

Virtual Triage

Bringing efficiencies and better health outcomes
via online triaging technology

John Korangy, MD, MPH, DABR
Co-Founder, CareClix



Introduction

Our first overview whitepaper “7 Ways to Start Your Telemedicine Program” outlined how to use telemedicine to expand care delivery pathways that bring healthcare closer to the patient, while creating a viable revenue stream.

As a follow up to the first paper, we began a series of whitepapers that broke down each of the “7 Ways to Start Your Telemedicine Program” offering a more in-depth look at the seven entry points.

Our first paper in that series explained the benefits of using telemedicine to build and enhance a Chronic Care Management program, and our most recent paper focused on virtualizing an urgent care system.

Urgent Care Virtualization

A three-step implementation strategy for building and growing an scalable Urgent Care Virtualization program



Now in our third installment in this series, we take a deep-dive into highlighting the virtual triage process, and how it improves healthcare provider workflows by optimizing staff and space availability.

We will also discuss how telemedicine can be used to augment the virtual triage process for different practice settings such as:



Urgent Care



Private Practice



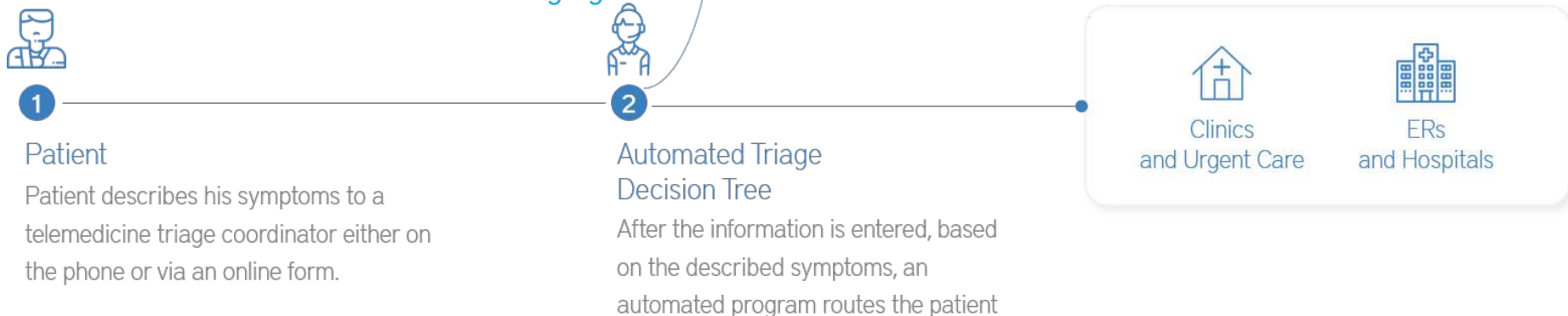
Emergency Room

How Does Virtual Triage Work?

Virtual triage begins by first connecting the patient with a telemedicine triage specialist through a virtual exam room. This provides benefits to both the patient and treatment facility by optimizing the flow of patients to ultimate treatment and saving time for both parties. Depending on the symptoms of the patient’s ailment, they are then routed for virtual or physical treatment. Virtual triage enables cost efficiencies during the routing process by assigning the patient with the safest, most cost-effective treatment option. For example, patients with minor conditions might be seen virtually by advanced practitioners, while those experiencing shortness of breath may be routed directly to the ER.

CareClix used these protocols to help organizations build their virtual triage programs tailored to their specific demand and staffing models. CareClix enables medical treatment facilities by providing our Virtual Triage service specifically branded for an organization (known as white-labeling). This solution gives patients 24/7 remote access to CareClix physicians and specialists, and effectively moves the triage process online.

“Using his experience in directing several emergency departments and urgent care centers, Dr. Sunil Budhrani, the Co-Founder of CareClix, originally developed the protocols utilized for virtual telemedicine triaging.”



Why Use Virtual Triage?

Why virtual triage? Because, quite simply, it's effective. According to the Healthcare Performance Management Institute, some **70 percent of doctor's visits and 40 percent of ER visits could be handled with a telehealth visit.**¹ Using the CareClix online interface, doctors can determine whether patients need non-emergency or emergency treatment and refer patients to either their primary care physician or the emergency room.

By triaging patients online before leaving their homes, CareClix helps patients avoid excessive travel for medical care, improves the efficiency and quality of treatment systems in urgent care clinics and doctor's offices, and lightens emergency room loads by preventing unnecessary visits.

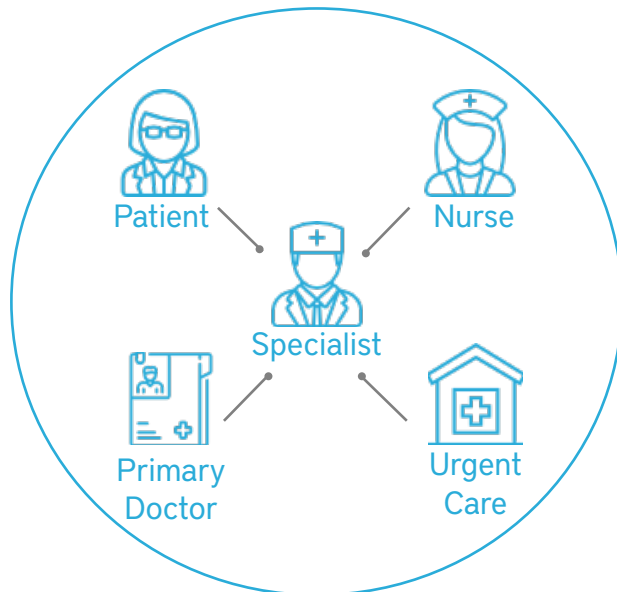


Delivering better care faster in these settings foregoing medical treatment, and saves lives.²

CareClix technology provides your medical practice the tools you need to triage your patients more efficiently, while also improving the quality of care you provide. The actual uses of online virtual triage differs slightly depending on the type of medical practice it is implemented in, detailed in the following sections.

Urgent Care and Private Practice Triage

Virtual triage technologies provide valuable support to urgent care facilities and doctor's offices. Using customizable CareClix telehealth carts - which include the most commonly-used devices in emergency care setting such as otoscopes, dermoscopes, glucose monitors, and ECG monitoring systems - nurses and doctors in offsite locations can electronically transmit vital medical information to physicians - including specialists - in other locations. This technology helps patients obtain care more readily and enables care providers to limit the number of unnecessary doctor's visits.



Virtual triage technologies enable medical providers and triage nurses to access patient clinical histories through the web or a mobile app and determine next steps. Depending on circumstances, medical providers may decide to treat a patient online, see a patient in the office immediately, schedule an appointment for a later day, and/or send a patient to the emergency room.

For instance, a nurse at an urgent care center may triage a patient experiencing an earache using an otoscope and diagnose the patient with a middle ear infection. A primary care doctor can then remotely see the patient, saving both the primary doctor and patient time.

In addition to this example, there are additional benefits that virtual triage brings to common medical scenarios seen in urgent care and office practices outlined on the next page.

Urgent Care and Office Practice Triage



Pediatrics

Virtual triage technology assists parents to best assess whether pediatric issues can be resolved online, require acute in-person care, or need a follow-up appointment scheduled for a later date.

Patient Benefits:

- Virtual triage allows patients to receive the care they need rather than having to sit in waiting rooms for a prolonged period of time.
- This also reduces unnecessary absence from school and saves parents having to take time off from work.

Provider Benefits:

- CareClix technology facilitates pediatric care by expanding access to medical services.
- It also provides the benefit of keeping sick children out of doctor's offices to prevent the spread of illness.



Primary Care

In primary care offices, medical practitioners can use virtual triage technologies to assess which patients' issues can be resolved online, which patients require immediate attention, and which patients would be best served by seeing a doctor or mid-level provider on a later date.

Patient Benefits:

- For patients, virtual triage systems at their primary care doctor have the capacity to reduce time lost from work, and to increase the chances of going to see the right doctor the first time.
- Thanks to virtual triage, a patient will know whether to follow up with their regular physician or a specialist, and whether they even need to leave the house to do that.

Provider Benefits:

- With CareClix technology, providers can streamline their triaging process, and be able to devote more time to providing quality care for the patients who need it most.



Specialty Care

CareClix technology allows specialists to assess whether patients' specialist specific medical concerns can be addressed online, in a doctor's office, or in a hospital setting.

Patient Benefits:

- Patients can limit the need to travel long distances to see medical specialists.
- Patients also receive specialized care with greater ease, and even in the comfort of their own homes.

Provider Benefits:

- In cases of post-operative other medical care involving follow-ups, virtual triage can be an effective way to streamline resource allocation in a doctor's office by facilitating online follow-ups rather than requiring in-person visits.

Emergency Room Triage

Virtual triage can bring much-needed order to the chaos in emergency rooms (ERs). In emergency rooms, it can oftentimes be impossible to predict how many resources will need to be devoted to the most vulnerable patients - like people suffering a heart attack, seizures, or a gunshot wound - on any given day. Additionally, pressure on emergency rooms to see patients is up considerably.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of emergency room visits in the United States jumped 36 percent from 1995 to 2010 – from 97 million to 130 million – while the number of ERs in the country dropped by 11 percent.³

Consequently, it is not unusual for many patients in the ER to wait for hours before they even get to the nurse triage process. Through the power of telemedicine, CareClix can simplify the triage process both for medical professionals in emergency rooms, and physicians referring patients to the ER.

With CareClix technology, patients can expect shorter wait times and be promptly cared for, and medical staff can expect an easier, more streamlined triage process. And, in the event of a natural disaster or large casualty situation, emergency rooms can easily scale up their triage process to treat more people more quickly.

Telemedicine has already helped emergency rooms improve their triage processes. **At Washington MedStar Hospital, tele-triage has treated some 15,000 patients since the program began in 2016. The hospital reports that wait times in the emergency room are down 26 percent.⁴** There are several ways that telemedicine can be used to facilitate virtual triage in an emergency room setting:



Face-to-Face Video Conferencing



Collaboration Across Medical Teams



Online Medical Suites

Emergency Room Triage



Face-to-Face Video Conferencing

CareClix can make it possible to do triage by video conference. This allows a triage coordinator to assess the patient and order any necessary labs so ER doctors have the necessary information to diagnose the patient prior to meeting them. In some cases, this can eliminate the need for an ER trip entirely.



Collaboration Across Medical Teams

CareClix technology makes it possible for medical teams to work together, even when in different locations, to deliver quality emergency care.



Electronic Prescription Services

Some ER visits can be prevented through adherence to prescriptions for common drugs like antibiotics or antihistamines. With CareClix, providers can quickly prescribe medicines to patients in the event of an emergency, no matter where they are.



Electronic Health Records

With CareClix, a patient's health records are easily and securely accessible and transferable, meaning ER physicians and other caregivers have immediate access to a patient's medical history, regardless of where the patient has been treated previously.



Online Medical Suites

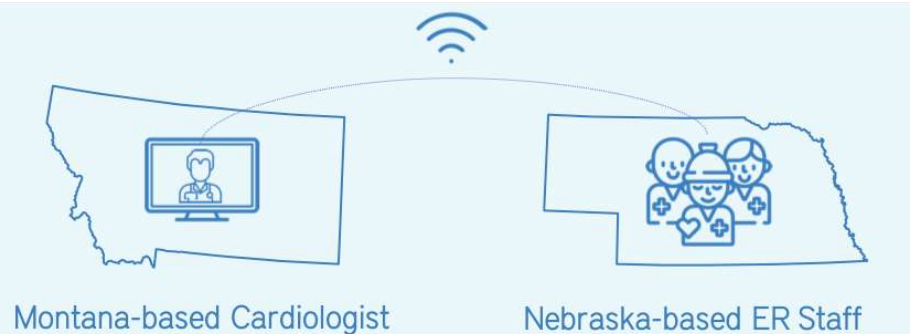
CareClix's solution is compatible with more than 100 commonly-available medical devices. In an emergency room setting, caregivers can take vital signs, perform imaging services or labs, transfer results to an offsite doctor for triage in real time before the patient leaves the ER waiting area.



CareClix Virtual Triage in Action

If someone from Montana who is visiting family in Nebraska experiences a heart attack, CareClix can enable that heart attack victim's own cardiologist in Montana to provide video triage care while he is on the way to the emergency room.

This way, the Nebraska-based ER staff can teleconference with and securely receive information from the patient's cardiologist in real time to provide better informed, quality care.



CareClix Case Study – Establishing Rush Medical Center’s Virtual Triage Program

Virtual triage does not only sound good in theory, but is also extremely effective in practice. [Chicago’s Rush Medical Center – which saw nearly 200 ER patients per day in 2016 – reached out to CareClix to help the overcrowding of its 60 ER treatment rooms by launching a virtual triage program.](#)⁵ The program routed patients at the ER to a room with telehealth equipment. Next, a telehealth provider, typically a nurse or a medical assistant provided patients with a preliminary diagnosis using various medical devices. Then, they connected the patient to a remotely-located emergency doctor for a face-to-face visit. Outcomes of these triage visits then determined how to most appropriately treat patients.

Indeed, the Rush-CareClix partnership is not the only example of virtual triage programs being used successfully. Other hospitals across the country are also seeing the value of telemedicine and incorporating the technology evermore in their operations.

[According to the American Hospital Association, more than half of U.S. hospitals already use telehealth systems in some capacity, while many other hospitals are working to adopt telemedicine programs.](#)⁶



Outside St. Louis, Mercy Hospital is a \$54 million facility that uses telemedicine to care for its patients, all with no beds on site.

Virtual triaging in emergency rooms is becoming the next-generation of the Fast Track process, which allows for less acute issues to be dealt with online and for more acute/urgent issues to be managed by onsite emergency room staff.

What is Fast Track?

Fast Track is the system that allows emergency rooms to address patients with the most urgent concerns quickly, while also ensuring that patients with less severe injuries and illnesses are treated in a timely manner. [At the Stanford University Emergency Department, for example, Fast Track patients – those without the most complicated conditions – typically get discharged within 90 minutes of checking in.](#)⁷ NIH determined that the presence of fast track systems in emergency rooms more than doubles the odds of patient satisfaction metrics concerning quality of care.⁸

Establishing Your Own Virtual Triage Program

To implement a virtual triage program in your own facility and realize the benefits that Rush and Mercy Hospital have seen, you need to adopt an end-to-end approach. Fortunately, the process to achieve that is relatively straightforward. Here's how you do it, in four steps:



Step 1: Assess Resource Availability

Optimizing available resources to improve flow of patients to providers



Step 2: Creating an Online Entry Point

Establishing a path to log-on to the virtual triage program



Step 3: Conducting the Virtual Visit

Allocating available practitioners to patients and assessing their needs



Step 4: Marketing & Training

Building out materials to raise awareness of program and train your team

Establishing Your Own Virtual Triage Program



Step 1: Assess Resource Availability

Effective virtual triage programs incorporate the number of resources and staff to best optimize the flow of patients to available providers – whether onsite or virtual. This includes understanding how many providers your practice has on hand, as well as the number of exam rooms and facilities available. In addition to this, the system must account for each staff member’s schedule, have a real-time understanding of room and equipment availability, and be able to account for any changes. Depending on the day or time of year, this fluctuates, so having these inputs is vital to the successful operation of any virtual triage program.

If your practice has a scheduling system, this provides the necessary resource availability information needed for a virtual triage program to be successful. In addition, [CareClix’s platform has analyzed a multitude of data on patient routing, and its analytics engine, coupled with your resource availability can help guide your patients exactly where they need to go at a faster rate.](#)



Step 2: Creating an Online Entry Point

With an internet connection at your medical facility, the initial setup for an online virtual triage service is practically clicks away. Through your website or mobile application, you can create an entry point for virtual triage. Patients can then register for the service independently, or they can be registered automatically through their medical group.

[Once online, patients can access the CareClix virtual triage program, enter their credentials, and access services from their designated provider.](#) Using this feature, patients can input medical information so details about their condition are available to the provider prior to the visit. Patients can also use this technology to schedule their online triage appointment.

Establishing Your Own Virtual Triage Program



Step 3: Conducting the Virtual Visit

Once the online entry point is established and patients are registering, you can allocate a subset of your medical professionals to consult directly with patients to assess the nature of their problems.

By triaging patients online before they leave their homes, CareClix helps patients avoid excessive travel for medical care, lightens emergency room loads by preventing unnecessary visits, and improves the efficiency and quality of treatment system in urgent care clinics and doctor's offices.

If a medical group so chooses, an automated decision tree feature can be utilized here to best determine the allocation of resources. This will route the patient to their treatment destination, whether for an online exam, a follow-up in-person appointment, or immediate treatment in an emergency room. For example, if a patient has the flu, but the ER triage system is congested, the patient can be rerouted to another medical facility with an available specialist.



Step 4: Marketing & Training

Building the capabilities for virtual triage is only half the battle. Driving adoption requires building awareness and educating your network, which is equally important as the technology itself. To this end, we are here to help.

Our talented team knows exactly how to compose medically-sound materials that will educate your doctor and patient population on the advantages of virtual triage. CareClix will work with your practice or facility to develop branded materials - including handouts, infographics, and presentations - and consent forms to speed up program implementation and support the adoption of your virtual triage program.

In addition, CareClix is familiar with the adoption process and facilitates training to help educate patients on virtual triage services, its benefits, and how to use it. These trainings are catered to your organization's needs and include anything from simple handouts, to in-person training sessions, or even creating an online training academy with on-demand videos to help you learn how CareClix's online virtual triaging program works.

Conclusions and Next Steps

This whitepaper provides ideas and structure to guide your strategic conversations about how to fit telemedicine and virtual triaging services into your organization's care offerings. In the coming months, CareClix will be releasing additional whitepapers about other ways to implement telemedicine into your care offerings, and how they connect to improved public health outcomes more broadly.

As your health system plans an entry or expansion of telemedicine capabilities, keep our strategic healthcare and business concepts in mind. Know your market, work with your providers, and cater to patient demand for convenience and quality care delivery. When CareClix partners with health systems, we offer a solution that is branded to our partner organization and geared to your targeted population of patients and providers.

After reading this guide, please feel free to contact us anytime if you would like to learn more about any of the concepts featured in this whitepaper or if you'd like to learn more about how CareClix can help your organization. We can be reached by phone anytime at **1 (855) CARECLX**, or by email at info@careclix.com.



John Korangy, MD, MPH, DABR
Co-Founder, CareClix

About CareClix

CareClix provides comprehensive, integrated telehealth applications, technology, and services that health systems can self-brand. As the only open telemedicine platform, CareClix provides out-of-the-box support for the most popular telemedicine carts, EHRs, and over 200+ medical devices. Healthline ranks CareClix as the #1 telemedicine company because we offer a seamless solution with advanced technical features and a dedicated team who helps tailor solutions to each of our clients. We've used this platform to help our customers implement telemedicine programs impacting over 4 million patients a year and counting.

Email

info@careclix.com

Call us

[+1-855-CARECLX \(227-3259\)](tel:+1855-CARECLX)



Sources

- 1 - <https://mydoctor.kaiserpermanente.org/mas/mapmg/news/blog/telemedicine.html>
- 2 - https://www.healthcatalyst.com/success_stories/emergency-department-triage-mission-health
- 3 - <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus12.pdf>
- 4 - <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/health/Tele-Triage-Cuts-Down-on-ER-Wait-Times-at-MedStar-438181163.html>
- 5 - <https://www.healthcarereportcard.illinois.gov/hospitals/view/101213>
- 6 - <https://www.aha.org/system/files/research/reports/tw/15jan-tw-telehealth.pdf>
- 7 - <https://stanfordhealthcare.org/medical-clinics/emergency-department/fast-track.html>
- 8 - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5654876/>