

# Contributing Factors to Avoidable Bypass

**Outmigration** happens when patients make a choice to receive care at facilities outside of their community. These facilities can be critical access hospitals (CAHs), clinics, or other rural health care organizations. When health care services are not available locally, patients must seek care elsewhere, a dynamic known as **unavoidable bypass**. In other cases, patients choose to leave despite local availability, driven by factors that influence access, perception, and preference. This is **avoidable bypass**. These patterns contribute to declining market share and revenue loss.<sup>1</sup> This technical assistance brief covers the factors that influence these decisions and offers tips to help rural health care organizations keep patients and essential services.

## Convenience

Patients seek care based on what is convenient to their daily routines. For instance, when someone's job is outside their local health care organization's service area, seeking care closer to work may become the best choice. Other factors such as limited appointment availability or access to primary care, therapy, or preventative services can lead patients to seek and establish care away from their local health care organization, often on a long-term basis. Updating scheduling systems, ensuring availability for established patients, and providing in-demand services can help reduce this avoidable bypass.

## Cost and Coverage

A patient's insurance coverage influences where they receive care. Restrictions and out-of-pocket expenses may require patients to seek services outside their community. Even when travel or access adds expense and burden, lower overall costs can drive the decision to seek care away from their local health care provider. If possible, providers should attempt to join commonly used insurance networks or offer affordable self-pay options.

## Privacy

Privacy concerns influence patient choice, especially in rural settings. Close-knit communities can increase the risk of perceived or actual privacy breaches. Even unintentional disclosures can erode trust. Patients who question confidentiality and trustworthiness may seek care outside the community. Investments in cybersecurity and training can help reduce avoidable bypass due to privacy concerns.



## Key Definitions

### Outmigration

When patients receive health care services at facilities outside of their rural communities.

### Unavoidable Bypass

When patients must seek care outside of their rural community due to the lack of local services.

### Avoidable Bypass

When patients *choose* to seek care outside of their rural community despite local availability.



## Experience

Patient experience is shaped by every interaction and environment they encounter, from scheduling, arrival, and through follow-ups. Perception is influenced by delays, poor communication, and inconsistent services. Interactions with staff heavily influence satisfaction, and a single poor experience can impact future care decisions. Improvements to and training in customer service and courtesy can improve reputation and decrease avoidable bypass.

## Physical Environment

A health care organization's physical environment plays a significant role in patient confidence and experiences. Outdated, dirty, and disorganized spaces may affect a patient's perception of the quality of their care. Modern spaces strengthen confidence and expand capacity for providers and services while reducing bypass. A 2020 study by the National Rural Health Association and Stroudwater Associates found hospitals that had remodeled or replaced their facilities reported annual volume growth of 3.9%.<sup>2</sup> While the Flex Program does not support physical improvements, supplemental funding may be able to support such efforts.

## Brand Awareness

Brand awareness occurs when patients and the community recognize the hospital, understand the services it provides, and view it as a trusted source of local care. Outmigration is often tied to limited brand awareness and low patient loyalty. Addressing outmigration tied to brand awareness requires organizations to use existing tools to build visibility, trust, and community connection. Tools such as Community Health Needs Assessments, engagement data, and consistent visual branding can help align services and messaging. This ensures organizations are meeting local needs, strengthening relationships, and positively influencing patient decisions.

## Social Media

Unmaintained or unprofessional social media accounts can weaken trust, create confusion, and leave patients with a poor impression of a health care organization. Relying on a single social media platform may also limit visibility. Broad, consistent, and professional presence can strengthen recognition, build trust, and keep the hospital connected to the community. Social media can also inform the public what services are available. Having dedicated and trained staff to manage and engage with social media accounts can reduce the risk of negative perception.

## Building Confidence

Patients may not understand how staffing and provider changes affect hospital operations, which can create questions or concerns about the quality of care. These doubts may result in them choosing care at other locations. Patients should understand that all providers and staff are qualified, integrated into the care team, and essential to keeping care local. This is especially important if an organization uses temporary or travel providers. Key messages of continuity of care, reliable access, and qualified professionals instill confidence and reduce bypass.

Addressing outmigration requires a focused approach that aligns services, experience, and environment with community needs. Each factor, from access to patient perception, plays a role in where individuals choose to receive care. Strengthening these areas supports retention, stabilizes revenue, and reinforces the role of the CAH within the community. For additional support, contact TASC at [TASC@ruralcenter.org](mailto:TASC@ruralcenter.org).

<sup>1</sup> Rural Hospital Closures - Sheps Center for Health Services Research, University of North Carolina. Accessed October 2025.

<https://www.shepscenter.unc.edu/programs-projects/rural-health/rural-hospital-closures/>

<sup>2</sup> Examining Rural Hospital Bypass for Inpatient Services. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. December 2020.

<https://www.cms.gov/files/document/ruralhospitalbypassfinalreport.pdf>

## The Three C's of Customer Experience

### Comfort

Interior spaces should feel calm and functional, with comfortable seating, neutral media, clean restrooms, and organized environments.

### Courtesy

Interactions begin before entry, supported by parking assistance and consistent, respectful greetings at every point.

### Curb Appeal

First impressions start outside, with safe parking, clear walkways, clean landscaping, and comfortable outdoor spaces.

