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White Paper

Why Secure Messaging Apps are Critical for Rural Health Systems



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Some rural and critical access hospitals (CAHs) still use pagers due to cost, tradition, and the perceived benefit of enhanced coverage. However, their use is declining in favor of newer technologies that offer Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) compliance and more functionality.

Rural healthcare systems are now seeking mobile platforms that offer the reliability of a pager while providing the advanced features of a smartphone app. Secure messaging apps offer numerous benefits that can be particularly impactful for rural and critical care hospitals, addressing some of their unique challenges related to access, resources, and communication.

 amtelco.com  info@amtelco.com

 800.356.9148  4800 Curtin Drive
McFarland, WI 53558

Enhanced Communication and Care Coordination



Using secure messaging apps results in improved internal communication by enabling instant, HIPAA-compliant communication between doctors, nurses, and administrative staff, replacing outdated and slow methods like pagers, phone tag, written messages, and insecure personal texts. This is vital in smaller facilities where staff often cover multiple roles or units.

Secure messaging apps help streamline workflows by enabling the instant sharing of patient information, coordination of care plans, and management of shift changes, thereby reducing fragmentation in clinical communication and leading to more efficient and coordinated care.

Rural hospitals usually have limited access to specialists. Secure messaging facilitates quick, secure sharing of patient data (including X-rays, lab results, and patient charts) with off-site or distant specialists for timely consultation and collaboration, which can directly improve patient outcomes.



Regulatory Compliance and Security

Secure messaging apps are built with end-to-end encryption and other security features (like role-based access and remote wipe capabilities) to ensure that all transmitted electronic patient health information (ePHI) adheres to HIPAA guidelines. This is crucial for small hospitals with limited IT resources, as it helps them avoid hefty fines and protect their reputation.

The advanced technology used by apps automatically logs all communication, providing a comprehensive audit trail that is essential for accountability, transparency, and regulatory compliance. Tracking and reporting logs of all message activity, complete with message histories to indicate who messages were sent to, when they were read, and replies. This information provides critical information if a health system becomes involved in a litigious situation.

Secure Messaging Implementation Plan for Rural Health Systems



The transition from pagers to secure messaging apps is an important step for rural health systems to enhance patient safety, efficiency, and HIPAA compliance. However, these organizations often face unique challenges, particularly financial constraints and limited IT resources.

Below is a structured, phase-based plan designed to help rural health systems overcome these obstacles during the transition.

Phase 1: Planning and Financial Strategy (Mitigating Budget Constraints)

This phase focuses on defining the project's scope, securing funding, and choosing a cost-effective solution.

Clarify Goals & Assess Need

Define the specific problems you need to solve (e.g., pager replacement, faster consults, secure image sharing) to justify the investment. Focus on the clear return on investment (ROI): reduced pager costs, fewer communication errors (which can lead to costly readmissions or malpractice claims), and improved staff efficiency.

Form a Stakeholder Team

Assemble a small, cross-functional team including a physician champion, a lead nurse, an IT representative, and a finance/operations leader. Keep the team lean to

minimize staff time away from clinical duties. The clinical champion plays a key role in promoting adoption.

Explore Funding Opportunities

Identify and apply for grants and funding programs designed to support health IT in rural areas. Apply for programs like the CMS Rural Health Transformation (RHT) Program (which includes funding for technology and cybersecurity upgrades).

Other opportunities include grants from the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP), which are accessible through Grants.gov and administered by organizations such as the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). Your state's Office of Rural Health may have additional grant opportunities.



Amtelco has been fantastic. They have been more of a business partner than any vendor I've ever dealt with, and I've worked in IT for over 30 years.

Kathy Mealer, IS Manager for West Tennessee Healthcare, Amtelco Secure Messages Customer

Select a Cost-Effective Vendor

Choose a HIPAA-compliant vendor that offers features most relevant to your needs (e.g., paging replacement, role-based messaging) and a scalable solution. Look for apps that specialize in the pager-replacement workflow and integrate with your existing Electronic Health Record (EHR).

Develop a BYOD Policy

Decide whether staff will use their own smartphones with a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policy or if the hospital will supply devices. BYOD can save costs on purchasing devices, but requires a strict, well-communicated policy on security, remote data wipe for lost devices, and reimbursement for personal data usage. Apps should offer the ability to mask the device's personal phone number and display the organization's phone number instead.

Robust secure messaging apps will securely silo the data transferred while using the app from other messaging platforms like email and SMS, so one device can be used for messaging. If budget allows, providing hospital-owned devices (or shared shift phones) may simplify security compliance.

Phase 2: Implementation and Infrastructure (Addressing IT Limitations)

This phase focuses on the technical setup and integration, using limited IT resources wisely.

Secure and Audit Infrastructure

Work with your vendor to ensure the system meets all HIPAA technical safeguards (encryption, audit logs, strong sign-on), and update network security. If you have a limited IT staff, focus on cybersecurity basics and prioritize the essentials: multi-factor authentication (MFA) for the new system and regular security assessments through a partnership with a larger healthcare system or a Managed Service Provider (MSP).

Integrate with Existing Systems

Integrate the messaging app with the hospital's existing software, such as on-call scheduling and notifications.

Pilot Program

Begin the transition by running the secure messaging app in parallel with the existing pager system for a pilot group (e.g., a single department, such as the Urology Department). This period is critical. It allows staff to become comfortable without disrupting essential patient care. Choose a small group of enthusiastic "early adopters" to work out kinks and serve as internal champions.

Phase 3: Training and User Adoption (Overcoming Resistance)

This phase ensures all staff are trained, compliant, and motivated to use the new system.

Develop Clear Policies and Training

Create and communicate clear policies on when to use the secure app versus other communication methods. Provide mandatory training and address staff concerns.

Train on features that directly solve old pager frustrations (e.g., read receipts, ability to send images). Set clear expectations for off-hours messaging and define "critical alerts" vs. standard chat. Mandate use for specific workflows to drive initial adoption.

Conduct Role-Based Training

Train staff based on their specific roles (e.g., nursing, physicians, call center agents) and how the app will be integrated into their daily workflow. Focus on the most straightforward, most direct path for everyday tasks. For call center agents, this might be quickly messaging the on-call physician. For physicians, it's finding the right nurse/team via role-based messaging.



We run reports using Amtelco Secure Messages fairly frequently, especially if somebody has a concern or expresses a need. For instance, our stroke program may request information about the Neuro alerts we've had in a particular month. We can run a report with that data, so it's very helpful.

Beth Wells, Executive Director of Patient Access and Information for Jackson-Madison County General Hospital in Jackson, Tennessee

Gather and Act on Feedback

Immediately collect feedback from the pilot group and roll out quick fixes and updates to the system or policies. A small rural setting can leverage its size for rapid feedback loops. The project team should meet weekly during the pilot to address technical issues and workflow frustrations. Success stories from early adopters should be shared with the organization.

Phase 4: Full Rollout and Optimization

The final phase involves a complete organizational switch and ongoing monitoring.

Full Pager Sunset and Go-Live

Transition the entire facility to the new system, decommissioning pagers once the dual-use period is complete and all stakeholders are trained. Announce a firm "Pager-Free" date well in advance, and consider a full-service launch (e.g., all departments on the same day) to prevent "split communication" where some staff use the app and others still use pagers, which can lead to errors.

Measure and Report Outcomes

Track key metrics and quantify the benefits (e.g., "\$22,000 saved annually on pager fees," "50% reduction in time to communicate critical lab results"). Use this data to justify future IT spending.

Plan for Ongoing Maintenance

Establish a continuous plan for software updates, new user training, and policy review. Dedicate a small, consistent portion of the hospital's operating budget for yearly software subscription renewals and IT support. Consider a strategic partnership with a larger hospital system to share expertise.

Please contact us with questions.

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