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Improving Transportation Access for Patients Seeking Health Care



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Issue

Each year, millions of people nationwide have trouble getting to medical appointments and miss or delay their care due to inadequate transportation options. Lack of sufficient access to routine and preventative health care contributes to worsening health outcomes, reduces revenue for community clinics, and causes costly ambulance and emergency department visits.

This report evaluates the transportation challenges faced by patients seeking care at any of the four Saban Community Clinic (SCC) locations in Los Angeles County. SCC is a federally qualified community health center (FQHC) that provides health care to a predominantly Latinx population who are underinsured or without insurance. The researcher explored patient transportation needs by examining the spatial patterns of patient residential locations, surveying patient transportation needs, and evaluating an SCC effort to reduce transportation barriers by offering free Lyft rides to patients.

Approach

This exploratory field study focused on understanding how SCC can improve transportation access to health care for its patients through multiple methods, including spatial analysis of patients' residential locations by ZIP code, along with the share of uninsured patients per ZIP code. The researcher also conducted an online survey of 46 patients

recruited through the SCC Patient Satisfaction Survey or a CareMessage text message. Lastly, the study evaluated elements of the clinic's Lyft program from January to August 2021 (e.g., trip cost, duration, destination and distance) as part of a descriptive analysis of the clinic's outreach efforts.

Research Findings:

Spatial Distribution of Patients

While most patients are centrally located close to SCC clinic sites, some patients can travel upwards of 20 miles to come to SCC from all over Los Angeles (Figure 1). This creates difficulty in providing one solution for the transportation needs of patients. Further, a high share of uninsured patients who seek care at SCC live in South Los Angeles and a high proportion of patients overall live in Southeast Los Angeles. Long travel distances to the clinics worsen transportation problems.

Transportation Survey Results

Patients who use public transportation, ride-hail, or are driven by someone else are more likely to experience transportation challenges relative to those who drive themselves. Patients face delayed or infrequent bus and train service, unreliable ride-hail bookings, and intermittent carpooling assistance. These challenges were frequently cited as reasons for being late or missing an appointment. In addition to issues by mode, patients over 65 are more likely to experience transportation issues than other patients. Additionally, not having enough money to

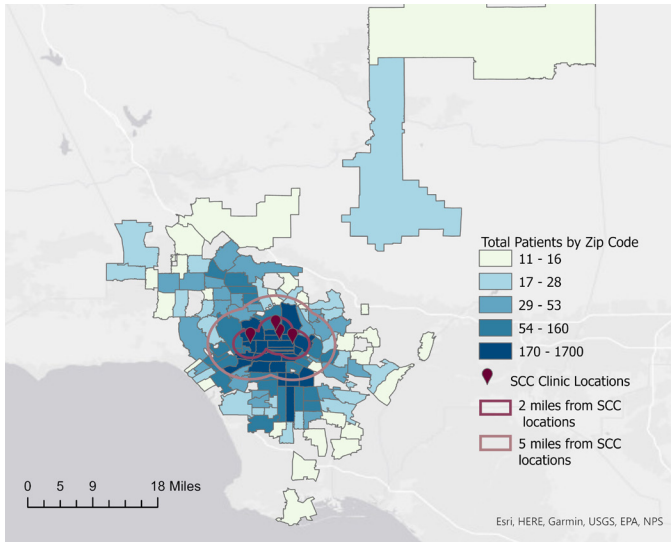


Figure 1. Quantile Distribution of Patients Served at SCC by ZIP Code

pay for public transportation, gas, ride-hail, or fixing the car also led to patients being late or missing appointments.

Lyft Program Analysis

Over the eight months of data analyzed, SCC’s Lyft program became increasingly popular and thus increasingly expensive. Price increases are attributed to providing more rides and increasing costs per ride. Most patients utilized the Lyft program for only one or two rides, but about 10% of patients who used Lyft took six or more rides. Patients primarily used the Lyft program to get to SCC appointments, though some also used the service to access care not provided by SCC, such as specialty care or social services.

Conclusions

This research provides insights into how health care and insurance providers and transportation agencies



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can best improve access to health care for patients similar to those served by SCC. Each recommendation stems from one of four keys of these findings.

Lack of Reliable Transportation Options

- Provide tools to enable patients to communicate when they are running late to appointments.
- Create a clear and flexible late policy to accommodate transportation challenges while ensuring clinic efficiency.
- Advocate for improved public transportation services.

Lack of Transportation Affordability

- Conduct annual or semi-annual transportation fairs to connect patients to transportation resources, including LA Metro’s LIFE reduced-fare program and LACare’s ride-hail services.
- Provide alternative transportation support, including taxi vouchers and bus passes.

Lack of Accessibility

- Explore opening an additional SCC site in South Los Angeles where there are many uninsured patients. This may also help patients who live in Southeast Los Angeles, who are similarly far away from the current clinic locations.
- Increase access to mobile clinics or telehealth.
- Invest in a transportation coordinator to help patients plan their trips.

Limited Clinic Resources to Support Patient Needs

- Collect more detailed information on patients who use the Lyft program and those who continuously miss or insurer-provided transportation services.
- Train clinic staff to identify and connect patients to transportation resources.

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