ACTION BRIEF

Employer Strategies that Drive Health, Equity and Value

National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions

RAISING THE BAR FOR HIGH-QUALITY MENTAL HEALTH

ACTION STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS

1. Recognize organizational and personal drivers of mental health and high-quality care.

2. Build personalized, ethnically and culturally sensitive mental health support into the care structure.

3. Educate with deliberate and purposeful employee communications that resonate across a diverse population.

4. Hold vendors accountable for improving their services' affordability, timeliness, and appropriateness to each individual.

In a 2022 study by Gallup, nearly one-fifth of US workers (19%) rated their mental health as fair or poor; those workers reported about four times more unplanned absences due to poor mental health than their peers. Mental health issues in the US workforce cost the economy an estimated $185 billion annually in lost productivity and presenteeism.

CURRENT STATE: GAPS EXIST IN CULTURE, ACCESS, AND EFFECTIVE TREATMENT

In the last few years, employers have increased their focus on addressing the mental health challenges that affect their workforce. Despite greater resources devoted to mental health, however, new evidence suggests our approach to mental health and mental health services may still be lacking. The need for more personalized and higher-quality, accessible solutions is greater than ever.

To address coverage gaps and boost their current mental healthcare efforts, many employers are focusing on these key areas:
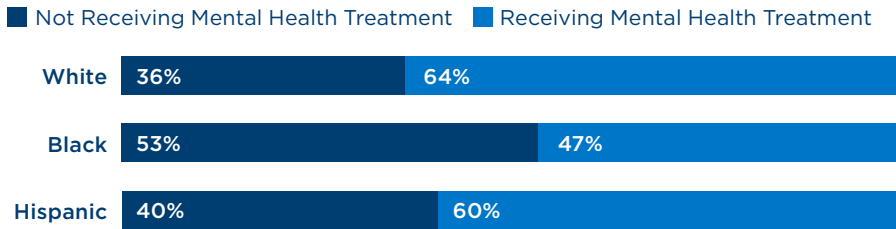
▸ **Personalizing wellbeing:** A broad cultural and programmatic focus on wellbeing is foundational, but it may fall short of meeting the holistic needs of the full range of individuals in the workplace. Understanding, engaging and supporting employees on a more holistic and personalized basis can dramatically improve results, both for employees and for the organization.

▸ **Re-examining stigma:** Breaking the silence on mental health was a start, but enduring issues of stigma are diverse and nuanced. While more employees are now willing to discuss their mental health at work, many still fear negative consequences such as discrimination or retaliation. Some cultures continue to view mental illness as a weakness to be overcome, rather than a health issue. And employee burnout can result from the lack of individual and organizational acceptance of the need for balance and recovery.

Thirty-one percent of employers were disappointed at the efforts being made to address gaps in access, and 66% did not feel their behavioral health directories truly reflected what was available to employees.

—*Survey by the National Alliance and the HR Policy Association*

Receipt of Mental Health Treatment Among Adults with Moderate or Severe Anxiety and/or Depression by Race/Ethnicity, 2019

■ Not Receiving Mental Health Treatment ■ Receiving Mental Health Treatment

Race/Ethnicity	Not Receiving	Receiving
White	36%	64%
Black	53%	47%
Hispanic	40%	60%

▸ **Promoting diversity, equity and inclusion:** Mental health support must be inclusive and culturally responsive to ensure all employees are well-served. Too often, services do not address cultural biases and socio-economic factors (e.g., historical adversity; health, economic and social resources; and educational tools) that disproportionately affect particular demographic groups. By practicing cultural humility, employers can seek to better understand (e.g., through employee resource groups) and intentionally support and include all people.

▸ **Improving access, affordability and effectiveness:** To improve access and better address affordability issues, employers must actively assess and manage their programs to ensure they provide access to timely and effective support. Ideally, services will be adaptable enough to match appropriate care to the needs and circumstances of each person, meeting them wherever they are in their life experience.

The following action steps can help employers promote a better

understanding of high-value mental healthcare and adjust programs to close gaps in care and lead to faster, better outcomes for employees.

ACTION STEP 1
Recognize organizational and personal drivers of mental health and high-quality care.

Workforce wellbeing and the mental health of the workforce are inextricably linked. No amount of support can mitigate the impact of a toxic workplace. Yet nothing improves individual wellbeing more than supervisors and leaders who are personally connected and responsive to the whole-person needs of employees.

Mental health, however, does not begin and end at work. Each person has a unique history of lived experiences,

Gaps in Employee Awareness, Utilization Have Consequences

4 in 5
employees report workplace stress affects relationships with family and coworkers.

34%
of employees say company leadership speaks openly about mental health.

38%
of employees say they would use their company's mental healthcare services.

Source: Mental Health America, 2022 "Mind the Workplace" survey of employees.

demands, and pressures that contribute to distress, anxiety and, at times, trauma. Mental health support must acknowledge these differences at the systemic level and engender trust by treating individuals with respect and empathy.

Gathering data to assess workforce mental health has been challenging, but recent studies indicate an increasing number of employees are facing mental health challenges and not getting the help they need. Employers who work with vendor partners to set expectations that include regular assessments fare better than those who do not.

McKinsey encourages employers to go beyond using claims or clinical analysis, gathering data based on employee surveys and "pulse checks," focus groups, lived-experience panels, and holistic assessments of benefits and programs, which enable the monitoring of employee and employer progress against stated health equity (including mental health) goals.

ACTION STEP 2
Build personalized, ethnically and culturally sensitive mental health support into the care structure.

High-quality mental healthcare is defined by the World Psychiatric Association as care that steers individuals to evidence-based treatments, promotes patient-centered outcomes, and supports whole person health. In addition, high-quality mental healthcare is measurement-based, providing culturally sensitive information and education that individuals find relatable and making continuous improvements in the ways it engages patients.

Ethnically and culturally appropriate employee communications about mental healthcare help lessen resistance to early diagnosis and treatment. Here are some communication strategies:

▸ Understand the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of employees. Knowledge of values, beliefs, attitudes, and

language preferences can be achieved through surveys or focus groups.

- Tailor communication on mental healthcare to each group's specific needs. Strategies can include using language and imagery familiar and relatable to employees and ensuring the communication is sensitive to cultural nuances.

- Partner with mental healthcare providers who have experience working with diverse populations and expertise providing culturally sensitive care.

- Provide education and training on ethnic and cultural awareness to managers and supervisors, who can set a tone of inclusivity.

- Use multiple communication channels and in-person meetings to ensure all employees receive accessible, appropriate information.

A recent PCORI-sponsored study shows that one specific type of patient-provider matching can increase the proportion of patients who return to health and productivity from 16% to 80%. Some types of matching—for example, based on gender, soonest availability, or provider-selected specialties—did not improve outcomes over the industry norm, in which most patients receive ineffective care.

The best matching method assessed patient needs with a multi-dimensional, measurement-based care tool, then gave clients a short list of providers with a history of statistically superior outcomes treating patients with similar profiles.

Through the PCORI study and others, patients receiving high-quality mental healthcare had greater reductions in primary mental health symptoms, less overall distress by the end of treatment, and more consistent treatment results than those receiving standard care.

Matching Therapists to Patients Improves Outcomes
David R. Kraus, PhD

David Kraus, clinical psychologist and president of Outcome Referrals, is coauthor of "Effect of Matching Therapists to Patients vs Assignment as Usual on Adult Psychotherapy Outcomes: A Randomized Clinical Trial," a PCORI-funded project.

Throughout my career, I've been on a quest to measure the unique skills of behavioral health providers and leverage them to improve population outcomes. Over the past 50 years, little has changed the fact that most patients do not benefit in a meaningful way from behavioral healthcare and only about 1 in 6 individuals returns to health and productivity. We are proud to report that our research is the first dramatic improvement in these success statistics, and our second PCORI dissemination grant demonstrates that the process is easy for health plans and providers to adopt and rapidly implement. In less than a year

"When patients are asked if they would like to be matched to a therapist who has historically helped patients with similar needs, 100% say 'yes.'"

—David R. Kraus, PhD

since dissemination began, a growing list of providers and health plans are supporting it.

Additional Observations from Dr. Kraus

Getting started: The necessary components of an effective patient/therapist match include: (1) rewarding the implementation of a multi-dimensional, measurement-based care platform that moves beyond simplistic measures like the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) to assesses things like substance misuse, suicidality, work functioning, and quality of life; (2) developing a data repository and risk-adjustment methodology to fairly compare provider outcomes; and (3) rewarding providers who speed patients to high-quality care with meaningful and obtainable value-based incentives.

Return on investment (ROI): There is enough return on investment from increased productivity and total cost-of-care savings to fund the above steps and leave a greater than threefold ROI for *both* health plans and employers.

Access issues: The most pressing issue facing employers is access to care, with industry-estimated wait times that are 6–12 months. However, if we do not commensurately solve the quality problem, patients have a higher likelihood of being harmed by care than being helped. Rewarding speed-to-quality-care solves both problems and provides the necessary economic incentives for health plans and employers to rapidly adopt the PCORI-funded innovation.

ACTION STEP 3
Educate with deliberate and purposeful employee communications that resonate across a diverse population.

Promoting worker wellbeing goes hand in hand with boosting workplace performance and, ultimately, economic and business success. Employers can take many steps to promote access to, and engagement with, mental health services.

Strategies include:

- **Raise employee awareness.** Educate employees about mental health through communication channels, programs, and training sessions that help them understand conditions, recognize symptoms, and reduce stigma.

- **Normalize through storytelling.** Storytelling, particularly by leaders, can help normalize mental health issues and build a culture of inclusion and acceptance.

- **Promote a culture of support.** Engage supervisors and the entire workforce to create a workplace culture supportive of mental health by promoting work-life balance, encouraging open communication

How One Employer is Championing High-Quality Mental Healthcare from the Top Down

Excerpted from a June 12, 2023, Star Tribune article. Read the full article here (subscription required).

David Moeller, founder and CEO of Inside Edge Commercial Interior Services, saw his retirement plans fall apart in 2019, when he was forced to return as the CEO of the Eagan, MN-based floor installation firm he founded in 2003.

Months later, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, wiping out 50% of company sales. To rescue his company, Moeller laid off some workers, took a Paycheck Protection Program loan, and quickly bought seven small companies in a last-ditch effort to diversify products and boost sales. *The actions saved the company but cost him his mental health.*

He was eventually diagnosed with COVID-induced depression and sought treatment. He then shared his story via video with his 250 workers and developed a "Take Five Movement for Better Mental Health and Wellness" program.

"The response was overwhelming," Moeller said. "I literally had 70 people come into my office or email me sharing their own mental health struggles that I never knew about. And I knew these people for years. It brought me to tears."

about mental health, and providing resources for stress management.

▸ **Offer easier access.** Partner with mental health providers to offer on-site counseling services or telehealth services. These make it easier for employees to access mental health services and reduce barriers to care.

▸ **Prioritize mental health.** Offering mental health days, so employees can take time off when they need it, can reduce the stigma associated with using time off for mental health reasons and demonstrate that the employer values whole person health. Even workplaces that don't offer mental health days might consider offering organization-wide time off that encourages employees to recharge and recover before and after periods of high organizational stress.

More ethnically and culturally appropriate mental health communications are another step toward health equity and greater employee satisfaction that can, in turn, increase productivity and retention. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers many employer resources on supporting minority mental health. Given the stigma associated with mental health conditions, particularly among certain employee communities, it's important to reach out with customized messaging and benefits.

ACTION STEP 4
Hold vendors accountable for improving their services' affordability, timeliness, and appropriateness to each individual.

A recent employer survey by the National Alliance and the HR Policy Association found that just one-third of employers were satisfied with access to behavioral health services through their network.

The following key performance indicators (KPIs) of best practices in vendor management can be used to support or enhance your vendor strategy:

▸ **Measure what matters.** Determine what's most important to your business, and emphasize the KPIs that your company values and that best support a healthy and mentally thriving workforce.

▸ **Set metric expectations.** Establish metrics that clarify expectations and offer vendors the right yardsticks to determine whether they are underperforming or meeting/exceeding expectations.

▸ **Set realistic expectations.** Use KPIs that determine and measure quality, access, and individual engagement. In addition, consider equity challenges for subpopulations that underutilize care. Consult your advisors to ensure that what you request is realistic and achievable.

▸ **Conduct ongoing review.** KPIs need not be static. Review them periodically, adjust as necessary, and advise/consult with your vendors as you consider ways to hone them.

The National Alliance recently offered a sample vendor-management tool to help plan sponsors better hold behavioral health vendors accountable for meeting critical quality performance requirements. The tool emphasizes the issues our research indicates are most important to plan sponsors and establishes realistic expectations for how vendors can truly take ownership of these issues.

If employers set ongoing expectations correctly (not limiting them to when they are "out to bid"), employees and their families will consistently be better served, and the overall behavioral health system will be more equitable and more responsive to the diverse needs of our people.

RESOURCES

- Behavioral Health Vendor Engagement Template
- Workplace Mental Health
- Implementing Matching of Patients to Mental Healthcare Therapists' Strengths (PCORI)
- Effect of Matching Therapists to Patients with Therapists (PCORI)
- Voice of the Purchaser Survey on Behavioral Health Support (Spring 2023 results)

- How the Advancement of Telehealth is Benefitting Mental Healthcare & Health Equity (National Alliance)
- Getting Back to Basics to Support Employee Health and Wellbeing (National Alliance)
- The Path Forward for Mental Health and Substance Use (National Alliance and strategic partners)

- American Psychiatric Association Foundation Center for Workplace Mental Health
- Measuring and Improving the Quality of Mental Healthcare: A Global Perspective
- A Treatment Improvement Protocol: Improving Cultural Competence
- Organizational Best Practices Supporting Mental Health in the Workplace

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Driving Health, Equity and Value

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