



## ***Extending a Warmer Welcome: UC Davis Health Reimagines Its Patient Access Center***

***How working with the right partner is helping to optimize workflows, improve technology and remove barriers to patient access***

**A**s healthcare organizations (HCOs) become larger and more complex, they become harder for patients to access and navigate. A recent consumer survey found that half of consumers avoid seeking care because finding, accessing and paying for healthcare is too difficult.<sup>1</sup> This is bad for patients, because they are not getting the care they need, possibly resulting in worsening health conditions and delayed diagnoses, among other consequences.<sup>2</sup>

UC Davis Health understands patients can find navigating healthcare systems confusing and overwhelming. Based in Sacramento, California, UC Davis Health is a comprehensive, multispecialty academic medical center that serves 33 counties. The system includes a 646-bed academic medical center and a network of more than 1,200 physicians who provide direct patient care. In 2020, UC Davis Health logged 808,242 clinic/office visits, 73,194 ER visits and 29,841 inpatient admissions (excluding observation days).<sup>3</sup>

A health system this large and complex can present formidable access barriers to patients, but UC Davis Health is taking a proactive and patient-centered approach to reducing barriers by creating a centralized patient contact center (PCC). The PCC (sometimes also referred to as a patient access center) is becoming the health system's service hub.

### **Focusing on the patient experience**

“Before we began implementing the PCC, we had 40 different phone rooms across our distributed clinics,” said Michael Condrin, Chief Operating Officer, Ambulatory Care, UC Davis Health. “As a result, the patient experience was at times inconsistent and volatile. We wanted to provide a more standardized, scalable and consistent patient experience.”

UC Davis Health was methodical in its approach to developing a solution. The PCC planning team visited more than a dozen academic medical centers to observe how other HCOs had centralized their operations. As the team worked to develop a business plan for UC Davis Health's PCC, they engaged with hospital leadership, as well as affiliated clinics and medical groups, to ensure an enterprise wide commitment to the initiative.



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MICHAEL CONDRIN | Chief Operating Officer, Ambulatory Care | UC Davis Health

“Physician engagement and leadership is absolutely critical for planning, problem-solving and support,” Condrin said. “Physicians are a customer of the PCC, also, along with the patients. They need to have a strong voice in making sure a solution meets the needs of the practices, as well as having the best interests of the patients at heart.”

## Developing a comprehensive vision

UC Davis Health already had the “nucleus” of centralized operations in place in the form of a Central Access Unit (CAU) that processed internally generated referrals and received external incoming referrals. “The CAU only serviced a portion of our enterprise, not the whole, but it did deliver a superior experience for those aspects that it touched,” said Condrin.

The PCC planning team’s vision was to expand the benefits of centralization to increase patient experience touch points and to bring more humanity to the patient journey. It is typical for patient access centers to offer centralized administrative functions, such as appointment scheduling, registration and referral management. UC Davis Health’s vision also encompasses the financial aspects of the patient journey: The system’s PCC integrates the Financial Clearance Unit (FCU), which is overseen by the Revenue Cycle team. That means the PCC is also equipped to handle tasks like eligibility verification and financial clearance.

Another important feature of UC Davis Health’s PCC implementation is embedded nurse triage. “A big pain point for many patient access centers is clinical escalation on-site when calls or referrals require quick clinical review,” said Condrin. “We have an RN team in place that can support the phone staff when, for example, a scheduling event has to be escalated to a clinical emergency event.” For example, if a patient calls in to make an appointment and mentions that he or she is having trouble breathing, that is beyond the scope of a customer service representative. “With the nurse triage in place, that kind of situation can be escalated and handled in real time,” he said.

## The value of working with an experienced partner

Once the institution had committed to creating a comprehensive PCC, the next step was to bring in an experienced partner to facilitate implementation. UC Davis Health chose to work with Tegria to bring its vision to life.

“We sought out specialists who had implemented this type of standardized operations at other medical centers and who came with a broader set of expertise in this realm than what we had internally,” said Condrin. “We wanted a company that could help us apply industry best practices and at the same time come up with solutions that were contextual to UC Davis Health’s culture and patient needs.”

Tegria works with organizations to identify, install and optimize the appropriate portfolio of technologies needed to achieve the organization’s goals. Tegria’s deep bench of experienced consultants helps HCOs integrate data, clinical workflows and organizational strategies to implement the organization’s vision. At UC Davis Health, Tegria helped identify and install an appropriate telephony platform and also helped to optimize the use of the existing EHR (Epic) to support the PCC’s functions.

“It’s important to not just automate existing processes,” said Condrin. “You need to review and, in many cases, fix underlying workflows before you can automate them. And when you go into an endeavor like this you uncover a whole lot of legacy workflows that you haven’t tackled in years. Now you have the opportunity to tackle them.

“Tegria is helping us with identifying obstacles in our workflow that don’t align with best practices. The critical thinking and the act of fixing broken processes before we automate them into the call center environment is a huge value added. We will be better off on a lot of fronts having gone through this transformational process.”

## Taking a long-term view on ROI

Condrin estimates that UC Davis Health is only about a quarter of the way through implementing its complete PCC vision. Nevertheless, UC Davis Health is already



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seeing a return on its investment (ROI), such as the time taken for scheduling an appointment dropping by more than 50% and the length of wait time for patients to see providers dropping by more than seven days.

Implementation of the PCC began just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the PCC resources proved essential for managing COVID-19 testing and vaccinations. "I don't know where we would be if we hadn't had the resources of the PCC in place to help manage our response to the pandemic," Condrin said.

While the value of the changes is apparent with each day, the team has big dreams for realizing more specific and measurable improvements to the patient journey related to overall PCC implementation, he said.

Danny Fleisher, Managing Director, Patient Access Centers, Tegria, said that as the patient access center becomes fully operational, UC Davis Health can expect to see even more increased timeliness of service, including decreased call abandonment rates and an increased percentage of first-contact resolution (i.e., the ability to resolve/address a patient's needs during the initial call to the center).

A properly implemented patient access center will meet specific technical performance benchmarks, but that's not all, said Fleisher. "We'd like to see patient access centers lead patients to improved self-service possibilities, where they can be empowered by technology as it relates to their healthcare," he said. "It should also be about expressing a heightened degree

of empathy and a heightened degree of awareness of how to help people to more confidently and effectively navigate their healthcare needs."

"I think it's tremendously important for an organization considering a patient contact center to remember to have a long-term view," said Condrin. "While we expect to continue to see ROI in the form of improved patient experience, we will also see improved market share and long-term competitiveness. But, fundamentally, as an organization, we are all about putting our patients at the center of what we do, and that is ultimately the motivation behind this expansive endeavor."

**To learn more, visit Tegria at [tegria.com](https://tegria.com).**

#### References

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# Tegria

#### About Tegria

Tegria helps healthcare organizations of all sizes accelerate technological, clinical, and operational advances that enable people to live their healthiest lives. Based in Seattle with teams throughout the United States and internationally, Tegria is comprised of more than 3,000 strategists, technologists, service providers, clinicians and scientists dedicated to delivering value for customers. Founded by Providence, Tegria is committed to creating health for a better world. [tegria.com](https://tegria.com)