

## Easing Access to Care

By USAMEDDAC-Fort Carson Public Affairs

TRICARE beneficiaries have recently been challenged when attempting to make medical appointment via the Access To Care phone lines. High volume call times sometimes over-burdened the system, but relief is on the way.

The Colorado Springs Military Health System has heard the concerns and is taking action. The CSMHS with its partners at Evans Army Community Hospital, Peterson Air Force Base and the US Air Force Academy, have funded an upgrade and expansion of the T-metrics system that supports the call center.

“This upgrade should take place in about two months,” said Capt. Joshua Elliott, chief of Business Operations at the enhanced Multi-Service Market. “Additionally, the contract is being upgraded to allow those answering patients’ calls to have a greater ability to communicate with their care teams and produce results without having to transfer the calls.”

Meanwhile, other options exist to ease access. Rather than calling the Access To Care line (524-CARE) early in the morning to make a same day appointment, patients can use Tricare Online at <http://www.tricareonline.com>.

“Using TOL, patients can actually check on and book appointments as early as 3 p.m. for next day appointments with their primary care managers. So they don’t have to wake up at 6 a.m. and wait on hold on the phone lines! In essence, making your appointment online is easier and more convenient,” said Capt. Melissa Thomas, Evans hospital’s chief of Clinical Operations.

Ninety-five percent of all primary care appointments can be made through TOL. Thomas said that besides primary care, patients can make optometry vision check appointments and gynecological well-woman exams – these types of appointments are

99 percent available online. However, beneficiaries must be registered at to make appointments on TOL.

In addition to TOL, primary care clinics and community based medical homes offer another avenue for appointments.

“This service makes it even easier to make appointments,” said Lt. Col. Francisco Dominicci, chief of Healthcare Informatics. “Through the Army Medicine Secure Messaging Service patients can even take care of medical issues without having to come in and be seen.”

SMS is a web-based communication portal that allows patients to request prescription renewals, receive laboratory test results, request appointments and referrals, receive guidance from their medical teams by secure email, and to consult with their medical teams regarding non-urgent health care matters.

“Responses will be within 24 hours to all requests, plus it is simple to enroll,” said Dominicci. “At your next primary care appointment, simply provide the clinic your email address and they will send you the link to sign up.”

To simplify the process, families may have the same generic account with multiple users -- minors and parents -- or they may choose to have individual accounts for each member of the family.

“With the improved phone system, TRICARE Online and Secure Messaging, patients have a choice and will have much better access to care,” said Thomas.