was funded by the FCC. Under the FCC’s rural pilot program – with the goal of significantly increasing access to acute-specialty-care, and even primary and preventive healthcare in rural America – the FCC provided nearly \$22.1

million over three years. Additional funds for the CTN have been provided by the California Emerging Technology Fund, and UnitedHealth/PacifiCare. Barton Health is one of three ACCEL sites connected to the CTN.

“You are making a powerful contribution to harness the power of technology in providing healthcare,” Genachowski said.

Rebecca Wass is communications specialist for Barton Health.