

Transforming cancer care: The role of digital navigation in rural health equity

Overview

- Huntsman Cancer Institute was instrumental in the development of the Digital Navigation ROI Calculator
- This new resource addresses the “distance as a disparity” issue and improves access to cancer care, especially to those in rural areas, aligning well with Huntsman’s population
- 77% of surveyed cancer patients are unaware of available clinical trials, highlighting the need for patient navigation services



[Huntsman Cancer Institute](#) at the [University of Utah](#) is the designated [National Cancer Institute Comprehensive Cancer Center](#) for Utah, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and Wyoming and proudly serves those with all types of cancer throughout the Mountain West.

[Dr. Carl Asche](#) leads the University of Utah’s [Pharmacotherapy Outcomes Research Center](#), which is affiliated with Huntsman Cancer Institute. As part of a diverse, multistakeholder team led by CancerX, he and his team helped develop the [Digital Navigation ROI Calculator](#) and other new resources to standardize navigation, workflows, and information for the Huntsman Cancer Institute and cancer centers nationwide.

We recently spoke with [Dr. Cornelia Ulrich](#), the Chief Scientific Officer and Executive Director at the Huntsman Cancer Institute. She shared how her team plans to leverage this new resource to harness digital innovation and reduce disparities in cancer care access, particularly in the rural areas they serve.

“These resources provide a blueprint that can be applied to numerous innovations in the field. The more we can utilize health economics to calculate various scenarios while considering new tools and modes of cancer care delivery, the better our decision-making will be.”

[Dr. Cornelia Ulrich](#)

Chief Scientific Officer and Executive Director of the Comprehensive Cancer Center, Huntsman Cancer Institute, Salt Lake City, Utah

Dr. Ulrich, tell us about your work at Huntsman Cancer Institute.

We proudly serve five states in the Mountain West—Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Nevada, and Utah—making this region the largest designated service area of any cancer center.

My background in mathematics has led me to believe that advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and digital oncology are crucial for our healthcare transformation efforts. Our work is a testament to our institute's commitment to driving change in cancer care through innovative technologies.

Currently, we are focusing on implementing large-scale, evidence-based prevention technologies through electronic health records (EHR). By modifying these records and collaborating with numerous organizations, including many federally qualified health centers, we are making significant strides in cancer prevention.

Why did you want to contribute to the Advancing Cancer Treatment Through Digital Innovation project?

In the five states we cover, many rural areas we serve are classified as frontiers, defined as areas with fewer than seven people per square mile. We cannot reach every individual through traditional clinic visits, especially in the winter when roads are closed, and there is no way to access a clinic.

To address this challenge, we are leveraging digital medicine, mobile health, and other technologies to connect with these underserved populations and tackle what we refer to as "distance as a disparity" with patient navigation. We are working to overcome barriers for rural communities, with digital oncology and digital medicine playing crucial roles in our efforts. These goals were very much in line with the Advancing Cancer Treatment Through Digital Innovation project, and we saw great value in participating.

How will the Digital Navigation ROI Calculator be applied to your work?

These tools are particularly valuable as we reach out to communities far from our cancer center, where many individuals are unaware of available clinical trials. Our recent survey revealed that 77% of the people we serve have never heard of such opportunities, highlighting the critical need for education and effective patient navigation.

When patients come to our center, we're dedicated to coordinating their care, addressing financial challenges, and making navigation support essential. The Digital Navigation ROI Calculator allows our navigators to leverage digital tools to quickly assess financial distress and streamline patient billing and reimbursement processes.

We're excited that this tool is ready to be used, and it will enhance our work in patient navigation and education.

In your experience, have you seen patients who can benefit from these resources?

Absolutely. Nationwide, we know that patient navigation positively impacts patients, caregivers, and healthcare institutions by ensuring smoother operations and enhancing the overall patient experience. With all the necessary tests and resources, navigating the complicated healthcare system becomes more manageable for everyone involved.

Our service area faces unique challenges, such as long distances and weather-related road closures. During inclement weather, connecting with patients and adjusting plans becomes critical. For instance, if someone is traveling from Wyoming and the roads are closed due to bad weather, it impacts our ability to provide care. Therefore, we recognize a significant need and opportunity for navigation, particularly in ways that overcome distance as a disparity for our rural communities. It's important to note that other underserved groups share similar transportation challenges, making this work vital for all.

In what other ways do you see this resource impacting the field?

This resource provides a blueprint that can be applied to numerous innovations in the field. As we harness AI and the power of data science, we have a unique opportunity for initial patient triage and predicting outcomes. The more we can utilize health economics to calculate various scenarios while considering new tools and modes of cancer care delivery, the better our decision-making will be. This framework is crucial not only for our institution but also for many others.

About CancerX

In February 2023, CancerX was announced by the [White House Cancer Moonshot](#) as a public-private partnership to boost innovation in the fight against cancer. At this time, CancerX was co-hosted by the [Moffitt Cancer Center](#) and DiME, alongside the [Office for the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology](#) (ONC) and [Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health](#) (OASH).

During DiME's tenure as a co-host of CancerX, we proudly contributed to leading this project and resource launch alongside Moffitt Cancer Center and CancerX members.