

Army hospital unveils Wi-Fi for patients, families

U.S. Army

FORT SAM HOUSTON, Texas (Jan. 23, 2013) -- Patients and their families will soon be able to text, email or just browse the Internet from their commercial, personally-owned wireless devices at San Antonio Military Medical Center, thanks to a new guest wireless pilot program set to launch in late January.

Upon connection, San Antonio Military Medical Center, or SAMMC, will become the first military treatment facility in the Army to offer Wi-Fi capability to its beneficiaries, officials said.

"Many civilian health care facilities offer wireless capability, and if they can offer it, why not us?" said Maj. Anthony Bradway, chief technology officer of the Information Management Division at Brooke Army Medical Center, or BAMC. "We don't want the ability to communicate with loved ones hinder people from coming here or detract from their quality of care."

The 180-day pilot program, which will run through mid-July, will enable beneficiaries to connect to Wi-Fi while in the hospital using their tablets, smart phones or any other web-capable wireless device, Bradway explained.

Throughout this time, BAMC Information Management Division will be tracking Wi-Fi use, connection speed and users' experience to determine if this service is in demand and if there's a reason to expand.

"We believe there will be a desire for this service," he added.

If the pilot is deemed successful, Army Medicine, or AMEDD, leaders may consider delivering this service to other military treatment facilities in the Army, said Michele Krause, chief of the Medical Network Operations and Security Center Customer Support Division of U.S. Army Medical Information Technology Center.

The program's goal, she explained, is to provide beneficiaries with the same Wi-Fi experience, whether at a hospital on Fort Sam Houston or a clinic on Fort Polk.

"Patients who have used this service in the public sector have said it improves their morale and happiness," she said, noting the average American has 1.5 mobile devices. "It gives family members something to do while waiting, and enables patients to check social media sites, make appointments, or send updates to loved ones. The intent is to improve patient satisfaction overall."

USAMITC, which is the lead agency for the guest Wi-Fi, chose SAMMC for this pilot program based on the hospital's proximity and size, Krause explained. Both worked closely with Southern Regional Medical Command, or SRMC, Information Assurance Office to ensure they could balance usability with the utmost security of personal

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health information -- a risk assessment that took over a year.

"When I look back, it's amazing how far we've come," said Chris Sellards, SRMC senior information assurance manager. "It was truly a great teamwork effort."

Word of this effort has spread, he added. He's been fielding calls in recent months from agencies interested in a similar service from across the military and government, including the White House.

A successful Wi-Fi effort today could lead to additional benefits far into the future, Bradway noted. AMEDD is exploring the idea of a "Bring Your Own Device" program that would enable providers to bring their wireless device to work and still access secure clinical systems.

The road to these types of future technological advancements is starting at BAMC with the guest Wi-Fi, Krause said.

"BAMC is helping to shape the future of guest wireless for the AMEDD," she said.

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