

Springfield, Massachusetts: Assisting Patients in Navigating Their Transportation Choices

Introduction

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, the Springfield, Massachusetts team shares what it learned about individuals going to healthcare appointments and the cultural, logistical, and financial barriers that sometimes impede their ability to do so.

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.

Bringing the Issues into Focus

Price Armstrong The Pioneer Valley Transit Authority provides a whole range of transportation for residents in the greater Springfield area. Medical transportation is of course one of the most important trip types that we provide both in our demand response vans and also our regular fixed route bus service. The focus of our project really chose us in a lot of ways. Medicaid costs the state about 40% of its budget every year so obviously there was a strong motivation to look at how can we make it more cost effective and also effective for patient outcomes. And then we found that up to 25% of all regular medical appointments are missed, we saw a huge opportunity to look at transportation as a key barrier that people encounter when trying to access their regular healthcare.

Moumita Dasgupta Missing appointments because of transportation issues was one of the biggest challenges the hospital was facing and that is what they wanted to solve. And also doing some local surveying, we found that transportation to access healthcare is a big barrier and one of the main reasons for missing appointments for folks at Bay State.

Jennifer Lee Persons with disabilities should have access to preventative medical appointments so they can manage their chronic illness. And Starborough has decided to get a part of this project because we believe that missed medical appointments was impacting the overall health of our consumers and those that we serve within the Springfield area.

The Research Phase

Moumita Dasgupta As we did our research, one finding that really stood out was the stress the patients were facing to get to their appointments regarding their transportation arrangements. Another finding that stood out from the research was the very complicated landscape of transportation options in the Pioneer Valley. It's not that there aren't options but there are sometimes too many options with different eligibility criteria.

Jennifer Lee When we conducted our focus group and our research, we found that it was often difficult for those to understand not only the qualifications but the prices associated with existing transportation options.

Price Armstrong Something that really stood out to me that was very surprising is, so Springfield is an incredibly diverse city and in addition to a diversity of languages that are spoken, I knew that there would be linguistic barriers to accessing transportation but something that came up that really surprised me was cultural barriers. For example, I was talking with case workers who work with a lot of refugee and immigrant populations and something that I would of never thought about was that older women in certain populations don't feel comfortable getting into a van where the driver is a male. So when I'm thinking about what's a transportation solution that works for this population, if I hadn't gone through this process that NCMM put together, I would of never thought about the fact that it's not just being able to speak the language but being able to understand the perspective of the full array of people that we're trying to serve and get to their healthcare.

The Solution

Moumita Dasgupta The solution that our team came up with is introducing a transportation specialist in to help the patients navigate this complex transportation landscape. The transportation specialist would work at the hospital site and they would have information about the patient's transportation needs, as well as their healthcare needs. They are going to overlap the two to come up with an optimum solution for the patient's transportation options.

Price Armstrong I hope that our solution will bring less stress to our patients who are trying to navigate the complicated and confusing transportation landscape.

Jennifer Lee I think for individuals with disabilities, along with their caregivers, they have enough to worry about. They should be worrying about their care. They should be worried about recovering. They should be worried about navigating all the complexities of their illness. Having to couple that with having to understand the complexities of the transportation arena can be very difficult. So I think having someone that can serve as a resource to these individuals and their families is one of the best parts of our solution.

Moumita Dasgupta The value that our solution will provide for our healthcare partners would be reducing the number of missed appointments which would help them address the issue of lost revenue that they have because of the missed appointments.

Price Armstrong For our healthcare partners I hope that our solution also clarifies and simplifies the transportation landscape in Springfield. So the most innovative aspect of our solution really in my opinion is how it connects to the broader innovation going on in Massachusetts through the accountable care organizations. Our solution is not just about getting patients to the medical facility. We are really interested in accessing healthy food, reducing social isolation, of course picking up prescriptions and it's this real whole health social determinants of health aspect that I think is the most innovative and compelling aspect of the solution.

Applying Design Thinking Techniques

Price Armstrong One thing about this project that I really appreciated was the guidance and support that the team at the National Center for Mobility Management provided in taking us through the design thinking process. I was a neophyte to the whole thing and I really had to trust the process and I'm glad that I did because in the end I think we came up with a solution that I feel confident we're going to be able to take through to implementation.

The design thinking strategy that helped our team the most was hands down assumption testing. We realized as we went through this iterative process of thinking about what are our assumptions that there were a lot of things that we took for granted that just weren't true. An example of that is a carpooling solution that we came up with where people going to and from similar locations for medical appointments would hitch rides with one another. As we started testing the assumption that people would be okay carpooling, we realized that medical appointments tend to be fairly private and there might be some significant problems.

Building a Lasting Partnership

Jennifer Lee I think one thing that was important to me about the project was how well human service providers, transportation providers, and researchers worked together for a barrier within the community. I think it showed how the intersections of transportation and healthcare are so important. And if our communities really want to focus on providing better health of individuals, they have to focus on transportation as a component of that.

Price Armstrong So Pioneer Valley Transit Authority had partnered with a lot of community based organizations, medical providers, the research community, and we think that this has opened up a lot of new pathways, not only to the community, patients, the medical providers but will provide also a really strong foundation for future funding opportunities and other ways to implement this project.

Conclusion

Amy Conrick The Springfield team talked about the many transportation obstacles that can get in the way of patients getting to their healthcare appointments. In its research the team learned what that journey was like for different populations, particularly for people with a disability or people from different cultural backgrounds. In designing the solution, the team benefited from vigorously testing the assumptions that were embedded in their ideas, so they could make sure that they could be as effective as possible. The team also spoke about the value of forming partnerships with colleagues from many different sectors and hoped that those relationships would continue through into the future.

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. And don't forget to use the number four (4) in the website address.