

Staffing Shortages May Challenge Robust Urgent Care Center Growth

Strategic staffing plans may help urgent care centers realize potential

Forbes recently reported that the urgent care (UC) industry is booming. So much so that a recently purchased chain of urgent care centers helped the revenues of UnitedHealth Group's Optum Health to jump 33 percent to \$3.4 billion in second-quarter 2015. Forbes went as far to say that according to analysts, the timing is right for more UC expansion.

In addition, according to the Urgent Care Association of America's (UCAOA) 2014 Benchmarking Survey Report, 5% of respondents reported taking on investors in 2011. In 2013, that number more than tripled to 18%.

Why UC strategies are growing more popular

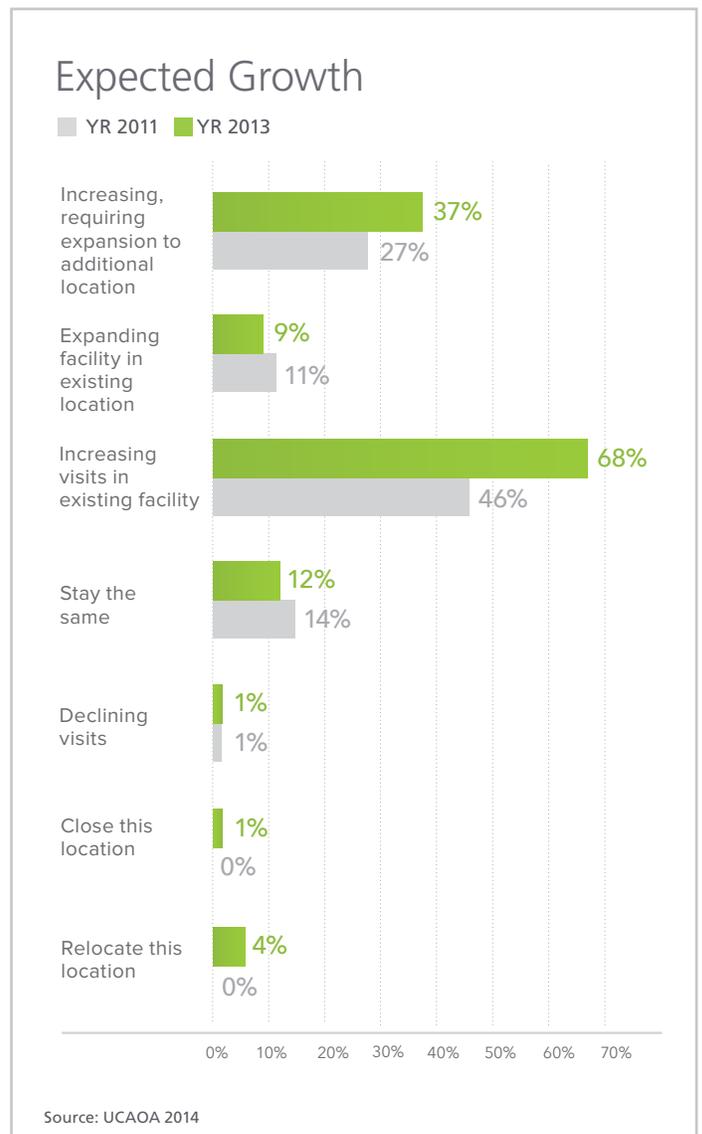
Urgent care centers are changing non-emergency healthcare because they offer lower costs for patients, shorter wait times, fast service and extended hours. They provide treatments that can keep people out of hospitals — and that can save a lot of money. And more patients are experiencing urgent care centers. According to the UCAOA, greater than 80% of urgent care centers reported growing organically through an increase in patient visits from the 2011 calendar year to 2013.

Also, many newly insured patients from the Affordable Care Act are not accustomed to traditional healthcare environments and seem to prefer the clinics' more casual and convenient settings.

UC growth and healthcare shortages

There are approximately 9,000 urgent care centers operating in the United States today. It's a \$15.3 billion business expected to grow 5.8% each year through 2018, according to a 2013 study by IBIS World.

On the surface, it's great news for the bottom line; however, as UC centers undergo rapid growth, there is an expanding healthcare professionals shortage of those who staff these facilities.



"Throughout healthcare, we will need about 15,000 additional primary care doctors just to meet the volume of newly insured through the Affordable Care Act, which is projected to cover up to 30 million patients by 2019," said Jeff Waddill, division vice president of Staff Care, a locum tenens company that is part of AMN Healthcare. "Among the biggest shortages for physicians are family practice and internal medicine. And those are exactly the specialties that feed the urgent care engine."

UC centers also employ ample numbers of nurse practitioners (NPs), which is another healthcare role in short supply. According to the American Association of Nurse Practitioners, more than 80% of NPs choose to practice in primary care settings.

In addition to the growing number of insured, the aging of the population is also creating increased demand for healthcare professionals.

Waddill said there is no panacea for the practitioner shortage challenging healthcare providers, including urgent care clinics. "The impact will sooner or later affect nearly every healthcare facility, but the fast growth of urgent care centers may mean that they experience shortage impacts sooner rather than later," he said.

All this rapid growth begs the question: What's the plan to address this challenge?

Your UC center needs a staffing plan

As your UC patient base grows, the goal becomes achieving and maintaining proper staffing levels so UC centers can concentrate on meeting their patients' needs. To keep quality of care and patient satisfaction high, Waddill said urgent care centers need staffing plans in place. According to the American Nurses Association, staffing plans should address:

- The ability to be flexible
- The intensity of patients' needs
- Staff experience
- Unit layout
- Resource availability

In addition to staff size and the skill sets needed to cover patient visits and predominant disorders treated, a staffing plan must include variables such as ramped-up need during cold and flu season, regional demographics and growth rates.

Waddill said that ensuring adequate staffing can satisfy patient expectation, which is a priority when it comes to UC services. A patient can usually go to an emergency room for anything that can be dealt with in an urgent care setting, he continued. But it's the short wait times, cost savings and convenient, extended hours that attract people to urgent care.

"It still comes down to convenience," Waddill said. "About 75% of urgent cares are located in suburban markets, and the patient experience is typically a good one. The overall value associated with the experience is not as important as the quality of care. But it's important that patients are able to get to an urgent care clinic quickly and have the sense that they are going to be seen relatively quickly."

In addition, UC centers must remain competitive to attract the high-quality healthcare professionals needed to meet patient demands in a growing industry. This includes planning for attractive benefits and work environment to recruit nationally and reel in top candidates, Waddill said.

Finally, your staffing plan should explore the benefits of using a mix of temporary and permanent staffing positions to deal with shortages. You will find that temporary and permanent staff rates are similar, but when you have a vacancy, a loss in revenue resulting from that vacancy can far exceed the cost of having a locum tenens on staff.

"The need for staff planning can quickly become evident in a fast-growth environment such as urgent care," Waddill said. "Early signs of trouble from rapid growth include difficulties in filling shift schedules and staff burnout." He said that a staffing plan that considers temporary and permanent clinicians can help avoid these problems while containing costs, improving employee and patient satisfaction, and decreasing adverse events.

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