

As More Hospitals Enter the Urgent Care Market, Will Staffing Shortages Challenge Growth?

Urgent care centers expected to grow nearly 6% per year through 2018

Akron Children's Hospital in Akron, Ohio, recently converted one of its emergency departments into a pediatric urgent care center to meet a growing demand: families are increasingly seeking lower cost options for treating non-emergency illnesses and injuries. In fact, hospitals around the country are opening urgent care centers to better serve patients and increase revenue. But what remains to be seen is whether a shortage of healthcare professionals will inhibit urgent care center growth.

Why hospitals are adopting an urgent care strategy

Urgent care centers are growing rapidly in number because they offer lower costs for patients, shorter wait times, fast service and extended hours. According to the Urgent Care Association of America, hospitals are increasingly including urgent care as an integral component of their ambulatory care strategy not only to meet patient demand but also to create new revenue and patients.

Patients walking through the urgent care door could end up being referred to the main hospital for more extensive treatment, or the patient could also be introduced to a larger healthcare network that the hospital belongs to, if and when further care is needed.

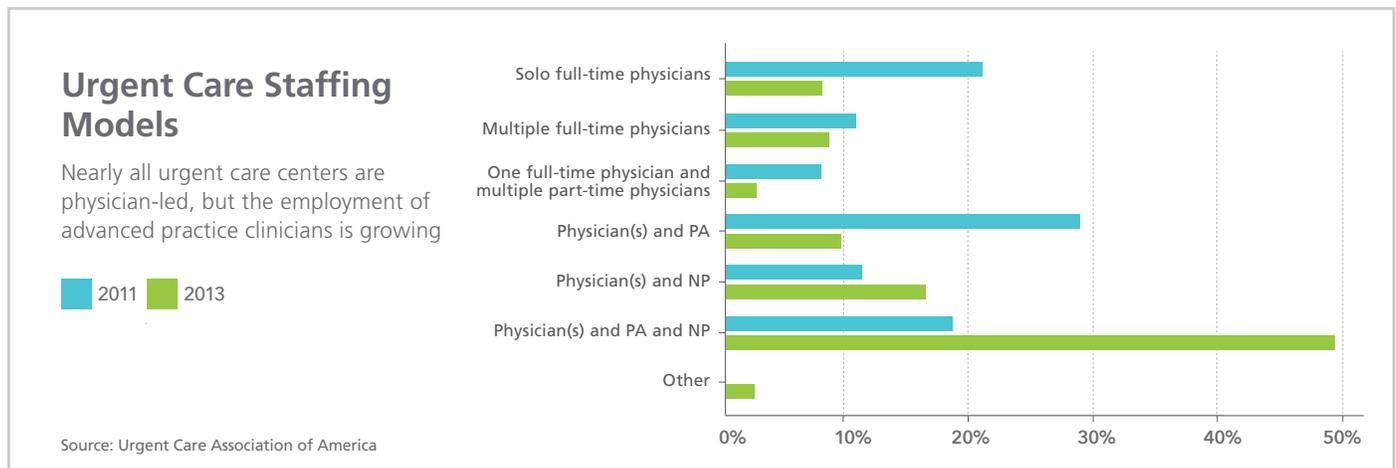
Also, many newly insured patients from the Affordable Care Act are not accustomed to traditional healthcare environments and seem to prefer the clinics' more casual and convenient settings.

Urgent care growth and healthcare shortages

With approximately 9,000 urgent care centers operating in the United States today, urgent care, currently a \$15.3 billion business, is expected to grow 5.8% each year through 2018, according to a 2013 study by IBISWorld. More than 80% of urgent care centers increased their number of patient visits from 2011 to 2013, according to a 2014 report from the Urgent Care Association of America. Square footage of urgent care centers also increased significantly during that period, the report said.

However, at the same time that urgent care centers are undergoing rapid growth, shortages also are growing for the healthcare professionals 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.”

The clinics also employ significant numbers of nurse practitioners, another healthcare role in short supply. 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.

Why your urgent care facility needs a staffing plan

Consequently, the goal becomes achieving and maintaining proper staffing levels so urgent care clinics 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 expertise 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 and regional demographics and growth rates.

Ensuring adequate staffing is key, added Waddill, because patient expectation is a priority when it comes to urgent care services. A patient can basically 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 lure people to urgent care.

“It still comes down to convenience. We know that about 75% of urgent cares are located in suburban markets, and the patient experience is typically a good one,” Waddill said. “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.”

Along with easy care access, urgent care facilities must remain competitive to attract the quality healthcare professionals needed to meet patient demands in a growing industry. This includes planning for optimal benefits and work environment in order to recruit nationally to find 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 such problems while containing costs, improving employee and patient satisfaction, and decreasing adverse events.”

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