

# Maine Sea Coast Mission Charts a Course for Improved Healthcare

## Maine Sea Coast Mission

### Polycom video brings primary care to residents of Maine's sparsely populated islands

There are rural geographies all over the United States to which delivering healthcare is a serious challenge and the subject of much debate. In the state of Maine, reaching remote areas to provide primary care is further complicated by the maze of islands off its coast that must also be served.

At 22 miles off the coast of Maine, Matinicus is one of the farthest inhabited islands, with 35 to 70 residents, depending on the time of year. In the winter, ferries visit the island only once a month, and, while there is air service to leave the island, inclement weather often precludes operation. Given these obstacles, traveling to the mainland for routine doctor's visits is often a hardship.

An organization that has long been addressing the challenges faced by Maine's island residents is the Maine Sea Coast Mission. A non-denominational religious organization, the Maine Sea Coast Mission recently celebrated its 101st year of providing spiritual and medical care to residents of the islands and the coast of Maine. The 75 foot long, 250 horsepower Sunbeam V, is one of the primary forms of outreach for the organization cruising at up to 10 knots between mainland Maine and its island communities.

Sharon Daley, the Sunbeam's registered nurse, describes the barriers to obtaining primary care for the inhabitants of Maine's islands. "A lot of the island residents do lobstering work, and it's a short season. Taking two days off to go to the doctor on the mainland is money out of their pockets," she says. "There's also significant cost involved with traveling for primary care. Flying to the mainland for a medical appointment from Matinicus, for example, costs \$40 each way. If you have two children to take, that really adds up. And if you need to spend the night, you incur even more expense."

Recognizing the huge challenge access to healthcare poses on the islands, the Maine Sea Coast Mission decided six years ago to equip the Sunbeam with state-of-the-art video telemedicine equipment to facilitate virtual doctor's visits. Today, the thriving telemedicine program is called Sunbeam Island Health Services and provides primary care at a distance.

#### A Shipshape Solution

Weather permitting, Daley travels on the Sunbeam twice a month to Matinicus as well as three additional islands to facilitate virtual visits with primary care physicians. She orchestrates the entire process for Sunbeam Island Health Services which includes scheduling between residents and doctors, and planning the voyage. Planning the voyage is no easy task as it includes scheduling around the ferry so she doesn't show up on the day everyone has taken it to the mainland, as well as the tides, since the Sunbeam must arrive and depart two hours before the tides come in or recede.

#### Challenge

Overcome the challenges of weather and geography to deliver timely, high-quality primary healthcare to the residents of Maine's sparsely populated islands

#### Solution

Polycom group video conferencing systems

#### Result

Sunbeam Island Health Services, a state-of-the-art video telemedicine network that facilitates hundreds of hours of primary care at a distance through virtual doctor's visits

"Of course, video telemedicine on the Sunbeam offers huge cost savings to people, but even more than that, it's often the first step in accessing medical care."

*Sharon Daley  
Registered Nurse  
Maine Sea Coast Mission*

Daley connects patients using a Polycom video conferencing system installed on the Sunbeam to physicians on the mainland at seven locations also equipped with Polycom video solutions. Appointments are for both acute and chronic issues including visits with pediatricians, a diabetes specialist, and behavioral healthcare professionals such as psychiatrists and psychologists. Daley also has peripheral medical equipment such as an otoscope and electronic stethoscope at her disposal for examining patients, or as she terms it, "being the hands for the doctor."

The Sunbeam has long been a gathering place for island residents. People often drop by for blood pressure screenings or to ask for advice on medical insurance or to participate in health education.

"Adding video capability to the Sunbeam has really allowed me to expand educational content," Daley says. "For example, Isle Au Haut has a very high rate of Lyme Disease, so I've brought in physicians from the mainland to educate park rangers, teachers and emergency medical technicians over video."

## A Safe Harbor

Offering virtual physician visits to those people living on Maine's sparsely populated islands is helping the Mission achieve its goal of delivering critical services to those most in need.

"Of course video telemedicine on the Sunbeam offers huge cost savings to people, but even more than that, it's often the first step in accessing medical care," explains Daley. "Even if a patient's condition requires more care than can be provided over video, time and again, after taking this first step, the follow through is much greater."

## The IT Perspective

*The Sunbeam Island Health Services video telemedicine network comprises eight sites: the Sunbeam, and a combination of seven doctor's office and hospital locations, each equipped with Polycom group video conferencing solutions. Peripheral medical equipment, such as an otoscope and electronic stethoscope, connects directly to the Polycom systems to provide real-time feedback.*

For example, one man thought he was having indigestion, saw the Sunbeam docked and decided to go in for a check-up. He was connected over video to a physician who diagnosed him as having a serious cardiac issue and went off island for care.

Daley also knows of many diabetics who are not checking blood sugar regularly or taking their prescribed medications who now enjoy regular access to a provider through telemedicine on the Sunbeam and, as a result, now take better care of themselves. Daley has also worked with people battling depression and reports significant improvement because these patients are better able to follow through with counseling.

## Setting Sail for the Future of Telemedicine

"I was pleasantly surprised at just how little patient reluctance I encountered when we introduced telemedicine on the Sunbeam," says Daley. "People are not at all uncomfortable accessing primary care this way."

In fact, video conferencing on the Sunbeam has been so well received that there is great interest among the residents in land-based video units so doctors are accessible even more frequently.

"I'd like to see another Polycom video system added to the main gathering area of the boat so that more people could attend our video education sessions," concludes Daley.

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