

Boston's Paradoxical Struggle with Doctor's Appointment Delays
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Imagine this: dialing your primary health care provider's office to schedule a visit for a medical issue, only to be told that there are no appointments available for the next 18 months.

This may seem far-fetched, but it is the reality for many Boston residents. The city is home to some of the best hospitals anywhere: Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston Medical Center and Brigham and Women's Hospital among them, and thousands of doctors. And yet, Boston has one of the longest wait times in the country for doctor appointments in the country, according to a [2022 Merritt Hawkins study](#) on physician wait times.

Indeed, Boston residents are grappling with a formidable adversary: the persistent issue of endless wait times for both routine and specialized treatment. Despite the city's renowned medical facilities and a reputation for cutting-edge healthcare, a growing number of Boston residents find themselves caught in a web of frustration as they navigate seemingly insurmountable barriers to timely medical attention. The problem is particularly acute for low-income residents in underserved communities who lack the resources to push through the barriers to health care.

"I feel like it is not a priority within the healthcare system for me to get an appointment, so then it just makes it not a priority for me, which makes me ignore my health," said Zahida Abdullahi, a medical student studying in Boston, reflecting the sentiments of many grappling with the city's healthcare conundrum.

The shortage of physicians, the frontline of the healthcare system, has become a pervasive challenge that resonates through every medical appointment delayed and each resident left waiting for essential care. According to a 2020 study by the [Massachusetts Health Quality Partners](#), over one-third of primary care physicians in Massachusetts are over 60, and the state exceeds the national average of physicians leaving their professions.

Michael Mancusi, the vice president and chief behavioral health officer at the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, states that this shortage of doctors is the root cause of the wait times for doctor's appointments. "What we're experiencing is the deficit of primary care providers. In our case, we have a very large provider group, close to 400 providers, but we always need more. I think it is a demand and capacity problem," he said.

The consequences of these delays are numerous, as routine check-ups turn into urgent medical matters. The delay in specialized care appointments exacerbates health conditions, leading to not only worsened outcomes but also inflated long-term healthcare costs. Due to a lack of resources and poor access to transportation, underserved communities are disproportionately affected and find it more difficult to obtain appropriate medical assistance.

Deborah Milbauer, a public health professor at Northeastern University, highlights the importance of addressing these disparities, as underserved communities in the Boston area face the brunt of the prolonged wait times. "This exacerbates health disparities because people are less likely to do preventative or primary care appointments. There are too many disincentives, which exacerbates access to care for more vulnerable people," she said.

“This is disproportionately affecting underserved communities because often due to their life situations— the social determinants of health. They often have to delay or postpone care, so when they come for [care], they need it,” Mancusi said, expanding on the vast impact of the lack of care on vulnerable populations.

As many residents struggle to find a consistent healthcare provider, they resort to urgent care clinics or emergency rooms for non-emergency issues, further burdening the healthcare system and driving up costs.

“Going to emergency rooms is way more expensive and it takes providers away from attending to the most critical care cases. It impacts everyone, not just the individuals who can't access care. It is a public health disaster,” Milbauer said.

The repercussions of prolonged wait times extend beyond inconvenience; they pose a significant threat to public health. Routine check-ups are delayed, transforming preventable health issues into urgent medical matters.

“There are many ignored health conditions, from early detection into full management. For example, a mom with young children is going to go get pediatric care maybe long before she's going to get her own care, so she hasn't discovered a chronic condition or has the opportunity to address it,” Mancusi said, highlighting the reality of many individuals who are unable to receive care.

Sitara Zoberi, a 26-year-old Boston resident, struggled to find a primary care provider for over seven months. “I called basically every hospital in Boston, every single place that I could find, and every single place said that the shortest wait time was seven months,” she said.

This seven-month-long process was not even her worst healthcare experience, as it took Zoberi over a year to get a dentist’s appointment.

“I have dental issues that are painful, like toothaches. So not having regular appointments definitely makes it worse. It makes me put my health on the backburner,” Zoberi said about her experience obtaining dental care.

Delaying medical care is a shared sentiment for Boston residents, which has a profound effect on the overall health of this city.

“If I need to see a doctor in a short amount of time, and I'm not able to see them, it makes me want to just push my health to the bottom of the priority list,” Abdullahi said.

As the city grapples with this healthcare crisis, healthcare providers and community members alike are collaboratively working towards comprehensive solutions.

“There's a serious lack of primary care doctors, and I know a lot of people are leaving medical school and residency and not finding a position like as a primary care doctor just because specialists make a lot more money. So, if there was more investment in primary care, then people

would be able to get preventative medicine and make sure that their health is maintained,” Abdullahi said on the future of primary care in Boston.

Milbauer stated that there should be financial incentives to boost individuals to work in primary care, specifically in lower-class neighborhoods. “We need to incentivize things like loan forgiveness, so providers will serve in neighborhood health centers, so that loan forgiveness is not just in rural areas but in urban low-income areas too. We need to utilize practitioners, physician assistants and nurse practitioners to be the primary care providers,” she said.

“More primary care providers would be the best thing for Boston,” Abdullahi said.