

Case Study: Wellstar Health System's Digital Care Network



Wellstar Health System's Digital Care Network Supports Rural Hospital Sustainability

Program motto “Going from transfer for uncertainty to keep with confidence” subverts traditional extractive hub-and-spoke models

Case Study Snapshot



Footprint: Headquartered in Marietta, GA; 11 hospitals, 300+ outpatient sites across GA

Timeframe: 2019 – Present

Challenge: Traditional approach of transferring patients away from rural hospitals created a negative feedback loop: Retaining fewer inpatients leads to less revenue & less reinvestment; increased transfers negatively impact community trust in the local hospital over time.

Solution: Multi-hub telehealth model positions rural hospitals as local acute-care hubs with 24/7 virtual specialist support, helping them treat higher-acuity patients locally & transfer to tertiary facilities only when necessary.

Key Partners

- Medical College of Georgia Center for Digital Health, Augusta University
- Wellstar Health System
- Independent rural hospital partners (19)

Challenges Addressed



Keeping Care Close to Home

Reduces unnecessary transfers for low-acuity conditions that do not require higher-level care, avoiding the extractive hub-and-spoke pattern, and keeps patients and revenue local to fund the staff, equipment, and capabilities needed for growth



Rethinking Workforce Innovation

Integrates local clinical teams, including physicians, nurses, and an on-call remote specialist, within the hospital's existing workflow, creating greater comfort and confidence in managing complex disease locally without competing for scarce rural specialists

Key Outcomes (2021-2026)



70% of patients in the program remain at local hospitals for care, compared to 30% in 2019



301 total e-consults (started 2024)



6600 patients served since program launch



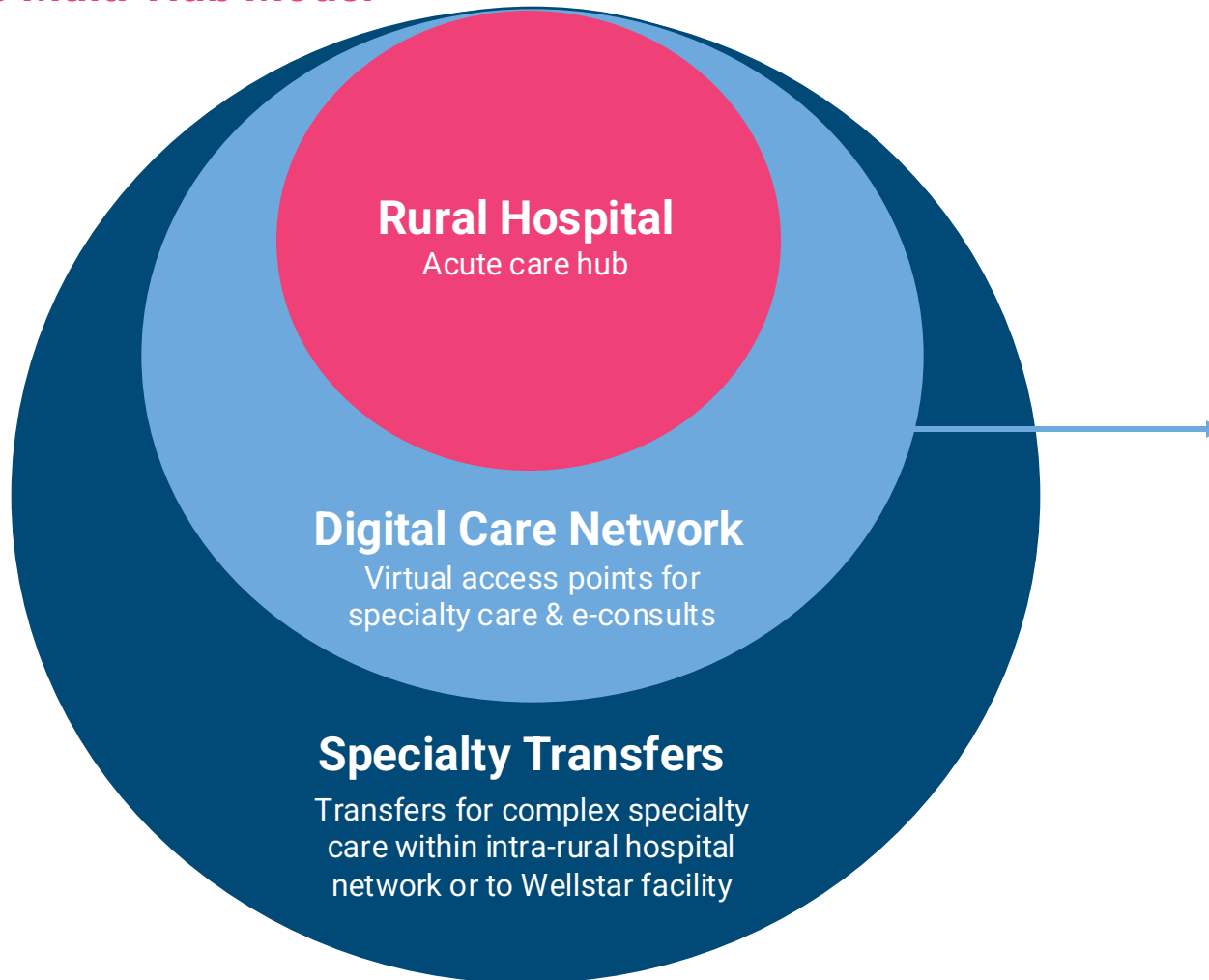
*[The Wellstar Digital Care Network] is the first thing that I've ever seen that actually makes rural healthcare stronger. Telehealth itself does not. **It's the philosophy behind how you use it that really makes the difference.***

– Dr. Matthew Lyon, Director, MCG Center for Digital Health

Multi-Hub Model Creates Interconnectivity Between Rural Hospitals

Philosophy of “right place, right person, right time” provides foundation for intra-rural transfers

The Multi-Hub Model



Lowering the Adoption Burden for Rural Hospitals

Adopting new technology in independent rural facilities requires more than functionality, it requires ease of use and minimal disruption to existing workflows. Models that succeed prioritize tools clinicians can trust and rely on without added technical burden. Wellstar’s Digital Care Network was designed around the following principles to support seamless adoption:



Low-tech by design

Cloud-based, with minimal proprietary hardware, requiring no need for a dedicated IT team to maintain.



Minimal clinical burden

Simplified, one-click access for clinicians, allowing direct connection to a specialist with the push of a single button.



Nimble, non-proprietary systems

Avoids single-vendor lock-in, allowing the network to adapt as needs change



Embedded in workflow

Technology is positioned as an integrated part of clinical care delivery, not a separate or standalone tool.

Scale Is Achieved as an Outcome of Responsible Network Stewardship

Wellstar's approach to determining when – and critically why – to expand their footprint over time

Approach to Scaling the Digital Care Network



Identify Bottom-Up Program Needs & Avoid Top-Down Mandates

New specialties are added when partner hospitals independently identify a shared need, rather than through top-down planning. Once a service line is added, it becomes available to every partner hospital through e-consult access.



Prioritize Financial Sustainability While Maintaining Flexibility

Each proposed addition is evaluated against Wellstar's financial fiduciary responsibility before it scales. Requests that are not yet financially viable may be deferred or referred elsewhere, but program leads remain open to potential future partnerships as the program evolves.



Make Innovation Routine Through Continuous Partner Feedback

Hospital CEOs and frontline clinicians openly flag what they are seeing in the field, and that feedback shapes ongoing improvement led by the core Digital Care Network leads. Growth depends on transparency, trust, and partnership.

Key Metrics for Network Performance

Metrics are tracked jointly by administrative and physician leads to decide when and how quickly to scale:

Operational Volume

- Consult volume by location
- Time-of-day consult patterns
- Average telemedicine days per patient

Transfers

- Transfer rate by county
- e-Consult transfers

Clinical Quality

- Length of stay
- Mortality rate
- Local end-of-life care rate

Wellstar's Digital Care Network: Lessons Learned for Health Systems

1

Health systems must be intentional about not letting technology be a barrier for building accessible partnerships with independent rural facilities.

- Recognizing that rural hospitals enter partnerships at different starting points and capacities, the Network has built-in flexibility to adjust services to each facility's needs and maturity level.
- Decision-making around new technology add-ons or improvements is driven by the philosophy of making adoption as easy as possible for rural hospitals, regardless of their existing infrastructure.

2

A sustainable “multi-hub” network should be designed with rural hospital capacity-building in mind, driving long-term sustainability of rural care ecosystems.

- Done right, telehealth can reverse the extractive cycle of rural healthcare—keeping patients local rebuilds trust, volume, and rural hospital capacity to treat complex conditions.
- Internally, this involves not just redesigning clinical workflows and processes but encouraging an intentional mindset shift that centers virtual care delivery as the norm e.g., a rural hospital without a cardiologist on staff requires cardiology e-consults for all heart failure admissions.

▶▶ What's Next?

- Plans to expand clinical specialty care services and support models across rural Georgia
- Expand educational opportunities for healthcare professionals, including on-site simulation training and enhanced tele-education pathways