

OUR CLIENT:

COWLITZ FAMILY HEALTH CENTER, A PRIVATE, NONPROFIT
COMMUNITY HEALTH SERVICE ORGANIZATION

THE ISSUE: NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE UPDATE



Cowlitz Family Health Center

Mission Statement

To promote, encourage and provide health services in order to improve the quality of life through sound nutrition, education, preventive health care, and the empowerment of choice.

THE SITUATION: Cowlitz Family Health Center (CFHC) of Longview, Washington, undertook a program to modernize their email and practice management systems. The task of updating a network infrastructure can be daunting, and is one that is often postponed because it can be like peeling an onion – you get through the outside layer only to discover that a simple update may not be sufficient and a more complete overhaul is needed. In the process, CFHC realized that their in-house IT person was not going to be fully capable of handling the upgrade alone.

ON REFERRAL: The project began when clinic managers decided that they needed to revamp their 25-year-old system for keeping patient records. To get recommendations on how to proceed, they hired a national medical consulting firm with expertise in the latest electronic medical records (EMR) and practice management systems. Along with making a recommendation on what new scheduling and billing system to use, the consultants recommended that CFHC hire an IT management firm to assist Cowlitz' internal IT staff with the installation. Responding to Cowlitz' RFP, Polar Systems, Inc. was selected to partner with the clinic for the upgrade.

At the time Cowlitz started working with Polar Systems, their whole network (all software and hardware) was contained at the clinic's Longview, Washington headquarters. The Longview network consisted of a patchwork of two mid-sized servers, with five PC workstations that also worked as servers, and a virtual network. The Longview staff, as well as personnel at the clinic's two remote worksites (there were approximately 125 users in total, spread between the clinic's three locations) needed to go through a very cumbersome process to access records at the main site which included logging into multiple software applications separately. In addition, the clinic's email software was archaic and didn't offer the functionality of contemporary email systems.

THE POLARSTAR SOLUTION: The first step for Polar Systems was to evaluate the existing system framework and assess the client's needs. As part of the company's PolarStar service, Polar provided a team of 'CIO-level' analysts with the expertise in system design and implementation that enabled them to quickly calculate that CFHC's current infrastructure would not support what they wanted to do. A complete rebuild of the clinic's IT system, from top to bottom, was launched.

THE CHALLENGE: The rebuild was broken into three phases, and during the process Polar managed and maintained Cowlitz's existing network so as not to disrupt on-going daily work activity. "During this process our team was onsite at CFHC two or three full days per week," says Ken Colton, Polar Systems' Director of Operations. "In phase one, we moved their current applications without change to a more robust infrastructure. In phase two we converted CFHC outdated email system to Microsoft Exchange, and in phase three implemented a single log-in for all applications based on thin client computing. This simplified and streamlined how the remote sites connected to the main site."

Cowlitz' in-house IT person had begun implementing a server virtualization environment, but had made some incorrect implementation decisions. Based on Polar's core competency in this area, they decided to unravel what had been done and re-implement the virtualization using VMWare, a more standard and robust architecture. The new system uses fewer servers than the previous one, but uses them much more

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efficiently. “Virtualization was key to the successful restructure of Cowlitz’ network,” says Ken Colton. “It enabled Cowlitz to cut server and space costs and energy usage, and it will allow them to grow and expand their data-driven business with relative ease.”

MEETING THE NEED: The entire process took approximately five months, and was worth the time and financial investment. Cowlitz’ Finance Director Norm Kraft says, “Before the upgrade our IT person had to run all reports himself using our 25 year old practice management system. Now anybody that has authority can run a report, and they’re produced in real-time. We can view the information on the screen, create a PDF, or create an Excel spreadsheet. This upgrade has made our business more efficient.”

Polar Systems has recently been able to change their focus at CFHC from improving the clinic’s network to maintaining the network and taking care of employee needs that arise. This is all part of the PolarStar network management service, which includes an on-call help desk, with the ability to perform remote diagnostics and servicing of clients’ networks whenever necessary. To ensure that face-to-face contact is maintained, and that Polar is kept up to date on Cowlitz’ IT needs, Polar Systems engineers make on-site visits to CFHC at least once or twice per month.

“Beyond solving the clinic’s system reliability issues and bringing them into the 21st century and to the leading edge of technology, our continuing involvement as part of the PolarStar service ensures that CFHC’s IT system will continue to thrive,” says Ken Colton.

Norm Kraft adds, “One significant advantage to outsourcing this work is having a team that responds to the projects that we have prioritized. No task is too vast or gets pushed to the back burner. This work has created a lot of stability and reliability within our system. The investment we made, and continue to make with Polar is money well spent. We’re confident that the support that Polar provides will serve us well into the future.”

Cowlitz Family Health Center is a community health center that provides medical, family planning, dental, WIC (women’s and infant nutrition program) and First Steps (case management for pregnant women). For more information about CFHC visit their website at www.cowlitzfamilyhealth.org.



About Polar Systems

Polar Systems, Inc., founded in 1981, has as its clients one of the largest installed bases of local and wide area networks in Oregon & SW Washington. The company’s diverse client list includes many of the best-known companies and government agencies in the area. Polar Systems is a Microsoft Gold Partner and is a charter member of the Microsoft Certified Partner program.

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