

How COVID-19 has changed visitor management

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The pandemic has increased interest in visitor management technologies, including technology enabling contact-free interactions.



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The COVID-19 pandemic has driven the need to better control access to our buildings. Security is now on the front line, screening and protecting the organization not only from the human aggressor but from the invisible threat of the virus. Although the United States is eager to get the economy back up and running, it is highly likely that COVID-19 restrictions will remain in place, or be reinstated periodically, for some time. The demands are shedding light on the value of visitor management technology.

THE MAIN LOBBY IS NOW THE FRONT LINE

The technology can play an important role in proper screening, which has become more complex as a result of the pandemic. Today, all facilities have instituted additional security measures in their main lobbies, and security provides the initial screening of all people entering the facility.

Beyond verifying identifica-

tion, screeners provide on-the-spot health checks, such as a temperature measurement. Some organizations also require an attestation that an individual entering the building does not pose a public health risk to others. This process may entail answering a series of questions about travel and contact with others. The decision to allow entry should be contingent on predetermined expected responses, and security officers should not be given the discretion to not enforce the policy. The screening should be done according to a published policy, and rejections should be universally applied per this policy. The policy should be written to accommodate and adapt to changing levels of overall threats, restrictions, and requirements.

During waves of the pandemic, many hospitals have restricted almost all visitors. Exemptions were sometimes made, however, for visitation of patients who were in very critical condition. Exempted visitors should, of course, be screened for exposure to and for symptoms of COVID-19. And those with evidence of infection or a known exposure in the last 14 days (best practice at the time of this writ-

ing) should not be allowed to enter the healthcare setting.

Healthcare institutions now limit or have eliminated employee convenience entrances, such as to the emergency department, to ensure that all people entering the facility are doing so via a staffed entry where manual screening can occur. That screening can ensure that employees comply with policies.

TECHNOLOGY'S ROLE

Visitor management systems began to be implemented in healthcare before the COVID-19 pandemic began. Leaders saw the technology as a way to reduce the risk that inappropriate people would enter the hospital, where they might make contact with a vulnerable population of patients. Some form of identification, such as a driver's license, can be required to ensure that visitors are truly who they purport to be.

Careful consideration should be given to selecting the appropriate visitor management system. The systems can be small scale, which might be appropriate for single offices or facilities. In larger settings, they should be leveraged for more than just issuing paper badges. In larger systems,

they can be robust and interface with a company's active directory and perhaps a hospital's electronic medical records and patient management system. Identifying the need and desired function is important. If a complex system is warranted, perhaps an experienced consultant is needed.

Visitor management systems can be helpful in several ways. They can, for instance, limit access based on occupancy counts, to aid in social-distancing requirements and control the number of visitors for a patient. Visitors of patients in a hospital rarely set up appointments, and sometimes the number of family members wanting to visit may exceed what is acceptable for the patient's well-being.

The interaction at the lobby, usually the first point of contact, is an opportunity to leverage the visitor management system to establish expectations and screen for risk. Visitor management systems can provide a point where the visitor can be required to provide the answers to screening questions so that these can be documented.

Visitors may be instructed to wear a face mask and comply with other required safety mea-

asures and may be given a document with information on the precautions they need to take. A visitor's understanding and agreement to comply can be documented in the system. And, as the restrictions evolve or are modified, the system can be adapted. Risk managers and legal teams of the organization should weigh in on these restrictions to ensure that liability issues are appropriately addressed.

Similarly, the visitor management systems can be utilized in office buildings, including those related to the business side of medical care as well as medical offices. In these venues, the visits are usually scheduled prior to arrival, and the process can be initiated much earlier than has been true in the past, allowing for a more efficient process at the lobby. In many medical office buildings, clinic visits have been restricted to the patient only. This information should be communicated early to avoid any conflict or angry interactions and to ensure that the person who accompanies the patient can make appropriate accommodations for the span when the patient is being treated. Visitor management systems can initiate the commu-

nication process, informing visitors of what to expect when they arrive at the building and also detailing procedures, restrictions, and rules for entering a facility. All of this can occur well before the visitor enters the facility.

THE RISE OF CONTACT-FREE OPTIONS

There is a trend toward increasing use of contactless methods of interaction. It is estimated that at least two-thirds of Americans now have a smartphone. The visitor management system can interface with smartphones and send the visitor a QR code prior to arrival. The scanning of the QR code can identify the individual and allow efficient processing. Informing patients and visitors of what to expect via e-mail, text messages, or phone calls is also part of this contactless trend.

CONTACT TRACING

Contact tracing has become an important element in combating the spread of COVID-19. Employees and visitors who test positive should have the means to self-report their status to employers and places they have visited, and public health officials should have the ability to track and au-

dit the actions of those individuals. Quarantine precautions may be required not only for the people who test positive but also for people who have come in contact with them. Technology for contact tracing is evolving rapidly.

The smartphone plays an important role here, as well. Smartphone apps are being developed to put this concept into action. However, these apps require that location services be active on the smartphone, and many people resist allowing location services to operate. So, using smartphones for contact tracing is not foolproof. Visitor management systems can play a role in filling that gap. An audit of the time and day of a COVID-19-positive visit can aid in contact tracing and in warning other people who were in the area of the possible exposure.

Current contact tracing methods come into play after exposures have been identified. Work is under way to establish proactive warning methodologies. Based on GPS, Wi-Fi and other location systems, these approaches may be able to send warnings to smartphones to indicate when potential entry into a hotspot area has been detected.

CRITICAL COMPLEMENTS

To be most effective, any technological solutions to visitor management should be paired with commonsense actions. Communications that outline best practices for preventing COVID-19 should be prominently displayed to visitors to enhance compliance. And hand sanitizer should be provided at the entry lobby desk. This action will not only help to prevent the spread of infection, it will also signal that the organization is serious about infection control and is willing to assist people entering their facility.

PREPARING FOR THE NEXT THREAT

COVID-19 is a profound re-

minder to all of us that epidemics and pandemics are possible. Regardless of the nature of the disease—the common annual influenza, H1N1, the coronavirus, SARS, MERS, ebola, or any other threat—everyone needs to be more cognizant of infection prevention. Although COVID-19 is the latest concern, security and emergency preparedness professionals should look to implementing an all hazards approach to visitor management. Flexibility is the key.

When the pandemic finally wanes, restrictions will likely be removed, but facilities will need to adapt and prepare for the next threat. Having a plan and adaptable access and visitor management systems in place should help to protect organizations.