

IMPACT OF DESIGN SERIES, VOL. 7

# Unity Health Care Brentwood

AMERICAN  
SOCIETY OF  
INTERIOR  
DESIGNERS  
**ASID**  
RESEARCH



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**PROJECT TYPE:**

Healthcare

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**LOCATION:**

Washington, D.C.

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**SIZE:**

2,200 SF

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**WINNING PROJECT:**

ASID 2019 Outcome of Design  
Awards [Category: Process]

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**CASE BRIEF BY**

**Gensler**

## CLIENT OVERVIEW

Unity Health Care is a team of compassionate and multicultural health professionals that provide a full range of health and human services that reach every facet of health, from pregnancy and infancy to senior years. Focused on well-being and as a patient-centered medical home (PCMH), Unity offers a team-based approach that encourages patients to become active participants in their own healthcare. Unity was founded in 1985 as the Healthcare for the Homeless project, and serves with the mission to promote healthier communities through compassion and comprehensive health and human services, regardless of ability to pay.



## DESIGN CHALLENGE

Unity's goal was to use design as a tool to help better serve patients and visitors, enhance the staff experience, strengthen bonds with the Brentwood community, and, ultimately, improve community health. They sought to create a sense of community and reflect the aesthetic preferences of the Brentwood neighborhood.

## DESIGN SOLUTION

- **Defined personal space** through furniture selection and layout, to increase spacing between seats, and elements to help create boundaries.
- Created a clear path to registration and replaced the numerous confusing signs with a simple station designating where to queue for check-in to **clarify the process**.
- **Encouraged communication** by designing conversational seating arrangements that included multiple small clusters and a large communal table.
- Designed a quilt wall of fabric-wrapped triangles that incorporated the community's aesthetic preference for visually complex patterns and bright, saturated colors, and included the community's own inspirational words hand silk-screened on select areas to **reflect the community**.
- A macramé piece inspired by an outline shape of the Brentwood neighborhood within a map and the use of various cords and untraditional knot pairings **represent the diversity** of the community.

## IMPACT OF DESIGN

- Wider seat selections and increased spacing between seats added seven seats and resulted in increased seating utilization.
- Art representative of the community increased staff happiness by 45 percent.
- Complaints about wait time decreased by 25 percent, although no change in perceived wait times.
- The new furniture arrangement increased communication among patients by 100 percent in instances between people who did not arrive at the clinic together.

## PROCESS

### TIMELINE

- Project Completion: October 2017

## PROJECT TEAM

- Design: Gensler
- Research: Gensler, Sunbrella, Unity Health Care Brentwood
- Construction: Rand Construction





## OVERVIEW

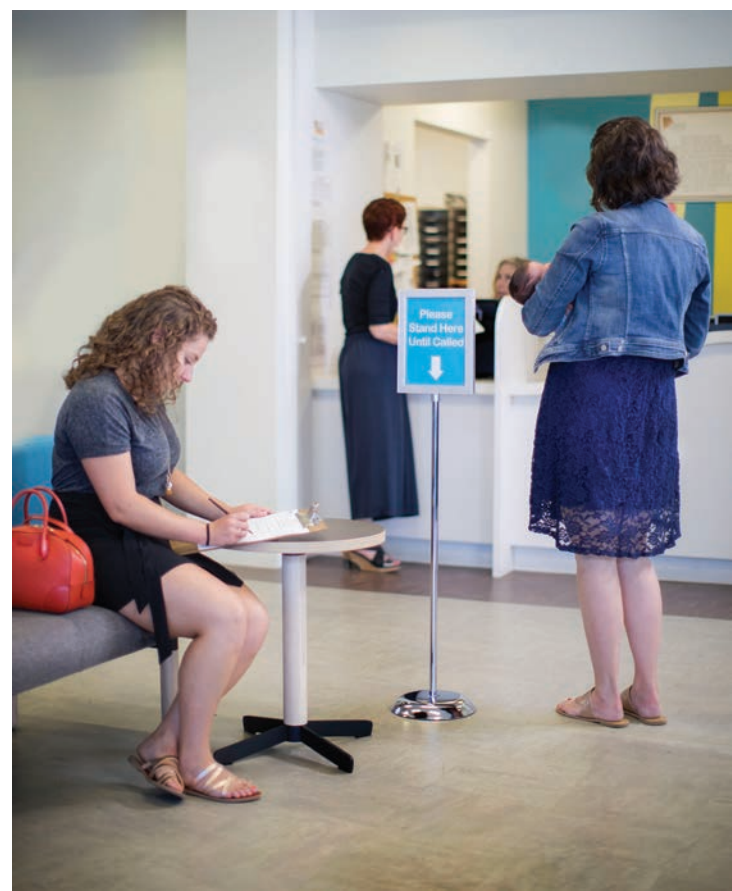
Unity's goal was to use design as a tool to help better serve patients and visitors, enhance the staff experience, strengthen bonds with the Brentwood community, and ultimately improve community health. To transform the Brentwood experience, Unity Health Care partnered with global design firm Gensler and fabrics company Sunbrella Contract, which served as a research partner. Together, the three organizations initiated research on the registration and waiting experience, exploring how to better serve patients and visitors, enhance the staff experience, and strengthen bonds with the Brentwood community.

The design intent was to create an intervention in the space that responded to the research question in a way that could be measured: can a waiting area designed with intention and community engagement (i.e., patients, family, staff and providers) improve the experience and increase satisfaction?

The intervention was designed around five key insights that came directly from pre-occupancy data collection efforts (i.e., surveys, observations, behavioral mapping, and community outreach) representing unmet needs in the existing space:

1. Define personal space,
2. Clarify the check-in process,
3. Support the process (i.e., completing forms, occupying kids, waiting for a taxi),
4. Encourage communication between patients, and
5. Reflect the Brentwood community

*Can a waiting area designed with intention and community engagement (i.e., patients, family, staff and providers) improve the experience and increase satisfaction?*





## BACKGROUND

*Pre-renovation space*

One out of six Washington, D.C. residents receive medical, behavioral, dental, or social services from Unity Health Care, a local network of federally qualified health centers that promote healthier communities, regardless of ability to pay. Across the nation, federally qualified health centers provide services to more than 24.3 million people in underserved and low-income areas. These centers are key to improving community health by providing accessible, holistic care that addresses the physical, mental, and social health of their patients.

Unity was founded in 1985 as the Healthcare for the Homeless project, providing primary healthcare services to homeless individuals and families in D.C. Upon receiving federal government emergency funds in 1996, their reach was expanded to include the underserved, uninsured, and working poor. Unity now has a mobile medical outreach vehicle and 29 health centers that are located in the poorest ZIP codes surrounding Washington, D.C. Focused on well-being, Unity's team of compassionate and multicultural health professionals provide a full range of health and human services that reach every facet of health from pregnancy and infancy through the senior years. As a patient-centered medical home (PCMH), Unity offers a team-based approach that encourages patients to become active participants in their own healthcare.

With the mission to promote healthier communities through compassion and comprehensive health and human services, regardless of ability to pay, Unity's goal was to use design as a tool to help better serve patients and visitors, enhance the staff experience, strengthen bonds with the Brentwood community, and ultimately improve community health.

When patients arrived at the previous incarnation of the Unity Brentwood waiting area, they were greeted by a space featuring the usual signifiers of healthcare facilities: walls largely unadorned and neutral-colored, chairs upholstered in a vinyl-like material and arranged in a rigid, rectangular layout, and an environment that spoke to institutional standardization.

Unity turned to design as a tool to transform the Brentwood experience. That led them to partner with global design firm Gensler and fabrics company Sunbrella Contract, which served as a research partner. Together, the three organizations initiated research on the registration and waiting experience, exploring how to better serve patients and visitors, enhance the staff experience, and strengthen bonds with the Brentwood community.





# PROCESS

The team followed a rigorous process of inquiry and designed strategically in collaboration with researchers, designers, and practitioners. They began with no assumptions or preconceptions regarding the result. The process was guided through three steps:

1. Defining the problem (literature review and hypothesis formation),
2. Data collection (surveys, interviews, observations, participatory observation), and
3. Data analysis

The research team analyzed existing research to directly inform the development of the fundamental research question, and a range of hypotheses that touched on everything from how furniture arrangement impacts communication to how art inspired by the community affects how staff and patients feel about the space.

The overarching research question was: “Can a waiting area designed with intention and community engagement (patients, family, staff, and providers) improve the patient experience and increase patient satisfaction?”

The research hypotheses were:

- A furniture arrangement will increase communication among patients.
- Community engagement in the design process impacts design solutions.
- Diversity in seating type will influence patient seating choice.
- Woven upholstery in a waiting room is preferred over vinyl upholstery.
- Art representative of the community increases staff happiness.
- A waiting room with art inspired by the community improves the waiting experience.
- An enhanced waiting room will decrease perceived wait times.



The community was a part of the process through every step of the design, solidifying the partnership. The team collected data through staff surveys and follow-up discussions, observations, and participatory observations byway of a community engagement event to test the hypotheses. More specifically, the team observed behaviors in the waiting areas over the course of several days (for both pre- and post-occupancy), focusing on times with both peak and average patient volumes. For part of the observations, behavior mapping was employed by tracking the paths people took, where they sat, what they did, and if they conversed with other patients. To gain input from patients and the Brentwood neighborhood, an event was designed to engage the community in a way that allowed researchers to observe and document, but also participate and interact with the community for a richer understanding of Brentwood's residents. Notices were posted around the neighborhood, with a promise of food and a prize raffle to elicit broader involvement, and included patients and their families, staff, members of the community church, and community leaders. There were four activity stations designed to elicit thoughts around colors, patterns, stories, and poetry. Participants described Brentwood in their own words, generated ideas for improving the waiting room, and voiced opinions on color and pattern. They also used magnetic cutouts of words to express themselves—producing inspirational messages like “reach above awesome” and “grow”. The ideas from this event became the basis for design interventions. The community's words were reflected in macramé art depicting Brentwood, the quilt wall's reflection of their poetic words, and the colors and patterns throughout.



*To gain input from patients and the Brentwood neighborhood, an event was designed to engage the community in a way that allowed researchers to observe and document, but also participate and interact with the community for a richer understanding of Brentwood's residents.*







# DESIGN SOLUTION AND IMPACT



## LAYOUT AND FURNITURE SPACING

The revised furniture selections and layout challenged the conventional wisdom about ganged seats being the most efficient solution. Additionally, the wider seat selections, including bench seats, and increased spacing between seats resulted in increased seating utilization. Elements (e.g., screens and moveable tables) were included to help define personal space.

*Seven extra seats added.*

*Less seats (1-2 seats compared to previous average of 2-3 seats) used to define personal space.*



## CLEAR SIGHTLINES FOR CLARITY

A clear path was created to registration by reducing visual clutter and replacing numerous confusing signs with a simple station designation directing patients where to queue for check-in. Clear sightlines were provided to call points.



## DIVERSITY IN SEATING TYPE

Not every patient is the same, so the furniture needed to reflect this fact. A variety of seating options was selected to offer choice and to meet specific patient needs, such as wide benches to accommodate bariatric patients with dignity, arm chairs to provide support for older patients, multiple small clusters of seating, and a large communal table to encourage more dialogue between patients.

*The most popular seats were closest to registration and call points.*

*The more conversational seating arrangements led to a 100 percent increase in instances of communication between people who did not arrive at the clinic together.*

*Families visiting the clinic gravitated to the small clusters of seats facing each other (as was intended for their use), whereas individuals gravitated to the bench seats where they could watch the room.*



## TRUST BUILDING

The Brentwood community's role as a co-creator in the project helped to solidify Unity's position in the community by increasing trust. Ultimately, the Unity Brentwood project spotlights possibilities at the intersection of space, wellness, and community. By giving community members a chance to actively participate in the creation of an environment tied to their wellness, the result can be an expression of that which is familiar, comforting, and supportive – elements critical to patients trusting their healthcare providers and fully engaging in their own care.



## LIFE-LONG COMMUNITY CONNECTION

This project created life-long community ambassadors for Unity, making sure the neighborhood takes full advantage of their services, and ultimately improving the overall health and well-being of the Brentwood community.

*Patients and community members who saw their words and thoughts reflected in the new space are now advocates for Unity's care and commitment to health.*



## ARTWORK DESIGNED AROUND COMMUNITY

An idea as simple as artwork inspired by the community helped to improve the waiting experience. The community's input on the aesthetics became key to defining the character of the space. A quilt wall of fabric-wrapped triangles incorporates the community's preference for visually complex patterns and bright, saturated colors. The overall pattern of the wall adds an additional layer of interest, with a nod to the vernacular tradition of quilting to create something familiar and relatable. As a final layer, the community's own inspirational words drawn from the outreach poetry session were hand silk-screened on select areas.

The community is represented through a macramé piece inspired by an outline shape of the Brentwood neighborhood within a map. The use of various cords and untraditional knot pairings represent the diversity of the clinic's members.

*Art representative of the community increased staff happiness by 45 percent.*

*Even though there was no change in perceived wait times, complaints about wait times decreased by 25 percent.*







## ABOUT GENSLER

Gensler is a global architecture, design, and planning firm with 48 locations and more than 6,000 professionals networked across Asia, Europe, Australia, the Middle East, and the Americas. Founded in 1965, the firm serves more than 3,500 active clients in virtually every industry. Gensler designers strive to make the places people live, work, and play more inspiring, more resilient, and more impactful.



*\*Photo credit: Wray Ward*