

Drive-thru Testing Sites: COVID-19 Response or the Next Generation of Outpatient Care?

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a sea change in consumer's perception of healthcare accessibility and delivery. And driven by the imperative to keep patients and staff safe and healthy during the coronavirus pandemic, many healthcare organizations have realized they can provide medical care to their community through alternate methods, including drive-thru testing centers and expanded telehealth services.

The following are strategies, key challenges, and potential solutions for understanding the planning implications in developing and constructing drive-thru testing facilities.

Understand Anticipated Volume

Perhaps the most critical data point in planning a permanent drive-thru testing facility is understanding the volume of tests to be conducted daily, as this will impact every decision, from staffing levels, storage of PPE and testing materials to the layout of vehicular and pedestrian traffic zones.

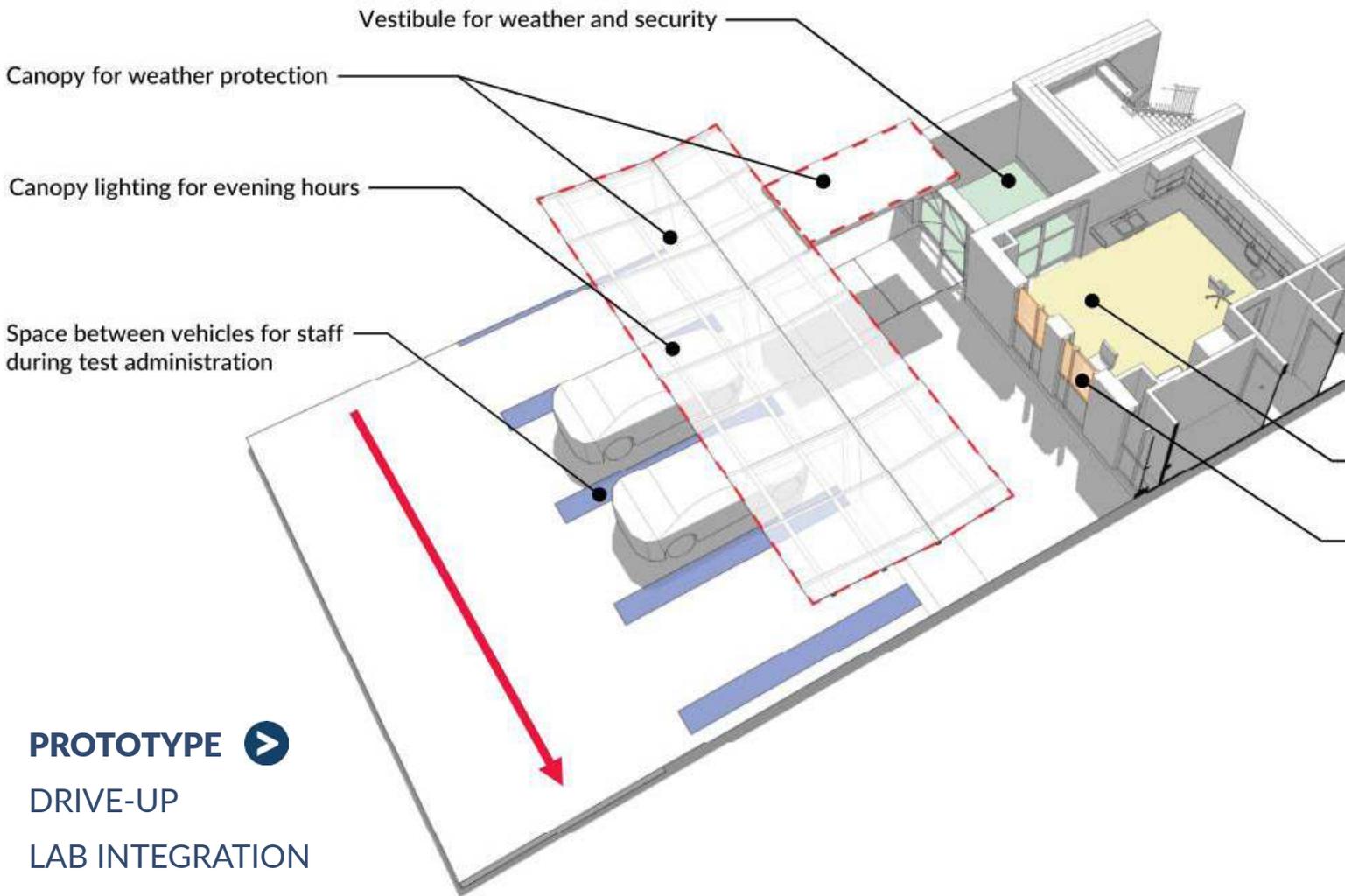
In determining volumes, remember that only blood and saliva samples can be collected in a drive-thru setting. However, vaccines and flu shots can also be delivered safely and efficiently using this approach, so that may impact patient volume as well.

Because of this, healthcare systems may need to consider drive-thru options to remain competitive with national drugstore chains that are offering this service through their prescription drive-thru facilities.

Investigate Traffic Flow

During the height of the COVID 19 testing, many hospitals set up temporary tent structures in unused areas of their own parking lots, or in nearby retail parking lots that easily accommodated surges in vehicular volume.

A permanent drive-thru testing area requires planners understand its impact on vehicular throughput so that the new drive-thru testing area does not negatively impact existing pedestrian foot traffic and campus wide circulation.



If a non-medical site is selected, such as a former bank or retail facility with an existing drive-thru canopy, determine how much additional staging and parking areas may be required to ensure that cars waiting in a testing line does not back up onto local access roads.

Be aware that drive-thru facilities need to potentially conform to applicable codes for retail restaurant drive-thru facilities. This is something that most healthcare architects have not had to address before.

Research Demographics.

Before selecting a site, conduct demographic research to locate drive-thru sites so that they are convenient to your target population. A large single site on your existing hospital campus or at an existing outpatient

facility can optimize efficient use of staff and resources but may make access difficult for patients who may not live nearby.

Multiple, smaller sites improve access, and reduce potential patient surges, but require additional staff, equipment, and supplies.

If you are considering using drive-thru testing facilities to support population health screening for cholesterol and blood sugar levels, consider sites in areas that align with the appropriate age and demographic profiles.

Realigning Adjacencies.

Traditionally, due to its specialized protocols, equipment-intensive layout, and need to support



Staff workspace adjacent to drive up area

Windows to provide visibility to drive up area



LEFT | A permanent drive-thru testing area requires planners understand its impact on vehicular throughput so that the new drive-thru testing area does not negatively impact existing pedestrian foot traffic and campus-wide circulation. ABOVE | Additional spaces between vehicles are allotted for staff / testing administration.

multiple departments, most hospital laboratory testing spaces are centrally located deep within the campus infrastructure, often on the basement or lower floors.

The seemingly universal acceptance of telehealth from both consumers and providers will impact the design of future medical office buildings and outpatient facilities, as many predict that less square footage will be required for exam rooms, registration areas and waiting rooms if telehealth programs are expanded.

Now may be time to revisit departmental adjacencies that support the drive-thru testing model. Consider celebrating its contribution to the healthcare process and locate a small outpatient laboratory in the reclaimed space achieved by reducing exam room and waiting areas that are normally found closer to the entrance.

Consider Impact of Climate.

The drive-thru testing experience needs to be positive for both the patient and the healthcare provider. While the patient has the benefit of remaining in their car, the healthcare provider is exposed to the elements.

When designing a drive-thru testing facility, remember to plan for protection from wind, noise, heat and/or cold. Canopies are an option for more temperate regions and can be equipped with heating panels in colder climates. Also consider empty warehouses, garages, or former automotive repair facilities.

Fresh air flow is important in enclosed facilities, not just for infection transmission, but also because extended exposure to automobile exhaust is a health hazard for workers.

Details Make the Difference.

In addition to addressing vehicular traffic flow and surge parking capacity, there are other details that must be addressed. Available separate storage for both clean and dirty set-ups is required, as well as storage areas for PPE. Wi-Fi and electricity may be required to support label printing and communication regarding registration and patient data.

Communicate registration and check in and sampling process to patients prior to their visit. Make sure there is appropriate wayfinding signage and informational signs with contact numbers in case they have questions. This will help elevate the patient experience. Plan for overflow parking to accommodate surges in volume.

Think Long Term.

Think beyond immediate needs to avoid short-sighted solutions. COVID testing labs became a top priority for nearly every hospital system at the beginning of the pandemic. However, making decisions based on speed may lead to short-sighted solutions. For example, an urban hospital needed to quickly bring a COVID-19 testing lab online and identified shell space earmarked for an expansion of their existing lab.

Regulatory approvals delayed the construction start and had they placed the COVID lab in the shell space, it would have severely limited future lab expansion after the pressing need for COVID testing had passed.

When thinking about siting a drive-thru testing area on your healthcare campus, consider how it will impact other important service lines.

Changes in Delivery Methods Moving Forward.

Just as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 radically altered airline travel, the COVID-19 pandemic will be remembered as a precipitating event that changed how healthcare is delivered. Drive-thru testing is an efficient, streamlined process that can accommodate large numbers of people without overwhelming facility capacity and can be completed at a fraction of the cost of a fully built out space with waiting areas.

With proper planning, this approach presents multiple benefits to healthcare providers as it offers an additional level of flexibility for healthcare campuses, is more agile and allows hospitals to respond to future disaster situations as they emerge.



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