

WISHIN: A Crucial Part of a Complete Disaster-Recovery Plan

In a typical summer Dane County gets about 13 inches of rain. But beginning on the evening of August 20, 2018, a summer's worth of rain fell in a matter of hours causing lakes, rivers, and creeks across southwestern Wisconsin to overflow, flooding homes and businesses throughout the region. In the wake of this tragedy it's important to consider the crucial role health information exchanges (HIEs) can play in the continuity of patient care when storms hit.

HIEs, like WISHIN, provide instant access to patients' medical records from external sources, thus improving clinical decision-making and care coordination. However, in the immediate aftermath of natural disasters, HIEs have also proven to be crucial tools in situations when local electronic health records (EHRs) may be temporarily unavailable. In effect, the HIE serves as a fail-over system in a disaster.

Over the past decade, health care providers across the state have made huge investments in health information technology. In fact, according to the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC), Wisconsin surpasses the national average for hospitals in adopting EHR technology. As of 2017, ninety-seven percent of Wisconsin hospitals had adopted a certified EHR. However, what good are these electronic records if they only exist within each individual health system?

This is where HIE is vitally important.

In 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit the East coast with force, but many New York hospitals were prepared. As Manhattan hospitals flooded they were able to evacuate displaced patients to other locations in the city that still had power—and internet access—to retrieve patient records from the Statewide Health Information Network of New York (SHIN-NY).

In an interview given at the time, David Whitlinger, former executive director of New York eHealth Collaborative (NYeC), which oversees SHIN-NY, shared his thoughts with [Healthcare IT News](#) on how HIE should be seen as a public utility for shared benefits, including adding the statewide HIE to an organization's emergency preparedness plan.

"The statewide HIE really can and should be seen as a public utility, for the public good. If everybody has to spend enormous financial resources on disaster recovery on their own, where they could rely on a state public utility resource for that, there could be some substantial savings," Whitlinger said, "When the community gets stressed like this, during a natural disaster, it only elevates its importance and value. It's not a commercial enterprise, it's here for the public good, and this is one example."

Now, more than six years after Hurricane Sandy, 95 percent of hospitals have a basic EHR system and HIEs have proliferated across the country. In Wisconsin, the WISHIN Pulse community health record provides access to critical clinical history when everything is running smoothly, and it is even more important when disaster strikes.

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