Tift Regional Medical Center (TRMC) is a not-for-profit hospital serving 12 counties in South Central Georgia. Located in Tifton, the 191-bed hospital has more than 95 physicians board certified in over 30 specialties. TRMC is leveraging its ongoing relationship with NEC to build a fully integrated voice and data infrastructure that facilitates organizational growth and long-term strategic goals.

**Challenges**

TRMC and NEC have a long-term partnership of over 25 years. “We had our first NEC voice solution back in the mid-1980s, says Wade Brewer, Director of Technology Services, TRMC. “We liked the NEC platform and the solutions have been workhorses for us over the years.”

In 1998, TRMC implemented a long-term strategy for growth and expansion. The hospital wanted to transform and leverage its technology infrastructure to help achieve its goals. “Back then, the hospital was running on a mainframe and we used dumb terminals,” says Guy McAllister, Assistant Vice President & CIO, TRMC. “We decided to change because we saw that technology would be a viable tool in improving patient care.”

Since then, the hospital has gone from a single, stand-alone facility to a 16-building main campus, an ancillary campus and a brand new, state-of-the-art, 15,000 square feet datacenter. As TRMC continues strategic growth today, the hospital is leveraging NEC technology as a part of its long-term organization goals. “Communications play a huge role in our transformation,” adds McAllister. “Whether its voice or data, it’s about connecting clinicians and staff to the right people and information, wherever they may be.”

Physician practice management was among the hospital’s most recent expansion and improvement projects. “We started out billing for six providers,” Linda Wilson, Director of Physician Revenue Cycle Management, TRMC. “With so much growth over the past two years, we are now billing for 60 providers.”

The growth also affected other departments critical to physician practice management. TRMC’s scheduling department takes calls from physician offices and patients needing to set up diagnostic, outpatient procedures. “We started getting several complaints from callers about not being able to get through,” says Brenda Stodghill, Patient Access Director, TRMC. “Physicians complained that their nurses didn’t have time to sit and wait on hold.”
The precertification department had high call volumes, which caused bottlenecks in the patient registration process. “Our registration department would perform precertification when patients arrived for surgery” says Stodghill. “The precertification department would have to stop in the middle of what they were doing to contact the physician... all the while, the patient is waiting in registration...something had to be done.”

The hospital’s manual process for call reporting created an even larger problem. “We had to get reports on call stats like calls handled, abandonment rates, wait times from the telecommunications room, then work the data into spreadsheets —this took about two days,” adds Edingfield. “Monthly reports were about 300 pages, we had to keep them for a year or more and manually compile them in order to do an annual profile,” says Stodghill.

TRMC sought a solution that would streamline physician practice management processes and improve interdepartmental communications. The solution would also allow the hospital to utilize resources efficiently and effectively. “We are not a large IT shop, therefore one of the key pieces we looked for is how easy the solution would be for us to administer.

Solution

TRMC upgraded to NEC’s UNIVERGE SV8000 series communications server and UM8500 voicemail platform. The hospital uses the SV8500 on its two campuses and datacenter; and replaced smaller systems around the hospital with the SV8300.

Brewer believes the SV8000 platform provides the most flexibility for TRMC’s strategic plan to eventually evolve to a converged voice and data network. “The NEC solution is a one-stop shop for all our communications needs: It protects your initial TDM investment. It has IP integration. It has SIP integration already built in—You just have to add the next piece, buy a license and turn it on,” says Brewer. “NEC has that connectivity that is seamless over other vendors.”

The hospital also implemented various NEC applications to improve physician practice management. With upgraded contact center and auto attendant applications, TRMC centralizes call center functions for better service to physicians and patients. “Billing and insurance issues are better handled by a live person,” says Wilson. “Patients now can call the physician office and be seamlessly connected to the billing office, instead of being transferred all over the place.”

The solution simplifies the metrics-reporting process. Staff can access view reports on demand and access service metrics anytime we need them. “With manual process it took two days, now it takes two minutes, says Stodghill.” The process also eliminates a lot of paperwork. “Now reports are two pages,” adds Edingfield. “I have the option to print them but most the time I just save it into a document file that I can access at anytime.”

The comprehensive reporting tool also provides better visibility into contact center operations. Staff can perform root-cause analyses and better identify solutions. “Since we can view and track call volume in real time, we can better staff to provide better service to callers,” says Edingfield. “We’ve gone from two to ten schedulers and caller complaints have decreased because we no longer have long wait times.”

The registration department has also alleviated bottlenecks in the precertification process. “We changed the process to where we were able to get patient information prior to the patient coming in and call volume in the precertification department has declined,” says Stodghill.

With NEC’s solution, physician practice management has improved. “We are managing call volume and reducing call abandonment rates,” adds Stodghill. “Patients are happier because they aren’t transferred all over the place and physicians are happy because there is one point of contact.”

Results

TRMC and NEC continue to work toward the hospital’s long-term, strategic goals. “TRMC has experienced significant cost savings with the NEC solution as our infrastructure has evolved,” says Brewer. “The return on investment has been unbelievable; I can’t even estimate what we’ve saved over the past 10-12 years.”

The SV8500 is a part of TRMC’s new datacenter, aligning with the hospital’s goal to evolve towards voice and data convergence. “As a part of the hospital’s data system, the SV8500 connects various departments like finance, patient services, accounting and personnel,” says Brewer. “It’s a networked system, but the SV8500 can stand alone and take over traffic if necessary.”

Integrating the SV8000 platform into the hospital’s data system also improves efficiency within the IT department. “With NEC, we’ve found we can simplify IT and communications management, adds McAllister. “ Rather than dedicate staff for both telecommunications and networking, we can actually use staff for both…which is a big plus for us.”

McAllister credits the success of the TRMC’s ongoing project to the hospital’s long-term relationship with NEC. “The truth is, our success in information technology and communications hinges on relationships. We have a number of IT vendors, but our NEC partnership has grown and evolved since the 1980s. NEC has become the benchmark of all our IT vendors simply because of the relationship.”

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