

When Flow Breaks Down: The Cost of Inefficient Care Environments



Healthcare delivery today is being shaped by faster-paced care models and growing outpatient demand.

Yet many environments remain configured for longer stays and more linear workflows, creating friction in how patients move through care. When spaces fail to support timely movement from arrival through treatment and transition, delays follow, and capacity is constrained, limiting how effectively organizations can deliver care and capture revenue. By rethinking how care environments flexibly support flow, healthcare systems can improve throughput and strengthen financial performance while making better use of existing space.



Designing Environments for High-Throughput Performance

As demand grows and care delivery continues to evolve, organizations are under increasing pressure to move patients through care settings more efficiently. Environments that support timely intake, smoother transitions, and more continuous use play a critical role in helping health systems meet demand while protecting financial performance.



Outpatient Demand is Accelerating

Growth in outpatient volumes reflects a sustained shift toward faster-paced care delivery, where spaces must support more frequent use and quicker transitions between patients.



is the growth expected in outpatient volumes over the next 10 years

American Hospital Association, 6 Takeaways from New Forecast of Health Care's Future, 2022.

Patient Flow Breakdowns Limit Capacity

When patients cannot move efficiently through the system, delays compound, and capacity is limited, slowing access to care and reducing overall throughput.



of patients need to board in the ED for more than 4 hours while waiting for an inpatient bed to become available

Health Affairs, Hospital Boarding Of Patients In the Emergency Department Increasingly Common, June 2025

What's At Stake

For patients

- **Access is delayed**

Inefficient movement through care settings can extend wait times and slow access to treatment, limiting how many patients can be seen and reducing overall system capacity.

- **Care breaks down before it begins**

When delays and bottlenecks increase, patients are more likely to leave before receiving care, resulting in missed opportunities for both treatment and revenue.

For caregivers

- **Time is pulled away from care**

Bottlenecks and inefficient layouts shift focus toward coordinating transitions and managing delays, reducing time available for higher-value tasks.

- **Work becomes more reactive**

Unpredictable flow and frequent disruptions make it harder to deliver consistent care, limiting how effectively teams can support patient volume and operational performance.

For organizations

- **Capacity is underutilized**

When patient movement slows, rooms and resources remain idle between uses, reducing the number of patients that can be treated.

- **Revenue opportunities are lost**

Delays, incomplete visits, and missed throughput targets directly impact the ability to capture and sustain expected financial performance.

Delays Are Disrupting Timely Access To Care



or less of patients are seen within 15 minutes of ED arrival¹, with 2.5% of patients leaving without being treated²

Inefficient Layouts Slow Pace of Care



3.6 to 5 miles

is the distance nurses can walk during a single shift, often due to inefficient layouts and decentralized supplies³

Outpatient Care Now Drives Majority of Revenue



of hospital revenue came from outpatient services in 2024, up from 52% in 2020⁴

1. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, *Some Patients Can't Wait: Improving Timeliness of Emergency Department Care*, March 2020.

2. Nursa, *US states with the shortest and longest ER wait times*, September 2025.

3. Human Resources For Health, *Nurses' steps, distance traveled, and perceived physical demands in a three-shift schedule*, October 2022.

4. American Hospital Association, *Costs of Caring: Challenges Facing America's Hospitals as They Care for Patients in 2026*, March 2026.



Design Thinking:

Care delivery often involves multiple steps that take place across different locations, creating added coordination and delays along the way. Environments that support these activities within a single setting help streamline workflows and accelerate the pace at which patients move through care.

Spaces that streamline movement and reduce handoffs

- **Multi-use exam and consult rooms**

Rooms designed to support clinical exams, consultations, and virtual visits reduce the need for patient movement and room changes, helping care progress more efficiently within a single setting.

- **Spaces that support consultation and coordination**

Integrating provider work areas within consultation spaces allows documentation, patient discussions, and care coordination to occur in one place, reducing delays and keeping exam rooms available for clinical use.



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Design Thinking:

Care environments are often designed for a single type of use, leaving rooms underutilized when patient needs shift. Spaces that can adapt to different levels of care and changing demand help maintain consistent use, reducing downtime and improving how effectively space contributes to overall performance.

Environments that adapt to changing care needs

- **Acuity-adaptable patient rooms**

Rooms designed to support varying levels of care allow patients to remain in place as needs change, reducing transfers and helping maintain more consistent room utilization.

- **Reconfigurable treatment areas**

Built for adaptability, modular treatment areas allow layouts and components to be adjusted as patient needs and volumes shift, helping keep spaces in active use and supporting a wider range of care within the same footprint.



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Design Thinking:

As patient volumes increase, activity often builds in a few key areas, creating congestion that slows movement through care. Breaking up where people wait, pause, and transition helps ease these pressure points and keeps patients moving more consistently from one step to the next, improving both the pace of care and how it is experienced.

Spaces that support continuous movement through care

- **Decentralized waiting areas**

Smaller, distributed waiting zones positioned closer to care points provide a clear, short-term place for patients to pause before being called, helping stage movement into care while reducing congestion in larger, centralized waiting areas.

- **Shared transition and touchdown areas**

Located along circulation paths and near care points, these spaces support brief, in-between moments, such as pausing between stages of care or handling quick calls, helping keep activity out of circulation paths, reducing congestion, and supporting more continuous movement through the environment.



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