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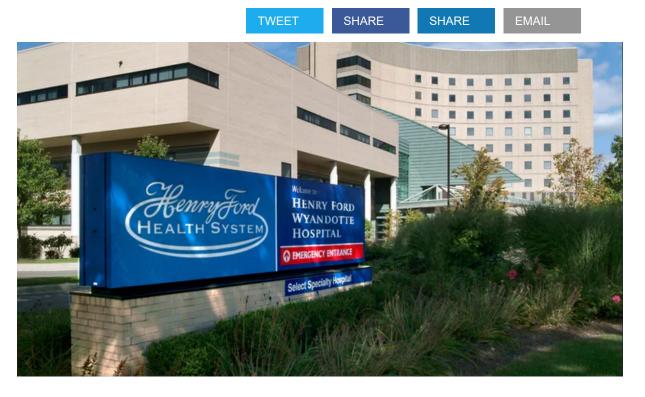
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Henry Ford Health System launches competition to tackle disparities with tech

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Henry Ford Health System is seeking out new ways to address health disparities with digital technology, including a focus on the digital divide, the Detroit-based system said Tuesday.

The system's Henry Ford Innovations arm on Tuesday unveiled the digital inclusion challenge, a competition it's hosting in partnership with Google Cloud and Novi, Mich.-based information-technology firm Miracle Software Systems. Entrepreneurs and engineers from across the globe are encouraged to propose ideas for how to use digital technologies to reduce racial, gender and other health disparities.

That could include projects that make care more affordable, accessible or that make it easier for patients who don't have access to high-speed internet access to learn about their health.

"We're open to seeing what comes our way," said Lisa Prasad, vice president and chief innovation officer at Henry Ford. "It's kind of an open book."

The challenge supports Henry Ford's broader effort to "double-down on DEIJ," or diversity, equity, inclusion and justice, Prasad said. Hopefully, entrepreneurs who participate in the competition will be able to help Henry Ford Innovations identify ways to better serve its patient population in Detroit and ensure patients are able to access emerging digital health and virtual care tools, she said.

The competition kicks off May 19 with submissions due June 24.

Henry Ford Innovations will reveal the top 20 finalists in July, five of whom will participate in a live pitch competition. That pitch competition will hopefully take place in-person in Detroit in August or September, Prasad said, although it will depend on COVID-19.

The winning team will receive $75,000 and will participate in a co-development program at Henry Ford Innovations, where the team can collaborate with the system's clinical, IT and other staffers.

Ideally, depending on the project, the winning team will also be able to test their project within Henry Ford, Prasad said.

The program builds on other innovation competitions Henry Ford Innovations has launched over the past five years, many of which have been internal competitions that seek proposals from staff that work at the health system, as well as innovation challenges hosted in Israel through Henry Ford Innovations' Global Technology Development Program.

Downers Grove, Ill.-based Advocate Aurora Health, Los Angeles-based Cedars-Sinai and Columbus, Ohio-based Nationwide Children's Hospital are among other health systems that have recently hosted accelerators and challenges to invite outside startups to pitch their innovations.

The American Hospital Association also hosts an annual innovation challenge, in which the industry trade group provides funding for three winners to developing projects they pitch.

It's become increasingly common for health groups to put out calls for startups to pitch proposals for specific problems, said Pam Arlotto, president and CEO of healthcare consultancy Maestro Strategies. Startups can bring expertise that health systems don't have, such as in advanced technology.

"Often, these partners will have complementary skills that the health system doesn't necessarily have internally," Arlotto said.

If a health system invests in the company or helps to commercialize the product, it can provide another revenue stream for the organization. And the startup often gets the opportunity to test its product in the clinical setting and get the recognition of being selected by the health system, which can help to raise awareness about the company and possibly help with fundraising down the line.

Arlotto said she expects to see more health systems launch competitions with partners from various industries, rather than hosting them on their own, similar to what Henry Ford Innovations is doing.

She highlighted a recent healthcare innovation challenge that Macon, Ga.-based Atrium Health Navicent hosted last year with local startup incubator Atlanta Tech Village, Georgia's Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society chapter and local technology association TAG Digital Health.

For Henry Ford's digital inclusion challenge, Miracle Software Systems is building the website and application portal for the program, and Google Cloud and Miracle Software Systems will also contribute educational resources. It marks the first time Henry Ford Innovations has formally partnered with Google Cloud, which has an office in Detroit, Prasad said.

Henry Ford Innovations will also reach out to local organizations in Detroit to raise awareness about the challenge in the hopes of recruiting more female and minority applicants. Prasad said she hopes Henry Ford Innovations will be able to identify entrepreneurs with promising ideas who can participate in future competitions, even if they don't win the Digital Inclusion Challenge.

"Great ideas don't come only from Henry Ford—they come from around the world," Prasad said. "We want to be at the forefront of implementing some of (them)."

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