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Dialysis with a view: new clinics bring in nature

- *Northwest Kidney Centers is building two clinics with grouped treatment stations facing landscaped courtyards.*

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Imagine flying to Chicago from Seattle three times a week, every week, for the rest of your life. This is the typical time commitment for people on kidney dialysis. They sit in a recliner for half a day, connected by tubes to a machine that cleans extra fluid and wastes from their bodies. This is what keeps them alive.

Most dialysis clinics emphasize safety and efficiency over aesthetics. Some patients feel well enough to work on a laptop; others may watch TV, play games or sleep to pass the time. But the surroundings feel, well, clinical. And they quickly grow familiar for the 468,000 Americans who treat their chronic kidney failure with dialysis.

A not-for-profit health care provider in Seattle is set to change that experience. Northwest Kidney Centers has been a leader in the field since it was founded as the world's first dialysis provider in 1962. It will build its newest clinics with an eye to the healing power of nature. This vision aligns with its mission to promote the optimal health, quality of life and independence of people with kidney

disease.

Thinking differently

“We are now the eighth largest dialysis provider in the country and we rate exceptionally well in federal rankings of dialysis quality. Yet we’re always looking for ways to improve patient care,” says Austin Ross, vice president of planning at Northwest Kidney Centers.

Since the 1980s, research has shown that hospital patients with a view to nature have fewer negative observations and less pain after surgery. Similarly, employees with views of trees and landscapes took less sick leave per year than those with no view.

With its lengthy hours of confinement and intensive therapy, dialysis is comparable to inpatient care. Yet connections to nature have not been a focus of dialysis clinics in the United States.

Working with Mahlum, Northwest Kidney Centers has embraced the power of nature to enhance healing and support the comfort and well-being of patients and staff. Taking lessons from other projects, Mahlum has designed two new clinics with dialysis stations and recovery areas that are human in scale and connected to the natural world.



Renderings by Mahlum [\[enlarge\]](#)

Northwest Kidney Centers' Rainier Beach clinic will open next summer along South Trenton Street in Seattle.

Attuned to nature

The first new-concept clinic is under construction at 4401 S. Trenton St. in Seattle's Rainier Beach neighborhood. It's expected to open next summer. Mahlum's design gives all 12 dialysis stations direct views into a series of landscaped courtyards. During more than 150 dialysis sessions per year, each patient will enjoy views of lush plantings, seasonal transformations and the changing sky.

Patients will be clustered into “community-scale” groupings of four treatment stations rather than seated in a long row. The new arrangement will feel less institutional and it will allow technicians to be close to the patients in their care.

In the same building, community health education rooms will host free classes about treatment choices, preparing for dialysis, home dialysis options, nutrition and transplant. For those who choose self-dialysis at home, the facility will include two home-training rooms. At-home treatment avoids the hassles of travel for each dialysis session and it allows for longer, more frequent treatments, closer to the 24/7 schedule of healthy kidneys.



All 12 dialysis stations will face into a series of landscaped courtyards at the Rainier Beach clinic. [\[enlarge\]](#)

Northwest Kidney Centers selected the Rainier Beach location to bring treatment to patients in an under-served Seattle neighborhood.

“We already have more than 80 patients living within a mile of the new clinic,” says Ross, “but currently they get dialysis three times a week at Northwest Kidney Centers’ clinics in downtown Seattle or Renton. Many of those patients have mobility issues and/or depend on public transportation so their travel time can add up to one or two hours each way. This neighborhood location will greatly reduce their time devoted to dialysis and let them enjoy more of regular life.”

Promising future

Northwest Kidney Centers and Mahlum will also connect patients to nature in a large new clinic being built at 12901 20th Ave. S. in SeaTac. That clinic is expected to open in about a year, offering 20 stations or capacity for at least 120 patients.

“Leaders at Northwest Kidney Centers and our project team hope that bringing nature into treatment spaces helps humanize the clinical experience for patients and staff, and that it will influence design of the next generation of clinics around the country,” says Ross.

Early indications are positive. Clinical staff at Northwest Kidney Centers have already begun requesting the opportunity to work in the new Rainier Beach facility a year before its planned opening.

PJ Bauser, AIA, LEED AP, is an associate principal and designer at Mahlum who promotes the influence of the built environment on healthy communities across the Pacific Northwest.

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