

St. Luke's Health System

Saves Schedulers 5-7 Hours per Day Through Self-Scheduling of COVID-19 Vaccinations

Achieves 55% patient portal enrollment across primary care patients.

When St. Luke's Health System (Duluth, MN) first announced they would be offering COVID-19 vaccines, calls from the community tied up their 672 phone lines within 30 minutes and prevented them from making any in- or outbound calls. While they appreciated the community's passion, they recognized that they would need a more efficient method for scheduling vaccinations.

Throughout the pandemic, St. Luke's looked to MEDITECH's Patient and Consumer Health Portal for creative solutions to difficult challenges, from virtual visits to the availability of COVID-19 results. Three months prior to the crisis, they had implemented MEDITECH's Direct Booking feature to support patient self-scheduling at select practice clinics. Upon evaluation, they determined that this functionality aligned perfectly with vaccine scheduling.

Benefits of self-scheduling

Appointment scheduling was placing an unnecessary burden on St. Luke's scheduling staff. Schedulers were spending two to three minutes per patient, manually looking up their records and confirming information.

With self-scheduling through the patient portal, the system automatically confirms all of the patient's details, as well as allows them to update their own demographics and insurance, and complete any necessary forms. As St. Luke's first vaccination phase was for patients 65 and older, the portal could also confirm eligibility based on age. St. Luke's is now adding MEDITECH's new eligibility

questionnaires for subsequent phases based on occupation, chronic conditions, and other risk factors.

Self-scheduling is significantly easier for patients as well. There is no waiting on hold and patients can also see availability and select the date and time that works best for them. Patients embraced self-scheduling right out of the gate. Within a few hours of releasing 150 appointments per day to self-scheduling, the whole week was booked. Once they added a second week, appointments were gone in just eight minutes. Based on current vaccination numbers, St. Luke's calculates that self-scheduling is saving their scheduling staff approximately five to seven hours per day.

Not every patient has a portal

While the portal is the most efficient method for scheduling, Director of Information Technology Clark Averill also knew they needed additional options for those patients who did not have a patient portal.

"We knew that to be truly equitable in our vaccine distribution, we would need to hold some vaccinations for patients who did not use our patient portal, such as some of our senior populations, those without internet access, or just those lacking familiarity or comfortability with technology," explains Averill. "We currently designate 50 percent of our vaccine appointments for self-scheduling and the other 50 percent we provide through direct patient outreach."



St. Luke's Health System at a glance...

St. Luke's Health System (Duluth, MN) is a 267-bed, not-for-profit facility that provides healthcare services to the residents of northeastern Minnesota, northwestern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

About St. Luke's:

- Includes two hospitals and over 40 primary and specialty care clinics.
- Recipient of the AHA 2020 Mission: Lifeline Gold Receiving Quality Achievement Award and AHA/American Stroke Association's Get With The Guidelines-Stroke Silver Quality Achievement Award.

About Duluth:

- Population: 86,164
- Percentage of population living in poverty: 21%



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Each time St. Luke's receives new doses of the vaccine, they work down a list of patients who are eligible for the vaccine but are not enrolled in the portal, and reach out to schedule an appointment. They also set aside vaccines for patients who have scheduled clinic appointments and meet the criteria, in particular for their busy internal medicine practice, nephrology, and cancer center. Doing so prioritizes vaccinations for their "at risk" groups.

Ensuring availability without the waste

Due to the unpredictability of when they will receive vaccines, St. Luke's only schedules one week out to ensure they have enough. Second doses are typically scheduled upon arrival, with the exception of those patients they call directly, who have both doses scheduled at once.

To prevent waste due to no-shows or cancellations, St. Luke's also maintains a list of patients who can arrive quickly — often within 15 minutes — and contacts these patients if vaccines are still available. They also notify clinics if additional doses are available so they can offer them to their patients. As a result, St. Luke's has wasted zero vaccines to date.

Portal enrollment doubles

While St. Luke's has always had strong portal enrollment numbers, their ability to leverage the portal throughout the pandemic led to a significant spike in portal enrollment, from 27,000 in March 2020 to over 55,000 a year later.

Enrollment numbers first started to spike early in the pandemic when they began automatically releasing COVID-19 test results to the portal to support recent Info Blocking regulations. Patients were told that the quickest way to get their results was to enroll in the portal, which led to a rise of 300-400 sign-ups per week. The availability of MEDITECH's Virtual Visits solution also led to an uptick in enrollment. But self-scheduling of vaccines became the primary driver, reaching as many as 2,000 enrollments in one week in December 2020.

Today, over 55 percent of patients assigned a St. Luke's primary care physician are enrolled in the patient portal.

Looking ahead

Averill feels that the COVID-19 pandemic has opened patients' eyes to the value of the patient portal. "Our clinic staff are strong advocates of the patient portal and try to encourage their patients to sign up every chance they get," he states. "We make it easy for patients to enroll with just their email, date of birth, and last four digits of their social security number. We are also capturing more email addresses at check-in so we can reach out and offer the portal to more of our patients."

Now that vaccinations have provided them with a strong proof of concept, Averill sees new opportunities for self-scheduling. While self-scheduling is currently also being used for Medicare annual wellness visits, it is being evaluated for other appointment types as well.

"By empowering patients to directly book their own COVID-19 vaccinations in our **MEDITECH patient portal**, we've saved our scheduling staff countless hours, freed up our phone lines, and provided our patients with the convenience of scheduling a time that works best for them. And since patient portal users are already in our system, we have all the context we need on the patient to verify their information and ensure their eligibility. It's a win-win for everyone."

Clark Averill

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