Networking: Securing illegals' records

January 16 2006

Migrant farm workers flow into Salinas, Calif., during the lettuce-harvesting season, just as once portrayed, long ago, by novelist John Steinbeck. The difference is that now, the workers come to California's Central Valley from central Mexico, not the Oklahoma dust bowl, as in "The Grapes of Wrath."

And although they are in the United States illegally, have no money or health insurance and don't speak English, they do have access to consistent medical and dental care, as a result of a new wireless networking initiative, experts tell United Press International's Networking.

A number of local technology companies, including Sonic Wall and the Alvarez Technology Group, have collaborated with a local health clinic in the valley to set up the remote healthcare facility. Outfitting an old recreational vehicle with the newest wireless routers, 802.11g adapters and firewall technology, the developers created a virtual private network, linking the mobile medical clinic with a medical center, where patient records are now kept digitally.

"Migrant workers can't afford to go to hospitals," Luis Alvarez, president of the Alvarez Technology Group (alvareztg.com), a systems integrator, told Networking. "They also have a fear of having their immigration status reported."

That has meant very poor healthcare in the past. Though doctors and dentists and nurses had traveled to locations where the workers -- and

often their families -- could receive treatment, there was no way to maintain case histories and determine if the patients were healing or were critically ill.

But now that the network is online -- work was finished recently on a wireless link with Sprint's cell-phone network -- the medical records can be accessed, and the patients can receive a higher quality of care. "The van can stay longer and treat more patients," said Alvarez.

The van simply shows up at a designated spot, the nurse takes out a folding table, types in the patient's name on a wireless laptop computer and picks up the treatments where they were left off. The mobile healthcare van uses SonicPoint access points and a SonicWall TZ 170 SP Wireless slim-line security appliance in the vehicle to help them connect back to the PRO 2040 firewall at the main clinic.

"The RV is fitted with equipment for field diagnostics," said Alvarez. "Dentists can do cleanings. X-rays can be taken. It's really cool."

The migrant workers often travel with their families and live in communal housing during the harvest season. Though the patients are illegal aliens, the records are stored digitally and are protected under the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act laws, meaning that the privacy of the patients is maintained.

Congress passed HIPAA in 1996 to establish national standards for electronic healthcare transactions and national identifiers for providers, health plans and employers. The act also addresses the security and privacy of health data -- making health-records privacy a key civil-rights protection under federal law. Adopting these standards, the government hopes, will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the nation's healthcare system by encouraging the widespread use of electronic data interchange in healthcare.

The mobile clinic in Salinas treats 20 to 30 patients per stop, said Alvarez.

The project is an outreach effort of Clinica de Salud, a clinic for low-wage earners and mobile workers, near Sacramento, according to a spokesperson for SonicWall, a provider of integrated network security, mobility and productivity solutions, based in Silicon Valley.

Though the clinic's records are HIPAA compliant, not all U.S. firms are just yet. The federal deadline for compliance was last April, but many companies and hospitals are struggling to make sure that electronic medical records are safe and secure.

Copyright 2006 by United Press International

Citation: Networking: Securing illegals' records (2006, January 16) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2006-01-networking-illegals.html