Triage constituted a bottleneck at Wenatchee Valley Medical Center. The relatively new facility had nine emergency department beds and five fast-track beds; 50,000 annual visits were projected. From the start, the front-end processes caused patient dissatisfaction; therefore, the center implemented an improvement project.

The project entailed moving the triage nurse into the reception area, giving the nurse the ability to visually assess arriving patients and turning triage into a proactive part of the emergency department process. Wenatchee Valley adopted an on versus off approach. On means capacity allows the triage nurse to assess patients in an exam room quickly for acuity level and best method of treatment. In-depth nursing evaluation and registration take place in the exam room. Off means capacity is limited or full. In that case, the triage nurse does a quick assessment – less than a minute – in the reception area, determining the safest and fastest method of care and sorting the patients by level of acuity. The nurse monitors patients in the reception area by taking vital signs every 30 minutes and keeping track of lab status and similar needs. This figure shows the results of the project.