

# El Paso Co., Colorado: Simplifying Transportation Access for Behavioral Health Patients

## Introductions

**Amy Conrick** In 2017, the Federal Transit Administration funded efforts in seven communities to improve transportation for people going to healthcare appointments. Each community chose a different focus for its project and assembled a multi-sector team of colleagues who had expertise in their chosen focus area. As they worked to address their chosen issue, they followed a human-centered design process called design thinking.

In this video, we asked the El Paso County team to talk about their efforts to assist behavioral health patients in getting to their therapy appointments, their support group sessions, and other related destinations.

Let's listen as the team describes the problem they were addressing, the solutions they came up with, and the impact they hope those solutions will have on individuals in their community.

**Gail Nehls** Envida is a non-profit that supports people getting where they need to go to live independent lives

**Dave Somers** Currently about 36% of our rides are medically-related, and a number of those folks are those who need to get to behavioral health clinics

## Bringing the Issues into Focus

**Gail Nehls** As a non-profit, we recognized that there was unmet needs in our community. And it really was people with behavioral and substance abuse issues. And that is why we chose to partner with so many in our community to help look at how to solve access to healthcare.

**Laura Teachout** When people are dealing with mental illness, they require a number of different services. Sometimes they need to get to their doctors simply to get prescriptions. They need to see their therapist for support or they can get to a support group. They also need to get to a pharmacy to have their prescriptions filled. Without transportation, none of these needs can be met.

**Gail Nehls** One finding that stood out to me as we were performing our research was how desperate and also anxious people were about getting their behavioral health and medical health needs met. When we're feeling anxious, it can cloud our thinking. And that's what we saw with patients and riders.

**Laura Teachout** Sometimes people when they're dealing with mental illness have trouble with logistics. They have trouble understanding how to get from one place to another. Sometimes

they're just forgetful. Transportation needs to be simple to understand, available when it's needed.

**Dave Somers** One of our findings from our research that truly touched me was a situation at our local rescue mission. We have folks there who need to get to behavioral health appointments. And they'll call to make the appointment, but when the transportation comes by and they see the address or they see the location, they keep on driving, which leaves these people feeling very frustrated and feeling judged that they did not deserve a ride. One of the barriers behavioral health patients face is that our public transportation system here does not accommodate people very well. It does not expand throughout the geographic area to locations that they need. We have a lot of mountains and hills. And a perfect example is a clinic that's at the top of a very steep hill. And the patients, when they get off the bus at the bottom of the hill, have to walk up about a quarter of a mile up the steep hill, and it's just too difficult for them

### **The Solution**

**Laura Teachout** With the solution that Envida has created, folks are asked at the end of their appointments whether they're going to need transportation to their next appointment. Envida steps in and assists them in getting to that next appointment. They coordinate with them for rides and locations and times

**Dave Somers** Our solution is technology-based, and it has a couple of very key points to it. We recognized through our research that patients aren't always able to advocate for themselves. It was important that our first point of contact be with the providers. We have established a healthcare transportation portal where healthcare providers can request rides directly through us. In addition to the innovative way that we connect through the healthcare transportation portal, we have a number of ways in which we can confirm rides directly with the patient. We can do this by regular phone, we can do this online, or we can do this through a handheld device

**Gail Nehls** When we're feeling anxious, it can cloud our thinking. And that's what we saw with patients and riders.

**Laura Teachout** People who are in an acute phase of their illness may not be able to handle the logistics required to get to their next appointment and when Envida steps in and contacts them directly, the client feels confident that they can get to their next appointment. They know who to call if they have questions. The human connection matters. It matters to someone who is struggling with emotional issues. They feel as if they're respected and cared for. They can have confidence in their ability to get to their next appointment.

**Gail Nehls** Research has shown that with regular appointments, they will have better health outcomes. Our solution reduces the anxiety for the patient by knowing the healthcare provider has access to a portal that will support their transportation needs there before they leave the office. I believe one of the most innovative part of our solution was the relationship between the rider and the provider's office. It is a hand-holding and a support for someone who is fragile that

has behavioral and mental health issues. It's that relationship that allows them to reduce anxiety and get their needs met through transportation.

**Dave Somers** The value our solution brings to the healthcare community is that we're reimagining the importance of transportation in our community, so that we are partnering with providers to truly impact the quality of life and health of the residents of our community.

**Gail Nelhs** The value of our solution for the providers is they should see a reduction in their no-show rate or cancellations. It's really important to get people to their appointments. And this portal solution should help that.

### **Applying Design Thinking Techniques**

**Gail Nehls** I enjoyed the design-thinking process. It helped us relinquish our preconceived ideas and focus on the patient and the person. It was fun to think bigger and broader solutions.

**Dave Somers** The one strategy that I thought was most valuable to this experience was involving patients or patient advocates in the solution. They had the foresight to tell us exactly how these solutions made them feel. It has meant so much to me and to our team here at Envida to be involved in this project. I think it has helped all of us to really be more sensitive and caring about the riders that we serve, particularly those who face behavioral health crises.

**Gail Nehls** We deepened our relationships with our partners in the community. We are able to leverage these relationships into future grant opportunities to further our solutions getting people with behavioral and substance abuse challenges to their medical appointments

**Dave Somers** The partnerships we've developed with agencies like Aspen Pointe, Peak View Behavioral Health, the El Paso County Public Health Department, the local hospitals, all of these relationships will be so critical to what we're doing in terms of finding healthcare solutions through transportation in the future.

### **Conclusion**

**Amy Conrick** Traveling to behavior health appointments, getting to pharmacies to pick up the medications you need, and just getting help when you need that help, were all issues that the El Paso County team dealt with. Through its research, the team came to understand that often individuals are unaware of the transportation services available to them or sometimes they are just unable to advocate for themselves to attain the services that they need. The team's solution focuses on ensuring that healthcare providers and the transportation providers can work together to ensure that behavioral health patients can get the services they need.

You can learn more about the work of this team and all the other teams at the Center's website at [nc4mm.org/challenge-2017](http://nc4mm.org/challenge-2017). And don't forget to use the number four (4) in the website address. Thank you.