



CONVERTING RETAIL INTO CLINIC SPACE

Tenant-improved retail space for primary care is far less expensive than medical office buildings designed for more specialized care.

With so much retail space going vacant across the country, many healthcare systems are taking advantage of the reduced rental costs of these spaces to locate clinics away from their hospital campus, and closer to the patients they serve. Tenant-improved retail space for primary care also offer long-term benefits: lower rents, adjacencies to other community services and businesses, and strong brand recognition due to locations near busy thoroughfares or on public transportation lines. However, these conversions require careful planning with an understanding of how to blend both efficient clinic design with the nuances common to retail space. When transforming a commercial space into a healthcare outpost, HED has identified three critical categories to not only save design time and costs but to maximize the return on your investment over the long-term.

1 CURRENT AND FUTURE STATE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Before embarking on any retail-to-clinic conversion, it's crucial to conduct a full-range needs assessment addressing what is needed in the next 3 to 5 years, but also considering the 5 to 15 year timeframe, depending on your lease; your service line may currently need primary care for young families in your community, but as your patient population base ages your future need may necessitate accommodating health issues for older adults.

A well-defined needs assessment and intended program can radically impact what you need to look for in a former retail environment - space allocation, anticipated equipment, patient flow, and applicable regulations. Once the program and needs are clearly defined, it becomes easy to eliminate properties based on the next two considerations.

2 OPERATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Once your needs are fully anticipated, you are now in a position to understand how healthcare is delivered differently in a retail versus medical campus setting. This relates to everything from hours of operation to delivery of secured supplies and to security itself.



For example, a review of the proposed retail space should consider how 'after hours' is defined in terms of what ventilation and lighting will be available for staff or patients who may be seen in the clinic late or even on weekends. While the delivery of supplies is a common function for retail centers, the supplies coming in to a clinic may be restricted, sterile items or controlled medications such as vaccines; furthermore, the removal of hazardous materials needs consideration when leasing a space. One nuance clients don't always consider is security; a clinic may see patients who are stressed to begin with and from the parking lot to the doctor's office unexpected stresses can create a situation the retail landlord may not be equipped to handle.

3 ARCHITECTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Retail spaces often lack the necessary infrastructure for healthcare facilities. Consider the state of the below slab environment. Is there space or ease of access for the installation of additional waste lines and plumbing? Retail environments typically have far less water, wastewater, and waste disposal requirements and will not be equipped for most clinic functions as-is. Adequate utility and water connections going all the way to the street may also place a limitation on your ability to select a vacant space, so look deeply into what's available on the site in question.

Airflow is another key consideration. Most retail spaces lack the HVAC systems to turnover or filter air to code requirements depending on the clinic's function. But even if the clinic is performing less invasive services or mostly administrative functions, consider that most retail spaces are a single large area with small support spaces in the back, so HVAC and electrical

upgrades will likely be needed to control temperatures in any new areas created, including more lighting, installed equipment, etc. Selecting a retail space with ample floor-to-floor heights might also be necessary when upgrading HVAC systems, and a consistent structural bay dimension column-to-column will also give you greater flexibility in your systems improvements, equipment placements, and floorplan as the project progresses.

Converting an empty retail space into a healthcare clinic is a complex endeavor that requires a blend of architectural, regulatory, and healthcare industry expertise. By meticulously defining your needs early, you can easily select an available retail space that will convert faster and more efficiently so your investment can prioritize patient well-being and staff efficiency while serving your communities well.

By Sharon Woodworth, AFAIA, LEED AP BD+C, ACHA |
Healthcare Market Sector Leader
Explore more market and design insights at
www.hed.design/insights

HED