

## **The Exceptional Patient Experience Pledge**

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Urgent care is a healthcare delivery model built around consumer needs, with high-visibility locations near patients' homes and work, extended evening and weekend hours, walk-in accessibility, a range of services provided in one location, and affordable prices. These attributes make urgent care more "retail" in its orientation than conventional health care venues like hospitals and doctors offices—so when consumers evaluate their urgent care experience they will most likely compare it to successful service businesses like Starbucks, Marriott, Southwest Airlines, and Nordstrom.

As out-of-pocket expenditures for health care continue to rise, consumers will use the same criteria for picking health care providers as they do any other place they spend money. Thus, urgent care operators can learn a lot by studying the methods and philosophies of retail and service businesses who have proven that good service ultimately comes down to caring people. Everyone in the urgent care center—front-line registration staff, medical assistants, physicians and practitioners, and even behind-the-scenes billing and collections functions—should be focused on delivering a personable, compassionate, and timely experience.

There is a direct relationship between high patient satisfaction scores and how providers and staff interact and engage patients in the center. Process efficiency, clinical focus and attention to documentation may be perceived by providers as "safe and quality care" but interpreted by patients as "sterile, hurried, impersonal, and uncaring." Everyone working in the urgent care center should smile, make eye contact, wear a nametag, and introduce him/herself to the patient by name and explain his/her role in the patient's care. Patients who feel genuinely cared for are more likely to be relaxed during their visits, comply with physician orders, return for future needs, and recommend the center to friends and family members.

### **Hire for a "Patient First" Attitude, Train for Technical Skill**

It's nearly impossible to build a great urgent care operation without great people. A common mantra among the best performing customer service companies is "hire for attitude, train for skill." In the eyes of these companies, hiring isn't so much about finding people with the right experience but rather, attracting people who will be fully bought-in to the customer service vision, enthusiastic about their roles, and will dedicate their hearts, minds and talents to the company's success. People who are willing and eager can then be taught the necessary technical skill.

Southwest Airlines, known for its lighthearted and customer-obsessed culture, sorts through over 150,000 applications annually to hire approximately 4,500 people with the "perfect blend of energy, humor, team spirit, and self-confidence." An urgent care center that hires two out of every three people interviewed is not selective enough. Because urgent care is a "people" business—successful applicants should have a "passion" for helping others, work with a sense of urgency, maintain effectiveness under stress, and be detail oriented.

### **High Employee Engagement Drives Business Success**

Hiring the "right" people is only the starting line—how well any patient experience initiative advances the business depends on those employees being fully engaged in making it successful. Some common elements of organizations with highly engaged employees include:

- Management actively seeks to understand and act on employee needs, preferences and expectations.
- Employees perceive their job is important and have a positive attitude towards the company.
- Employees are clear on job expectations and have the resources to perform their jobs well.
- Career advancement and improvement opportunities are available and communicated.

- Supervisors provide frequent feedback and dialogue with employees.
- Employees have good working relationships with their supervisors and co-workers.
- Employees perceive the organization is ethical and have bought into its mission, vision and values.
- Achievements are recognized and rewards and incentives are in place for sustained effort.

Research shows that organizations with high employee engagement have higher quality products, better customer service and lower employee turnover and absenteeism. When comparing urgent care centers, over 40 percent of variance in patient satisfaction ratings can be attributed to employee engagement while engagement explains 30 percent of variance in profitability. Moreover, centers with highly engaged employees show long-term visit increases while centers where disengaged employees actively undermine the business show long-term visit declines.

### **“Onboarding” and the Patient Experience Pledge**

It is possible for employees to be engaged *with the company and each other*—enjoying their roles and team interactions—but not necessarily engaged *in the patient experience*. In extreme cases, highly cohesive teams create solidarity *against* patients, bonding through an “us versus them” mentality. Creating great patient experiences requires that employees know what behaviors and attitudes are expected of them. Such is accomplished during “onboarding”—the process of helping new hires become productive members of the center team. Successful onboarding is more than orientation and training—it entails making new employees feel welcome, establishing their responsibilities, and familiarizing them with company culture.

One tool that can support the onboarding process is the “Exceptional Patient Experience Pledge” (*see example on Page 3*). This form outlines exactly what behaviors and attitudes are expected of all team members, secures the new colleague’s commitment to deliver positive patient experiences within their scope of responsibility, and demonstrates management’s support of colleagues in fulfilling their commitments.

The “Exceptional Patient Experience Pledge” should be more than just one additional piece of paper signed on the first day of work. Successful implementation makes the “pledge” a living document—a constant reminder that colleagues have committed to pleasing patients—that can be built upon through the center’s training and development programs. The pledge should be introduced during the interview process and become the centerpiece of all efforts to foster colleague engagement including team-building activities. As a constant reminder to colleagues that the center exists to serve patients, the pledge may be enlarged and displayed in employee-facing areas like the front office and medical stations or a card-sized version attached to employee’s lanyards with their keys and ID cards. The “pledge” should be made personal to employees and guide their everyday thoughts and actions.

Before a new hire signs the pledge, the new hire’s supervisor should talk through each point on the document, give examples of what each point means, and ask the employee to explain how he/she will think and act when carrying out his/her job responsibilities. The form is signed in triplicate—with copies going to the employee, the employee’s HR file and immediate supervisor.

***What is your center doing to promote outstanding patient experiences? UCAOA wants to hear from you!  
Please send your stories to Alan Ayers at [aayers@ucaoa.org](mailto:aayers@ucaoa.org).***

## The Urgent Care Exceptional Patient Experience Pledge

To deliver a memorable urgent care experience, not only must there be safe, timely and quality clinical treatment, but everyone working in the center must also desire to make a difference whenever they have an opportunity. This means listening to patients and colleagues with intent, anticipating needs before being asked, taking personal ownership in resolving problems, and extending help and compassion.

As an ambassador of <Insert Name> urgent care center, I will assist patients and/or family members in any manner deemed appropriate to create an experience such that patients will want to return for future needs and tell others to do likewise.

### ***I pledge to promote an exceptional patient experience by always:***

- Acknowledging the dignity of every individual and delivering care free from bias or personal judgment:
  - Treating each patient, family member, colleague, and/or physician with courtesy and respect;
  - Smiling, making eye contact, and acknowledging every individual I come in contact with.
- Anticipating the needs of patients and colleagues and asking “how may I be of help” or proactively finding someone who can help:
  - Responding to patients and colleagues as soon as they express a need;
  - Actively listening with the intention of finding a solution to patient/colleague concerns.
- Providing clear communication that patients and/or family members can understand, including:
  - Explaining what is happening as a patient progresses through clinical and administrative processes;
  - Explaining physician orders, information on medication, and follow-up instructions;
  - Helping patients communicate their pain levels and responding appropriately to control pain.
- Providing a welcoming and healing environment that is organized, calm, and user-friendly:
  - Evaluating the facility through the patient’s eyes—picking up trash, clearing out clutter and performing routine maintenance and upkeep;
  - Making sure amenities—such as coffee, water, snacks, television, and/or magazines are available to help ease wait times, improve comfort levels, and keep the patient engaged.
- Maintaining an appropriate personal appearance reflective of dedicated urgent care professionals:
  - Wearing a neatly kept uniform with nametag, covering tattoos and piercings, and assuring jewelry and perfume/cologne is subtle and appropriate for the workplace;
  - Minimizing noise by being mindful of what is said around patients and their families—using the computer appropriately and taking cell phone calls, personal conversation, laughter, etc. to appropriate venues.
- Following policies and procedures to assure delivery of quality and safe clinical care while also assuring accuracy in documentation and billing.

### **Signatures:**

***I am committed to providing the best possible impression to our patients and their families.***

\_\_\_\_\_  
Team Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

***As your leader, I am committed to supporting your efforts in delivering exceptional patient experiences.***

\_\_\_\_\_  
Team Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Three copies of this signed pledge should be distributed as follows:**

**1—Team Member’s Personal Copy**

**2—Manager/Supervisor’s Records**

**3—Team Member’s Permanent Human Resources File**