

Driving Urgent Care Traffic with Municipal Directional Signage

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An urgent care center's most valuable marketing asset is its location on a high-traffic street with clear and visible signage. Signage visibility is key to raising awareness that a center exists and is among the most common reasons why consumers select an urgent care center. Even when a center buys media advertising or relies on word of mouth from past patients, prospective patients still must know where to find the center and be able to get to it easily. So it can be said that good signage boosts all other marketing investments. When consumers drive past an urgent care center's sign as part of their regular commute, that sign begins to act as a billboard—providing daily reinforcement that the urgent care center is available to meet their needs.

So what happens when an urgent care center does not have good signage? Such as centers located on less-travelled streets, in buildings or developments with signage restrictions, or those hidden away in business parks, medical office buildings, or on hospital campuses? The answer may be to enlist the municipal government in erecting informational street signage directing patients to the center, such as the examples that follow.

Examples 1 and 2: Municipal sign directing patients to nearby urgent care centers.



Informational signs installed by a county, city, township, or other local government direct motorists to key civic, cultural, tourist and recreational attractions. The standard color for municipal signs is a blue background with white or reflectorized lettering and border. Although municipal signs are most often used to direct

drivers to schools, libraries, parks, stadiums, and other points of interest—they can also be used to progressively direct prospective patients to an urgent care center.

Examples 3 and 4: Starting at the big box retail draw at the highway exit, this municipality provides several signs that progressively direct prospective patients to an urgent care center.



Unlike hospitals with their universally recognized blue “H,” currently there is no symbol representing urgent care that is recognized by the United States Department of Transportation. Without recognition, states are not required to post urgent care directional signage on federal highways. This also means there is no standardized urgent care sign design that is easily adopted by municipalities. While some state legislatures have defined standards for “special services” signs (namely food, gas and lodging), by definition an urgent care center does not qualify as a “tourist attraction.” The lack of state-defined standards can make it difficult for an urgent care center to secure a sign on a state road. But for city streets, municipalities may create their own rules or by action of city counsel, allow special information/directional signage within the city limits.

In order to get a municipal directional sign for your center—and the process is not guaranteed because it’s subject to the discretion of local lawmakers—the starting place is typically the municipal streets or traffic engineer’s office. It may be able to handle the request directly or refer you to the mayor, city manager or your councilperson or alderman. In order to successfully lobby for municipal signage, urgent care operators need to show the value their facilities bring to the city:

- Reducing total health care costs by offering a lower cost alternative to hospital emergency rooms—allowing local businesses to continue offering health care benefits and be more profitable.
- Paying rent, payroll taxes, licensing fees, and other revenue sources to a municipality while supporting local suppliers who do likewise.
- Providing a referral source to local physicians and ancillary service providers—assuring access and support to a larger local healthcare infrastructure.
- Improving the health and safety of the local workforce—labor is the economic driver of local business and protecting employee health protects the tax base.
- Keeping medical care expenditures in the community—without a local urgent care clinic, residents and businesses may otherwise have to travel to hospitals in neighboring communities for care.
- When a center provides occupational medicine services to municipal, police/fire or school employees, directional signage can improve the ease with which city employees find the urgent care center.

The design and location of the municipal sign will depend on the standards and regulations of the issuing municipality. In many cases, to prevent consumers from confusing urgent care capabilities with those of full-service emergency rooms services, it may be necessary to list the ages served and either the operating hours or to include the verbiage “limited hours” on directional signage. In addition, for the sake of fairness, when one urgent care center gets a new sign, it can expect its competitors to receive the same (even if they never asked for it)—so it may be worth partnering with competing centers or hospitals that have political sway.

Example 5: To prevent confusion with 24-hour hospital emergency rooms that treat patients of all ages, some municipalities may require an urgent care center to post its hours, ages accepted, or other limitations.



In summary, marketing is a very important aspect in any business as it builds customer relationships and creates product awareness. For urgent care centers, one of the most important marketing elements is a visible sign prominently displayed to passing traffic. Good signage is an advertising investment that provides a constant reminder that the center is open for business. A blue informational municipal sign offers a solution to the urgent care center challenged by signage or visibility constraints. When it comes to raising awareness of an urgent care center consider the adage, “nothing ventured, nothing gained.” In order to attain a municipally installed sign, the urgent care operator must identify key decision-makers and properly communicate the value his or her facility brings to the community. A municipal sign may not be available in every community, but the value it can serve in driving traffic to a center certainly justifies the effort in trying.