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## **LONG-DISTANCE DOCTORING**

### **New services gives residents better access to mental health care**

Owosso, MI – Shiawassee Health & Wellness has hired a new full-time psychiatrist but there is a twist – he lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

Leveraging advances in communications technology, the nonprofit health organization has introduced tele-psychiatry, which uses secure video conferencing for appointments between Dr. Ralph Saintfort and patients.

The approach allows increased access to psychiatric services in under-served Shiawassee County. Saintfort started taking patients September 17, and early indications point to success.

“It’s turned out to be a very natural experience,” Saintfort said Tuesday during an interview conducted – of course – by video conference. “The patients use Facebook and other social media in their daily lives, so this is very comfortable for them. Laughter and giggles and all appropriate emotions are still there, across the screen.”

Saintfort is part of the SHW team, consulting daily with staff members, participating in meetings and working with patients’ medical providers. Adults who visit SHW can receive services for mental health and substance disorders from a highly qualified psychiatrist, even though he lives hundreds of miles away.

Shiawassee Health & Wellness plans to expand the tele-psychiatry model to provide mental health services at the offices of medical doctors throughout the county, enabling patients to avoid having to arrange for transportation to its offices in Owosso.

“It is our vision to make tele-health available in smaller communities to reduce the transportation barrier,” SHW Executive Director Lindsey Hull said.

That fits with the stated mission of Iris Telehealth, the Virginia-based company SHW has contracted with for tele-psychiatric services: to provide underserved communities with access to the best mental health specialists. Shiawassee County is federally designated as a health professional shortage area, not only for mental health providers but also for primary and dental care providers.

Tele-psychiatry offers the benefit of allowing medical facilities such as SHW to hire top-notch psychiatrists who might not be willing to move to the area where the facilities are located.

It's a win-win," said Dee Buchholz, Shiawassee Health & Wellness nursing supervisor and registered nurse. "Our consumers have been very happy with Dr. Saintfort, and he doesn't have to leave Iowa."

However, Saintfort will visit SHW in person from time to time, with a trip planned this month. The visits will give him an opportunity to tour the facility and connect with staff members, SHW officials said.

Saintfort is a graduate of Connecticut College and George Washington University. He completed his residency at Harvard Longwood Psychiatry and a fellowship in medical psychiatry from Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

The psychiatrist's experience includes working as a director at a community health center for five years and at his own psychiatry private practice for 10 years.

Retaining Saintfort increases the number of psychiatrists on SHW's staff to three. The other two hold part-time positions.

Shiawassee Health & Wellness (formerly known as Shiawassee County Community Mental Health Authority) provides services and support to county residents who are adults and children with developmental disabilities, adults with serious mental illness, and children with serious emotional disturbances.

The organization is the county's designated Community Mental Health Services Program, with the responsibility for serving the specialty behavioral health needs of county residents.

"At Shiawassee Health and Wellness, we have been intentional in our efforts to raise awareness about mental health and treatment opportunities," Hull said. "We have been and will continue to actively pursue ways to collaborate and coordinate mental health services throughout the county.

"We intentionally contracted with Iris Telehealth for more psychiatric provider time than we believe we need internally in order to have the expertise available to consult with other health care providers in the community," she continued. "Our goal is to improve access to mental health treatment in Shiawassee County."

