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Hawai'i Telehealth Summit moves state toward increasing access to healthcare using innovative technology

HONOLULU – More than 150 healthcare and information technology professionals from throughout the state will gather for the Hawai'i Telehealth Summit this week to explore ways to improve access to care for Hawai'i residents through telehealth technology.

The two-day Hawai'i Telehealth Summit, co-sponsored by the Hawai'i Department of Health (DOH) and the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, will be held at the John A. Burns School of Medicine and the Dole Cannery Ballrooms on Oct. 12 and 13.

"Today, we have technology capable of improving access to healthcare services for Hawai'i residents who are homebound or living in rural areas, including the neighbor islands where there is a shortage of specialists," said Dr. Virginia Pressler, director of the Hawai'i Department of Health. "The Department of Health has adopted telehealth for adolescent psychiatric counseling and has piloted teledentistry for West Hawai'i residents, but as a state, we've only just begun to scratch the surface.

The event will feature exhibits and hands-on demonstrations of the latest telehealth technologies, equipment, and services.

On the first day, summit attendees will hear a keynote address, "Telepresence Skills: How to build and maintain authentic and effective provider-patient relationships when practicing telemedicine," by Dr. David Roth of Mind and Body Works. The second day of the summit will feature keynote addresses from Gov. David Ige and Congressman Brian Schatz. The event will culminate in facilitated discussions to establish a statewide telehealth strategic plan.

Hawaii has adopted new payment models to keep pace with advances in telehealth technology. In July 2016, Gov. Ige signed a law that allows healthcare providers to receive the same reimbursements for patient care, whether it is through a telehealth

consultation or a face-to-face office visit. These types of changes are expected to further accelerate telehealth's popularity in Hawai'i.

"It is exciting that the telehealth law paves the way for tremendous opportunity for providers and communities in Hawai'i, but there is still a lot of work to be done," said Denise Konan, the dean of the UH Mānoa College of Social Sciences. "The university is fully supportive of the summit and committed to bringing people together to keep the momentum going."

Currently, about 15 percent of Hawai'i physicians use electronic communications to deliver health care, according to the Hawai'i Physician Workforce Assessment Project's 2017 report to the state legislature.

"Telehealth is changing the way providers interact with patients," Dr. Pressler said. "Telehealth is particularly convenient for our island state, where many segments of our population face challenges in accessing quality healthcare due to geographical constraints. Telehealth can be a cost-effective alternative to the more traditional face-to-face way of providing medical care and provides greater access to healthcare."

For example, the state's physician shortage often forces neighbor islands residents to fly to O'ahu for treatment. These patients — or government programs such as Medicaid — must absorb the added cost of travel and patients must endure long wait times. With telehealth, medical specialists on O'ahu can treat patients at smaller, neighbor island hospitals that lack such specialists.

Pressler added, "We look forward to working with our partners in the community to develop a strategic plan for telehealth and ultimately improve the way we deliver healthcare for Hawai'i's people."

For additional information on the summit, call the DOH Office of Planning, Policy and Program Development at (808) 586-4188.

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