

AltaMed uses AT&T connectivity to turn empty lots into COVID-19 testing sites for L.A.'s most vulnerable

- **Business needs**

A community health network required access to patient information to operate COVID-19 test sites in underserved neighborhoods.

- **Networking solution**

AT&T trucks became mobile hot spots that provided connectivity to the vital medical information that healthcare workers needed to perform potentially lifesaving testing.

- **Business value**

The ability to deliver essential care to individuals and help protect neighborhoods.

- **Industry focus**

Community healthcare

- **Size**

1 million medical visits annually

About AltaMed Health Services Corp.

The mission of AltaMed Health Services Corporation is to eliminate disparities in healthcare access and outcomes. It provides superior quality health and human services through an integrated delivery system for multi-ethnic and underserved communities in Southern California. AltaMed began serving indigent, uninsured, and underinsured populations in 1969. Today it's the largest provider of culturally competent medical care for Latinx medically underserved communities.

The situation

Residents of large population centers like Los Angeles are at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19. AltaMed wanted to establish community-based sites to make coronavirus testing easily accessible to its patients. Before it could launch its ambitious program, AltaMed needed a highly secure and reliable way for medical teams to access patients' electronic medical records.

Solution

AT&T provided highly secure mobile connectivity by parking an AT&T truck equipped with Wi-Fi hotspots at an AltaMed testing site in a disadvantaged neighborhood. The initiative enabled hundreds of patients a day to access vital healthcare services.



Community-based medical care

AltaMed was founded more than 50 years ago as the East Los Angeles Barrio Free Clinic. Its CEO, Cástulo de la Rocha, is a long-standing community health leader who has changed the face of the communities AltaMed serves. Expanding a sustainable and innovative model of healthcare delivery provides access to quality care for millions of underserved patients.

Patients include uninsured and underinsured individuals, people in communities with a shortage of primary care providers, and those with language or other cultural barriers that prevent them from

accessing care. Two thirds of AltaMed patients subsist at or significantly below the poverty level.

The organization delivers medical care regardless of patients' ability to pay. It serves more than 300,000 individuals through 1 million medical visits a year at its 42 service delivery sites across Los Angeles and Orange counties. Its clinics and multiple mobile units provide medical, dental, HIV prevention and treatment, and behavioral health services.

AltaMed has a staff of 2,845 full-time employees, 17 part-time employees, and 171 volunteers. It is the largest independent Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) in the U.S. and has been accredited by the Joint Commission since 2011.

A responsibility to shift service delivery

Many of AltaMed's patients find it difficult to access medical care, hampered by factors like poverty, limited English skills and low health literacy. This puts them at increased risk for health problems. The specter of COVID-19 loomed large in many of the neighborhoods served by AltaMed. The organization wanted to provide testing services to its clients but had to overcome severe operational challenges.

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Raymond Lowe
Senior Vice President/Chief Information Officer, AltaMed

AltaMed's Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer Raymond Lowe was part of the team that began working to find ways to protect vulnerable patients. "The COVID-19 crisis provided a singular focus for our organization," Lowe said. "We galvanized behind our medical director of infection prevention and executive leadership team. We knew we had a tremendous responsibility to shift the way healthcare is delivered to the communities we serve."



The pandemic added an urgency to AltaMed's work. As the virus spread, it became clear that countries that acted quickly to test for the virus and isolate those who had been exposed to it were able to significantly slow infection rates. "Our organization quickly mobilized to implement the changes needed to serve our patients and our workforce," Lowe said.

"I think there are 24 defined COVID testing sites in L.A. and we're running 9 of them," Lowe continued. "One of them is on an empty lot in Boyle Heights right behind Mariachi Plaza. Putting up a mobile clinic that can see 150 folks in a day was quite a challenge."

Turning an empty lot into a clinic

AltaMed did not have much time to arrange the necessary IT, facilities, and clinical staffing for its test sites. In addition to medical supplies, each location required laptops, printing capabilities, tents, patient-flow planning, and staffing.

"We quickly built technology templates and aligned with facilities on traffic patterns and clinical workflow," Lowe said. "We had 4 days to turn an empty lot into a space where our providers could function as if they were in a clinic."

While the timeline, staffing, and equipment requirements were formidable, the biggest challenge was delivering connectivity to each site. Providers needed access each patient's electronic medical records. Access to patient information and accurate documentation is critical to COVID-19 testing efforts. Without connectivity, AltaMed would be unable to bring this vital service to the communities that depend on it.



Working to extend its important work

As AltaMed was researching ways to facilitate access to patient health records, AT&T Business was helping people and organizations affected by the coronavirus by—

- Offering schools 60 days of unlimited data for laptops, tablets and hotspots
- Keeping its free public Wi-Fi hotspots open for anyone who needs them
- Waiving late fees and overage charges for wireless customers who notify the company that they are unable to pay their bills

AT&T officials recognized that healthcare providers might need additional help in serving patients during the pandemic. When Lowe reached out for help arranging connectivity, the AT&T Healthcare team readily agreed, and suggested a novel solution. Why not use AT&T retail trucks as mobile hot spots?

“Without AT&T providing Wi-Fi for this site, we would not have been able to increase testing access for this community.”

Ilan Shapiro, M.D.
Medical Director of Health Education and Wellness, AltaMed

The trucks are typically used as AT&T retail shops at sporting events and festivals to let people buy phones, accessories, and wireless service on the spot. The trucks can also provide robust connectivity. Parking

them at the site of AltaMed’s pop-up clinic provided a platform that empowered the organization to extend its important work and continue to make a difference.

“AT&T dropped one of its mobile retail stores out there, which covered about half of the empty lot with internet connectivity,” Lowe said. “It provides the critical coverage we needed as well as the power, so that was a win.”



Thanks to the ready connectivity, medical personnel in the temporary clinics have all the bandwidth they need. Healthcare providers can easily access AltaMed’s cloud-based electronic health record application, so they can provide the level of informed care that its patients have come to expect.

Taking care to the patients

In-person visits to most medical facilities dropped significantly since COVID-19 began spreading in the U.S. “It’s really made us become very nimble and agile in thinking about how we can still provide quality care to our patients,” Lowe said.



For COVID-19 testing, patients and community members are asked to call AltaMed's Patient Service Center to determine the best option for care. AltaMed uses its electronic health record system, which includes a telehealth application that enables it to perform some of this triage. Staff can then schedule patients for a virtual visit or an in-person evaluation at one of its outdoor clinics.

The telehealth appointments protect patients and medical staff and help make medical care more proactive. "We're taking the care right to the patients and promoting patient monitoring to keep people out of the hospitals," Lowe said. "And of course, we have a mobile-first approach."



Increased access to services

The AT&T mobile hotspots are equipped with FirstNet SIMs, which provide added capacity for first responders and those critical to supporting their emergency response. FirstNet is America's public safety communications platform that gives police, firefighters, EMTs, and other critical workers 24-hour-a-day priority and preemption across voice and data networks.

AltaMed's medical professionals made good use of this connectivity at their pop-up COVID-19 testing site. The fact that AT&T donated the service was another great benefit to the organization.

Ilan Shapiro, M.D., AltaMed Medical Director of Health Education and Wellness, said the solution enabled AltaMed to provide mission-critical care to the community. "AltaMed has never turned anyone away, regardless of their ability to pay, but now the increased demand for services has put a strain on resources," he said. "Without AT&T providing Wi-Fi for this site, we would not have been able to increase testing access for this community."



Transformative technology delivers lasting change

Lowe is convinced that the COVID-19 epidemic will bring lasting change to the healthcare system. “I think we’ll have more focus on the overall quality continuum, the value of what we’re doing, and how we’re providing that care,” he said. “But I also see a really large transition out of traditional brick-and-mortar operations.”

The lessons learned during COVID will shape the practice for years to come. “This is the year when you’ve launched the tools and you determine the processes and refine things,” he said. “And next year much of our patient-centered care can be delivered where and when the patient wants it—at a click on their mobile device. That’s where I see our focus shifting, and that’s awesome.”

Medical innovations are no longer the purview of only the largest and best-funded healthcare systems. With transformative technology, ingenuity, and a commitment to excellence, all providers can improve their operations and deliver lifesaving care.

