Business challenge
As the COVID-19 pandemic overturned the medical field, Desert Sage Health Centers had to act fast to find new ways of seeing patients safely, keeping staff engaged in their work and employees employed.

Transformation
Medical facilities across the globe grappled with the overwhelming influx of patients during the COVID-19 outbreak. To accommodate the increase in patient numbers, Desert Sage Health Centers built a drive-in clinic with the help of Simpler® Consulting, an IBM Company. Within days, the rural health system was providing safe, car-side patient care.

Results

Successfully opened drive-in clinic
that accounted for 66% of all encounters during peak operation

Dental staff remained employed with new roles
after their clinic was forced to shut down during pandemic

Cut patient turnaround times
by streamlining check-in and check-out processes

Desert Sage Health Centers

How one healthcare system acted quickly to aid its community during COVID-19

Established in 1982, Desert Sage Health Centers has been delivering vital care for communities in and around Mountain Home, Idaho. The organization is a federally qualified health center and has expanded its reach by opening multiple facilities, including a recent drive-in clinic, throughout its community. With a staff of nearly 70, including medical, dental and behavioral healthcare providers, Desert Sage Health Centers' clinics provide quality healthcare to all persons without regard to geographic, economic or cultural barriers.

"We wanted to help patients and our community—they're watching the news and are scared. We wanted to be a comfort for patients."

—Paty Hernandez, Medical Clinic Manager, Desert Sage Health Centers

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Facing an unprecedented event

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the US hard and fast. Throughout the country, medical care facilities began to be inundated with sick patients, leaving medical personnel scrambling to serve the unprecedented numbers.

Desert Sage Health Centers, a rural Idaho health system based in Mountain Home, was no different. Within days, the organization was overwhelmed with calls and visits from worried patients. Onsite, the center's dental clinic was shut down over health and safety concerns, putting its healthcare staff out of work and leaving them in limbo.

Paty Hernandez, the Medical Clinic Manager at Desert Sage Health Centers, explains: "When COVID hit, we thought, 'How are we going to help our sick patients? How can we keep patients and staff safe and keep our staff employed with meaningful work?'"

Desert Sage Health Centers wasn't solely focused on treating patients with COVID-19 symptoms. The health system also operated a Behavioral Health clinic that desperately needed to stay in operation and to see patients routinely.

Desert Sage Health Centers wasn't going to sit idly by while its community suffered; patients needed to be seen and employees needed safe and meaningful work. The federally qualified health center soon began devising a plan to keep patients safely distanced from one another while getting them in quickly to see medical personnel. The plan also needed to include a way to provide jobs for those employees whose roles had been impacted or temporarily cut due to the pandemic.

Thinking outside the clinic walls

Having worked with Simpler to apply Lean methodology for nearly 18 months before the pandemic, Desert Sage Health Centers was in good shape to expand its services. The healthcare provider's team looked to collaborate closely with Simpler on a new project that would not only benefit patients but was also vital for clinic staff.

"The idea of a drive-in clinic had been thrown out there before," says Hernandez. "But now equipped with the tools that we had learned through our Lean transformation, we were prepared to launch the clinic."

Equipped with an innovative plan and committed to becoming one of the most reliable healthcare providers in the area, Desert Sage Health Centers put its Lean knowledge and tools to work. The organizations used video conferencing to work together in real time.

Simpler's coaching and teaching approach is designed to prepare employees to rapidly identify and then implement the strategic improvement opportunities that exist within any organization. Desert Sage Health Centers applied Lean principles and used them as the foundation for mapping and designing the pop-up facility. Over four days, the Desert Sage Health Centers team developed a new outdoor clinic process covering

> *"Lean is not a two-day training … it's a culture change and an investment in time and resources, and Simpler knew that and worked with us every step of the way."*
>
> —Mary Ferguson, Chief Executive Officer, Desert Sage Health Centers

patients from check-in to check-out. After completing multiple test runs with success, the organization launched the new drive-in clinic.

The new clinic is open to all patients, established or new, on a first-come, first-served basis, regardless of insurance, with parking spaces to serve 10 vehicles at a time. Typically, the clinic is staffed by one provider, two medical assistants (MAs), two registration staff, two support staff and one clinic lead to oversee daily operations.

While other medical facilities in the area strained to stay operational and keep staff employed, Desert Sage Health Centers' facilities amplified their activities. With the new Lean plan in place, management created meaningful jobs within the drive-in operation for its clinic employees. By way of the drive-in clinic, the staff coordinated the distribution of medical refills for patients, doing acute care, handling COVID-19-related visits, seeing patients with broken limbs and even performing x-rays.

Mary Ferguson, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Desert Sage Health Centers, explains: "Having had processes already in place gave us the ability to double our load—it was quite impressive. It was amazing to watch all the cars out there, some having patients being seen in multiple windows, quickly getting care."

Changes were also happening inside clinic walls. Using Lean principles and training, the Behavioral Health team successfully launched a telehealth service as a new resource for patients and for staff to manage appointments and visits safely.

Scaling faster and more efficiently

By incorporating previous knowledge from Simpler, the Desert Sage Health Centers team streamlined its processes and scaled its services while other healthcare providers were shutting down. The staff quickly learned what was and wasn't necessary for taking care of patients and efficiently managed cycle times for visits inside and outside the clinics.

"We've streamlined not just the medical visits, but also the registration process using technology, abbreviated forms and having a runner to go back and forth between vehicles," says Amber Jordan, the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Desert Sage Health Centers. "That was a pretty amazing accomplishment that the team was able to do."

Desert Sage Health Centers saw 908 visits in the new drive-in clinic within the first nine weeks of operation, with an incredible 20% of those patients being new to the facilities. During peak operation, the drive-in clinic

"We had the strength to carry on during COVID-19 because we already had problem-solving tools, techniques and methods from having worked with Simpler."

—Mary Ferguson, Chief Executive Officer, Desert Sage Health Centers

accounted for 66% of all encounters that occurred throughout the medical system.

Where does Desert Sage Health Centers' partnership with Simpler go from here? It will continue to evolve and strengthen.

"There's a lot of consultants out there who do a lot of different things, but what Simpler offered us from the very beginning was a genuine partnership between our organizations," says Jordan. "We are challenged in ways that make us better, and Simpler has been so supportive and professional, making this partnership so successful."

About Simpler Consulting, an IBM Company

Simpler is part of IBM® Watson Health®. For nearly 30 years, the Simpler team has worked with clients to collaborate, coach and enable them to achieve rapid improvement across financial and nonfinancial performance indicators. Simpler's value lies in its ability to work with clients to develop a business system and implement systematic improvements that facilitate long-term performance and sustainable growth.

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