Want to know how to start a telemedicine program at your facility? Need advice on selecting equipment? Have questions about billing? The Great Plains Telehealth Resource and Assistance Center (gpTRAC) provides technical assistance to health care facilities in six Midwestern states, including Minnesota.

The federally funded center was created 10 years ago and is one of 14 such operations in the country. Its staff of four works out of the University of Minnesota Institute for Health Informatics. gpTRAC assists facilities that want to start a telehealth program as well as those that already have one. (It doesn’t offer start-up grants.) Many of its services are free. “We try to answer any question about telehealth,” says project manager Zoi Hills, MHI. “I say ‘try’ because although we know a lot, telehealth is changing so fast, even we have trouble keeping up.”

Some typical questions gpTRAC fields: Can you recommend specialists we can connect our patients to? How do we bill for a telemedicine visit? What will the billing location code be for telemedicine provided by our docs when they see patients who are travelling in other states? What are the CPT codes for telepsychiatry to nursing homes? What kind of electronic stethoscope do you recommend?

Hills says there’s a right way and a wrong way to develop a telehealth program. She says before starting, “get all your stakeholders talking to each other and in agreement on how to proceed, including at the facility where the specialists are. Some think they can do it on their own without buy-in from key people, even at their own facility. Then the program fails.” Hills has witnessed a couple of attempts to launch programs that fell apart and were unable to be salvaged.

She also advises organizations to start small. “Start with one specialty that’s logistically simple, perfect it, then move onto the next.”

And have a champion. “Identify a champion who’s a clinician and has good communication skills, who’ll work tirelessly to make it happen,” she says. “Without one, you won’t get far.” Hills adds that some of the most successful telemedicine programs are driven by doctors. – HOWARD BELL

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Contact Dennis Kelly, CEO, at 612-362-3767 or dkelly@mnmed.org.

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