PAUBOX

Patient Communication Trends for Mental Health Practitioners

January 2023

There has never been a greater need for the life-saving services of the nation's mental health professionals.

A global pandemic, economic uncertainty, the "always-on" demands of many industries and an overwhelming number of texts, comments and social media posts has left many Americans emotionally exhausted and struggling to find balance. As a result, therapists, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists are playing an ever-more important role in the overall health and wellness of more than 40 million Americans.

At the same time, mental health practitioners have had to adapt to sweeping changes in the way care is delivered and how they communicate with patients. Several of those changes are the result of the pandemic's push toward telehealth practices and tools, while others have come from an ever-changing regulatory landscape as it relates to the use and transmission of protected health information (PHI).

This report provides a summary of patient communication practices, as reported by more than 100 mental health practitioners around the United States in the Fall of 2022. The goal of the report is to help therapists, psychologists and others learn from the experiences of their peers as they try to navigate those communication and regulatory changes amid ever-increasing demand for their services.

How do mental health practitioners communicate with their patients?

As Figure 1 shows, nearly 70% of mental health professionals rely on email and text as their primary method of communication with patients outside of therapy sessions. While those numbers seem typical in most industries, they are somewhat surprising in the context of mental health, given the sensitive nature of the content of some of those messages and the likely inclusion of PHI. At the same time, as seen in Figure 2, only 27% of respondents directly communicate follow-up notes on therapy sessions. Activities like sending messages to promote general wellness or sharing practice updates may be more generic in nature, not requiring the transmission of PHI.

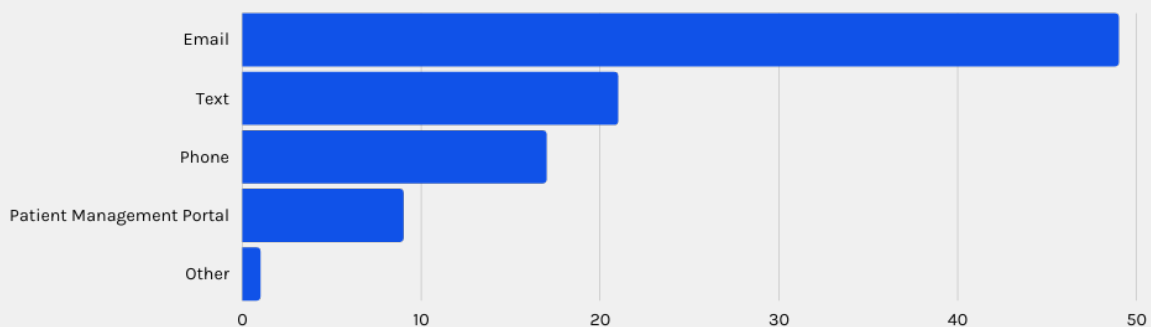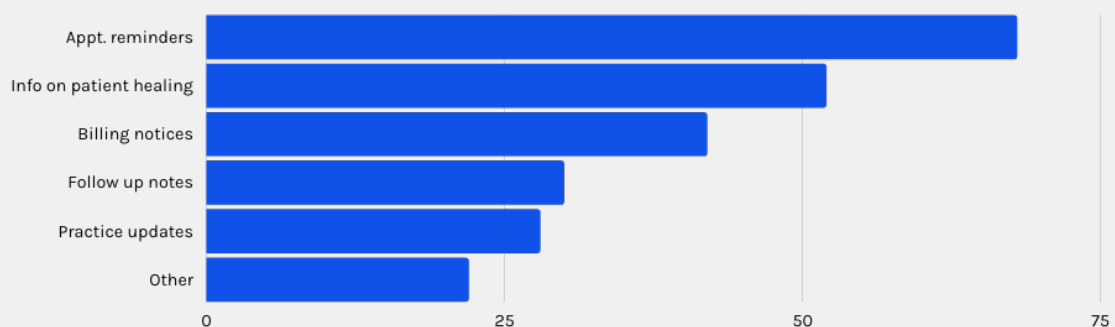Figure 1

Primary method of communication with patients

Figure 2

Reasons for communicating with patients

In terms of communication frequency, Figure 3 highlights that only 38% of mental health professionals regularly message their patients on a weekly basis or more frequently. The remaining 62% communicate once every 2-3 weeks or less frequently. As Figure 4 shows, those professionals face a wide range of challenges related to patient communication, with the most commonly cited challenges being keeping track of patient communications, archiving messages and being overwhelmed with the sheer number of messages (emails, calls, texts, etc.) received from patients.

Figure 3

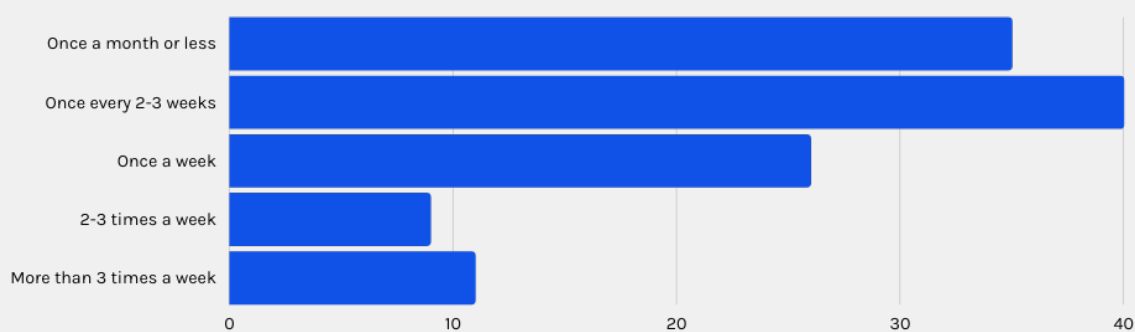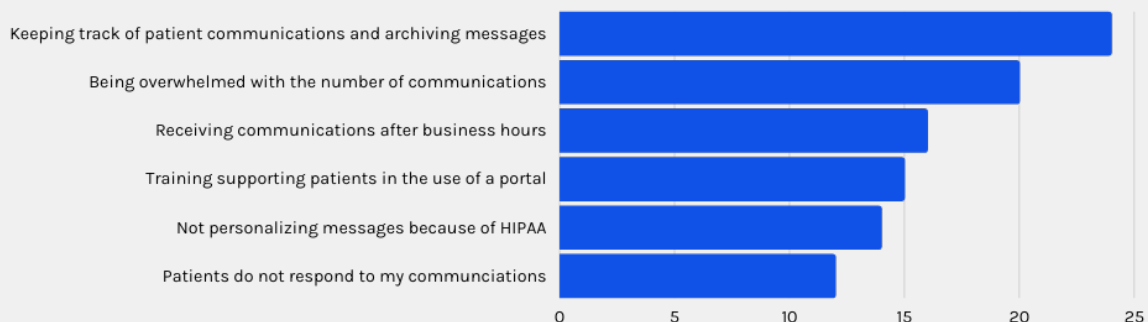**How often mental health professionals communicate with patients**

Once a month or less	
Once every 2-3 weeks	
Once a week	
2-3 times a week	
More than 3 times a week	

Figure 4

Biggest challenge with patient commuication

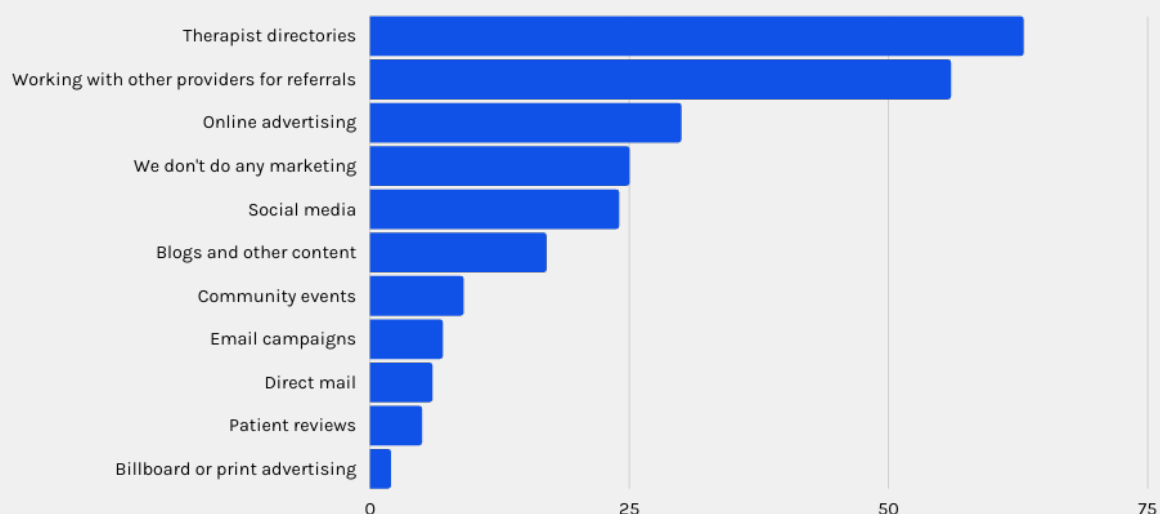|	
Keeping track of patient communications and archiving messages	
Being overwhelmed with the number of communications	
Receiving communications after business hours	
Training supporting patients in the use of a portal	
Not personalizing messages because of HIPAA	
Patients do not respond to my communciations	

How do mental health professionals market their practices?

Despite the great need for mental health services, connecting patients with providers remains a challenge; so many organizations invest in marketing their practices to reach as many potential patients as possible. Figure 5 highlights the most common ways practitioners try to spread the word about their valuable services.

Not surprisingly, working with other providers to cultivate referrals and therapist directories top the list of most common marketing activities, while 23% of respondents say they do no marketing at all. The next most common marketing activities include online advertising (28%) and social media (22%). Surprisingly, only 6% regularly use email marketing, despite that channel having the highest return on investment of any marketing tactic. For instance, a study by McKinsey & Company found that "email remains a significantly more effective way to acquire customers than social media—nearly 40 times that of Facebook and Twitter combined."

Figure 5

How professionals market their practice

Offering more clarity on these marketing activities, Figure 6 highlights the therapist directories most commonly used by practitioners, while Figure 7 shows the most frequently used social media channels. Figure 8 outlines the average amount these practices spend on marketing on a monthly basis, with the majority investing up to $1,000 each month.

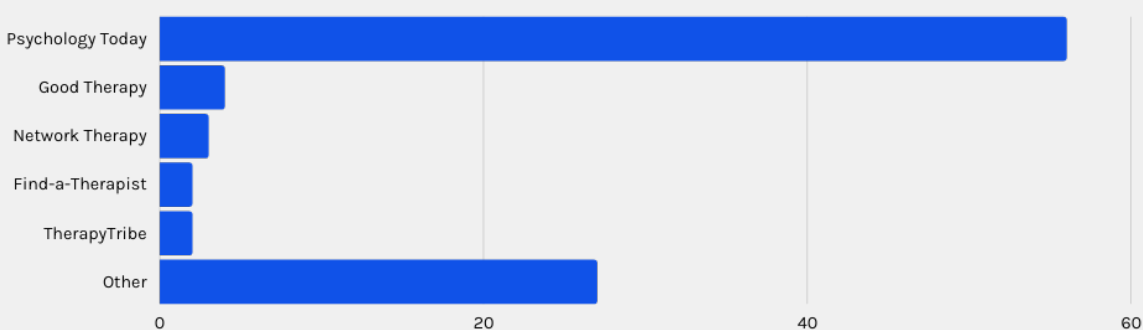Figure 6

Therapist directories used to market practice

Figure 7

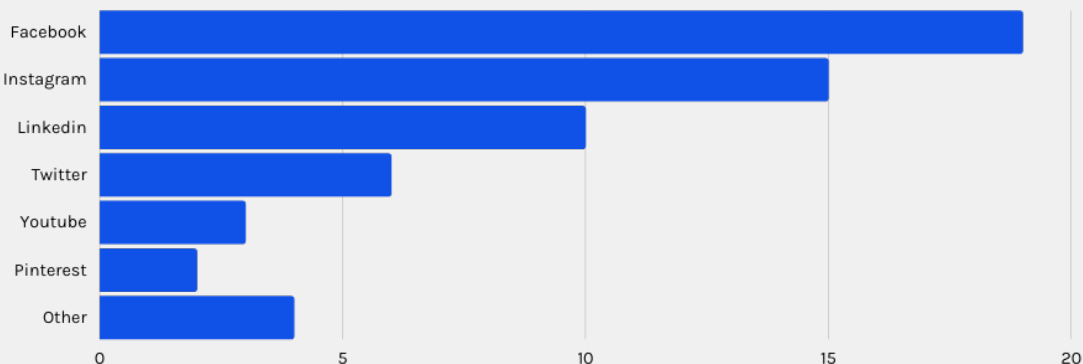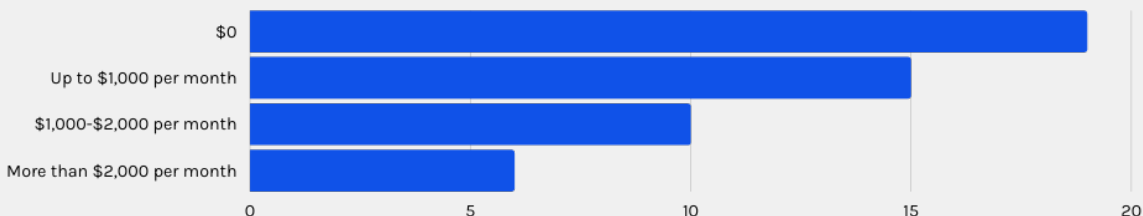**Social media channels used to market practice**

Figure 8

Money spent to market practice

How do mental health practices store and manage patient data?

While the transmission of protected patient information has a number of regulatory implications, particularly around the provisions of HIPAA, how that data is stored and managed within a practice is also a key consideration. Figure 9 outlines the methods mental health practitioners use to manage patient data. While more than 80% indicate they use electronic health record (EHR) software, many of those respondents supplement their EHR use with office laptops, paper records and spreadsheets. Figure 10 shows the most commonly used EHR systems, while Figure 11 underscores the fact that very few of the respondents have full-time IT personnel on staff (only 6%), which often leaves the practitioners themselves or office managers to wrestle with technical issues, possibly explaining why many of the practices with an EHR also leverage other low-tech methods of patient data management.
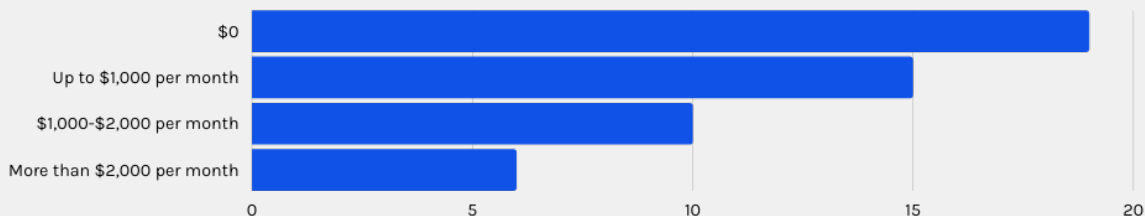
Figure 9

How patient data is managed

Figure 10
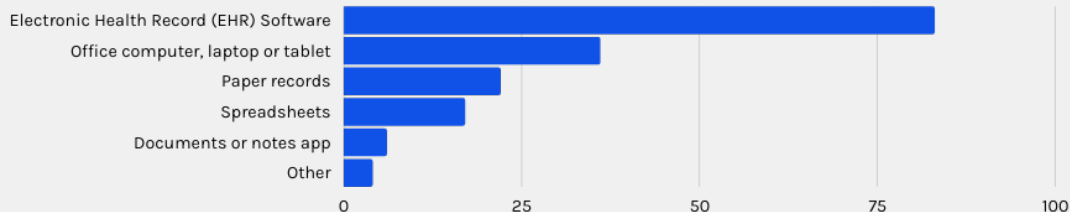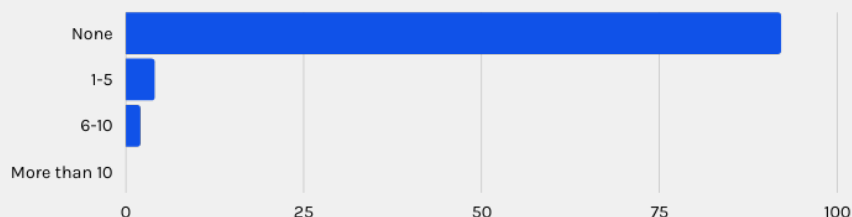
Electronic health record (EHR) softwares used

Figure 11

Full time IT people on staff

What pulls mental health practitioners away from patient care?

The final aspect of patient care and communication the survey profiles is a look at the mundane administrative tasks mental health professionals can't ignore but which take them away from time with patients. Figure 12 highlights the most common of these administrative tasks, with 75% of respondents citing the task of documenting patient visits and follow up as the most frequent drain on their time, followed by appointment scheduling (41%) and working with insurance companies (34%). Figure 13 shows the average amount of time practitioners spend on these tasks each day.
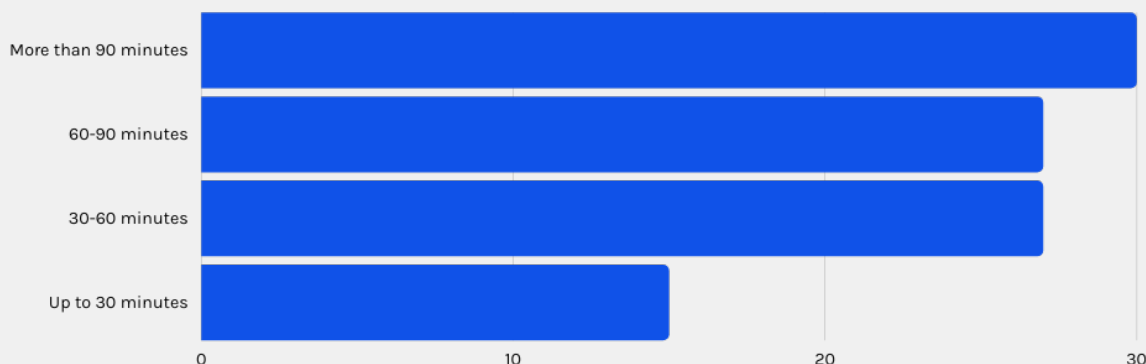
Figure 12

Time consuming administrative tasks

Figure 13

Time spent on administrative tasks

The remaining charts, Figures 14-17, provide a demographic profile of the survey respondents.
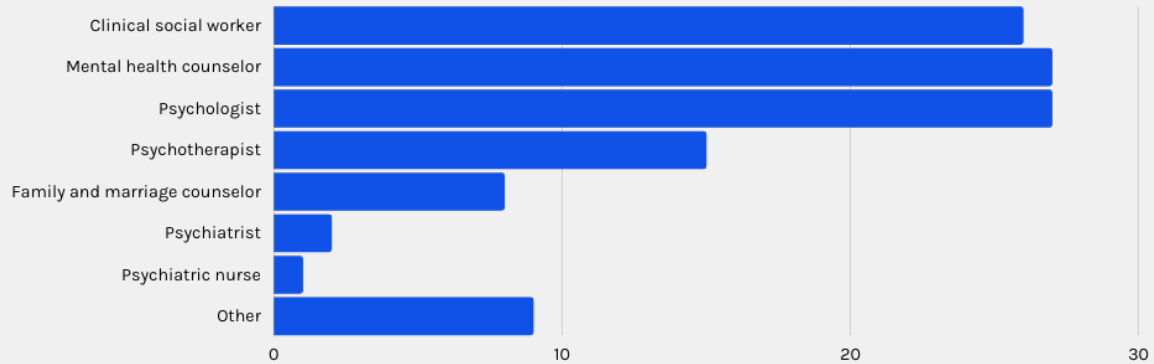
Figure 14

Job title of respondents

Job title	
Clinical social worker	
Mental health counselor	
Psychologist	
Psychotherapist	
Family and marriage counselor	
Psychiatrist	
Psychiatric nurse	
Other	

Figure 15

How long respondents have been in practice

0-3 years	
4-10 years	
11-15 years	
16-20 years	
Over 20 years	

Figure 16

How many days per week patients are seen

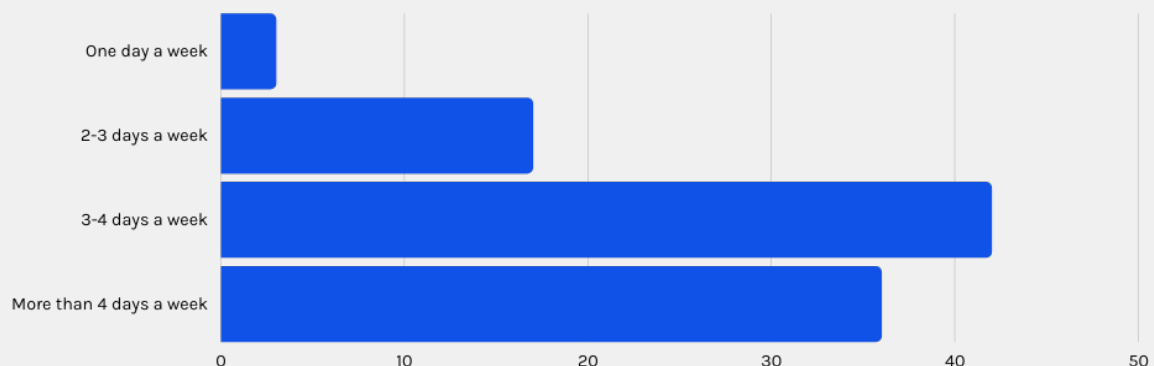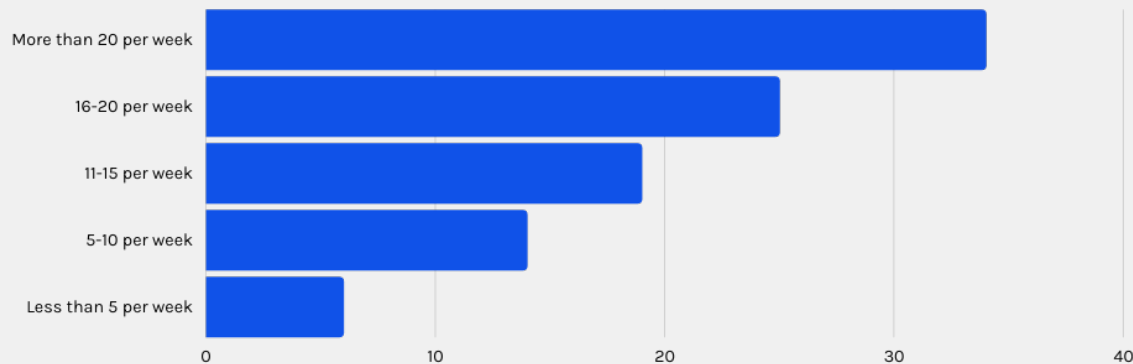|	
One day a week	
2-3 days a week	
3-4 days a week	
More than 4 days a week	

Figure 17

How many patients are seen per week on average

Key insights

Across the varied findings of this year's survey, a number of key insights and questions have emerged:

- **Email and text are the primary methods of communication between mental health providers and their patients,** but do those channels provide the necessary security to meet HIPAA regulations?

- Cultivating referrals from other providers and online directories is the most common way mental health professionals market their practices, while **email marketing remains a largely untapped but highly cost-effective channel.**

- **While the vast majority of mental health practitioners have EHR software in place, those systems may be underutilized,** resulting in the need for supplemental methods of patient data management.

- **Very few mental health practices have full-time IT resources on staff,** leaving the practitioners themselves or office managers to add tech support to their already overwhelming list of responsibilities.

- **58% of mental health providers spend an hour or more each day dealing with mundane administrative tasks** that pull them away from patient care.

Simplify your email communications with Paubox Email Suite

Paubox Email Suite is perfect for mental health organizations that have limited or no IT resources and that don't want to waste time transferring patient data from one system to another. With Paubox, every email you send is secured, encrypted and 100% HIPAA compliant, so you can include patient details, treatment plans and other protected information in the message without risking a HIPAA violation. Email archiving is also available to keep a secure record of all those communications.

Paubox is the only HIPAA compliant email provider with zero-step encryption on all sent emails.

There are no portals, plugins or extra steps to send secure data. Recipients have it easy, too, without needing to log in to a portal or set up a new account just to view a message. You just send and receive email like normal while Paubox works in the background. This approach makes it easy to incorporate secure email into your workflows rather than utilize a cumbersome portal-based system.

Paubox Email Suite can be set up in minutes and works with with Google Workspace, Microsoft 365 or Microsoft Exchange, and you can keep your existing business email address. Paubox is the #1 ranked email encryption software on G2 and serves more than 4,000 customers around the country.

Read on to learn how Lifespan Psychiatric Consulting leveraged Paubox Email Suite to help secure its operations and significantly improve the practice's communication workflow.

Experience email encryption without the hassle

Start for free

Lifespan Psychiatric Consulting

Lifespan Psychiatric Consulting is a mental health practice operating in East County in the Portland Metro Area. Its mission is to provide psychiatric medication and therapy services using a grounded, holistic approach by developing individualized treatment plans with a strong emphasis in collaborative problem solving, cognitive behavioral therapy and motivational interviewing.

Challenge

Lifespan was doing all the right things in regards to making its communications HIPAA compliant, but like many private practices, it was finding compliance to be a burden rather than a benefit.

The practice was using an email encryption vendor that used a portal to gate communications. But that meant it took recipients up to five extra steps just to view a message. It also made the experience of reading email on a mobile device cumbersome.

However, it wasn't just a problem for recipients; not being able to send and receive emails quickly bogged down employee workflows.

Company snapshot

- Locations: 1
- Paubox Email Suite Plus customer since April 2016
- https://lifespanpsychiatric.com/

Paubox Email Suite Plus goals

- Find a HIPAA compliant email solution that is easy to use for email senders and receivers
- Seamlessly add email encryption to existing email platform
- Provide robust inbound email security protection from phishing, malware and email bomb attacks

Industry

- Psychiatric care

Use case

- HIPAA compliant email that works with existing email provider

Used solution

- Paubox Email Suite Plus

Favorite features

- Easy-to-use encryption
- Seamless integration with existing email platform
- Responsive and friendly customer support

Solution

After researching options online, Lifespan Psychiatric Consulting chose Paubox to be its email encryption vendor.

Paubox made secure email easy to use and was flexible enough to use with any email service, rather than locking users into a proprietary app.

"I love that I can use Airmail app with Paubox to secure my email communications," said Andrew Vilius, principal of Lifespan. "It's helped improve my email workflow on the order of 50%."

Excellent customer support

Vilius also appreciated the responsive customer support that didn't require multiple phone calls or emails to talk with a real person.

"The support was extremely helpful in getting me started, including transferring all of my archived email messages from my prior service to Paubox," said Vilius. "Their ease of use and HIPAA compliance make Paubox an ideal email service for healthcare providers."

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Andrew Vilius
Principal, Lifespan

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