

Providing
remote patient
care during the
pandemic with

AT&T connectivity

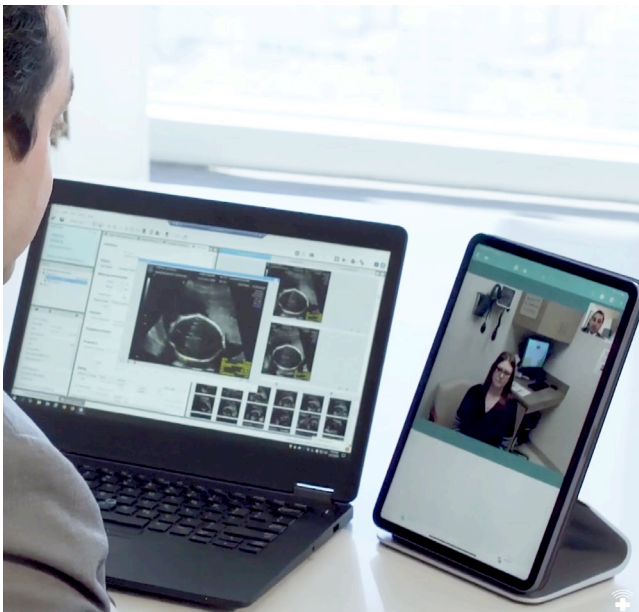
- **Business needs** - A strong link between onsite clinicians, hospitalized patients, and physicians treating them remotely.
- **Networking solution** - AT&T-powered tablet computers deliver dependable backup connectivity that enables potentially lifesaving telemedicine sessions.
- **Business value** - High reliability and enhanced ability to deliver patient care to underserved areas.
- **Industry focus** - Medical care
- **Size** - 650+ specialists and subspecialists have cared for more than 1.7 million patients to date

About Access Physicians

Access Physicians is the leading multispecialty physician group committed to clinical excellence through telemedicine. Founded by physicians, the company is one of the largest providers of acute subspecialty telemedicine, deployed at hundreds of hospitals in 22 states. Its doctors have cared for high-acuity patients in some of the hardest-to-serve healthcare environments. Access Physicians' core clinical service lines include Pulmonary and Critical Care, Acute Stroke and General Neurology, Hospitalist Medicine, Cardiology, Infectious Disease, and Maternal Fetal Medicine.

The situation

Connectivity is at the heart of Access Physicians' ability to provide medical care. The growing physician group used hospital Wi-Fi networks to connect patients and nurses with doctors. Because Wi-Fi may not always be available, Access Physicians needed a redundant alternative to connect doctors with patients and their onsite care teams.



Solution

Access Physicians equipped its sophisticated medical carts with tablet computers powered by fast and dependable AT&T connectivity. The tablets provide a highly reliable backup to the desktop computers that use hospital Wi-Fi networks to link patients with physicians. The AT&T solution gives the organization redundancy, high reliability, and peace of mind in the knowledge that its doctors can provide medical care even if an unforeseen event shuts down the hospital networks.

Caring for patients in their communities

Millions of Americans live in either sparsely populated areas with limited access to doctors or urban settings with a shortage of specialty physicians. Studies show a significant gap in health outcomes between people who live in urban areas and those in rural communities. This gap can result in delayed healthcare, reduced continuity of care, and poorer prognoses for patients.¹

¹ <https://www.medicaleconomics.com/view/dealing-shortage-rural-physicians>

Access Physicians was founded to provide timely access to quality physicians for persons in need. The organization's care philosophy says it all: "We believe patient outcomes improve when the time to encounter is shortened and the experience for the patient is enhanced. We use telemedicine to achieve these goals."

The organization has become one of the largest providers of inpatient telemedicine in the U.S. Its network includes more than 600 specialists and subspecialists from some of the nation's most esteemed health care systems and academic medical centers providing world-class care to patients.

Access Physicians CEO Chris Gallagher, M.D., is one of the practice's founders. He said Access Physicians began as a traditional in-person physician group focusing on care of hospitalized patients. "As we grew, we faced the same challenges that every provider would face—getting the right talent to care for patients in rural communities," Dr. Gallagher said. He and his partners implemented telemedicine to facilitate this care.



Moving the needle on health and financial outcomes

Dr. Gallagher and his partners saw very quickly the value of their model. “On the third night of our first pilot in 2013, we saved the life of a patient that otherwise would have not seen a critical care physician and most likely would have expired,” he said. “The patient walked out of that hospital, so it really struck everyone that this could be something significant, something worth dedicating our attention, time, and resources toward.”

The company’s growth has been swift. Its clients now include Fortune 500 healthcare enterprises, independent rural and community hospitals, regional hospital networks, and the nation’s first and largest operator of micro-hospitals.

“We’re a multi-specialty physician group practicing via telemedicine, creating scalable clinical programs that move the needle on both health and financial outcomes,” Dr. Gallagher said.

The goal is to provide timely care in patients’ local communities. “This is not only good for patients, but it helps to build thriving hospitals, which are among the top employers in many communities. It’s a wonderful service that positively affects patients, families, communities, hospitals, and those who work in the hospitals,” he noted.

Virtual presence supports a high level of care

Technology is a critical enabler for Access Physicians’ lifesaving services. “We definitely could not have scaled to the over 200 programs in 22 states without

“Many hospitals are planning network upgrades or have dark corners where you can’t get a signal. We decided early on to always ship our device with multiple layers of redundancy.”

Erica St. Angel
Chief Technology Innovation Officer, Access Physicians

(Chief Technology Innovation Officer) Erica St. Angel building out our IT infrastructure and an IT support team that made sure the technology worked,” Dr. Gallagher said.

The heart of this technology is a sleek telemedicine cart equipped with powerful desktop computers that enable the patient and onsite medical staff to see and speak with an Access Physicians doctor. “The carts are designed by physicians who understand how powerful technology can be, but also how it can obstruct and frustrate if not done well,” Dr. Gallagher said.

The founding partners wanted the cart to command attention and make a statement as it moved through the halls into a patient’s room. “We try to communicate to hospitals and staff that haven’t had a telemedicine program that they need to think of this as the virtual doctor,” he said.

“It is the doctor’s eyes and ears and helps us replicate other human senses. When you pair that with our remote access tools to log into the hospital systems, you can provide a high level of care that replicates in-person physician presence,” he said.

Proactive monitoring and maintenance

Access Physicians' ability to provide care depends on the carts. "They are purpose-built to be the physical manifestation of the clinician in the room. And they must work," Dr. Gallagher said.

St. Angel and her team are tasked with making sure the carts are optimized and ready for telemedicine visits. "We don't wait for the phone to ring," she said. "We're proactively monitoring our fleet to determine whether telemedicine can happen." Access Physicians has a U.S.-based remote support team to assist hospitals' clinical staff with problems. Support technicians spring into action the minute a cart sends an alarm to resolve the problem quickly.

Access Physicians' carts use hospital Wi-Fi networks to connect patients with its doctors. However, the strength of Wi-Fi connectivity may not be consistent with the potential for dead spots in hospital buildings. "Many hospitals are planning network upgrades or have dark corners where you can't get a signal. We decided early on to ship our devices with multiple layers of redundancy," St. Angel said.

Dr. Gallagher agreed that high reliability was critical. "If someone's in an ICU or ER and you have a technology problem that delays or prevents care from happening, you're going to lose the confidence of the patient, the hospital and the staff, and you're not going to be living up to your mission as a physician." Access Physicians needed a highly reliable backup system so that patients can connect with physicians.

An added layer of redundancy

Access Physicians chose tablet computers powered by AT&T mobile connectivity to provide redundancy for its telemedicine virtual presence carts. "Over time we've built a plan B for just about everything on the cart," St. Angel said. "That enables us to get the physician to the patient's bedside at three in the morning."

"If the hospital Wi-Fi network should fail for any reason, she said, "the cart will automatically roll over onto a 4G network through a hotspot." Adding a tablet computer with highly reliable AT&T connectivity provides another layer of redundancy.

"If for some reason something goes sideways on the cart, which is very, very rare, we then simply turn the cart around and have the clinician call into the tablet," St. Angel said. The tablets use AT&T cellular connectivity, so they're not reliant on hospital Wi-Fi.

"The coverage has been mostly optimal for the sites where we seek to deploy telemedicine," St. Angel said.

Responsiveness during the pandemic

Access Physicians called on AT&T Business for help when the COVID-19 virus increased the need for its physicians' services. "AT&T's willingness to work with us amidst the pandemic was key. The entire universe was trying to acquire devices, and so we needed a rapid response for fulfillment," St. Angel said.

"The key was the willingness of AT&T to recognize the timeliness of our request, the care environment that

we were going into, and work through the weekends and the evenings to help us turn it around very rapidly,” she said. In addition, AT&T was pivotal in recognizing that the physician group was providing essential services, and arranging priority access to its high-speed, nationwide wireless broadband network.

“We’re grateful to AT&T for the work it does to keep pressing forward, because these tools are incredibly important. And they really do have tangible impacts on people’s lives.”

Chris Gallagher, M.D.
Founder & CEO, Access Physicians

Access Physicians helped hospitals start using a Bring Your Own Device model to respond to the pandemic. “We were able to turn anybody’s device into a telemedicine portal,” St. Angel said. In some cases, hospitals used the tablet computer that’s usually on the Access Physicians telemedicine cart in COVID treatment rooms and screening tents. “Now clinicians in other parts of the hospital and those working from home, because they’ve had to quarantine after exposure, are able to beam into those different care settings very rapidly,” she said.

The organization deployed multiple COVID Rapid Response programs, including training more than 1,000 providers for one national healthcare enterprise on providing telemedicine for its client hospitals. “This initiative has shown us that even though this

isn’t necessarily the business model that we originally intended to go into and it doesn’t represent our day-to-day operations, our tools and our relationships are scalable and helping us meet the need in the moment,” St. Angel said.

Connectivity facilitates clinical good

Dr. Gallagher is also grateful to AT&T Business for its services and support. “Connectivity is our lifeblood. It’s the magic that makes all of this happen. Without it, we don’t have a service,” he said.

If the pandemic had struck even a decade ago, most organizations would not have been able to pivot quickly to continue operations. “Today we can respond because of the connectivity that we have, and because the cell networks are so much better today than they were when we started,” he said. Cellular connectivity is now standard on Access Physicians’ carts.

Dr. Gallagher envisions a day when Access Physicians will not use hospital Wi-Fi networks. “I think we would love this, because we would have better control, and from a security and compliance standpoint it would make everyone’s lives much easier if we essentially brought our own connection with us,” he said. “Connectivity is an incredible tool that facilitates so much clinical good.”

He’s grateful to live in a time when technology helps healthcare organizations battle challenges like COVID. “We’re grateful to AT&T for the work it does to keep pressing forward, because these tools are incredibly important,” he said. “And they really do have tangible impacts on people’s lives.”