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## ST. LUKE'S HEALTH SYSTEM

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

When St. Luke's Health System (Duluth, MN) first announced it would be offering COVID-19 vaccines, calls from the community tied up its 672 phone lines within 30 minutes and prevented staff from making any in- or outbound calls. While the hospital appreciated the community's passion, it recognized it 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, the hospital had implemented MEDITECH's Direct Booking feature to support patient self-scheduling at select practice clinics. Upon evaluation, IT leaders 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, allows them to update their own demographics and insurance, and enables them to 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 its scheduling staff approximately five to seven hours per day.

## 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.



"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."

**Clark Averill**  
Director, Information Technology  
St. Luke's Health System

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**MEDITECH Podcast:**  
**How St Luke's doubled patient portal enrollment during the pandemic**

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## Not every patient has a portal

While the portal is the most efficient method for scheduling, Director of Information Technology Clark Averill also knew St. Luke's 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," explained Averill. "We currently designate 50% of our vaccine appointments for self-scheduling and the other 50% we provide through direct patient outreach."

Each time St. Luke's receives new doses of the vaccine, staff 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 the hospital's "at risk" groups.

## Ensuring availability without the waste

Due to the unpredictability of when the hospital will receive vaccines, St. Luke's schedules only one week out to ensure it has enough. Second doses are typically scheduled upon arrival, with the exception of those patients whom staff call directly. In these cases, both doses are 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. Staff 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, its ability to leverage the portal throughout the pandemic led to a significant spike in 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 the hospital 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, sparking as many as 2,000 enrollments in one week in December 2020.

Today, over 55% 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 stated. "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 St. Luke's 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.

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