



U.S. EMPLOYERS AND BUSINESS COMMUNITIES LEAD AMERICA'S RESPONSE TO BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CHALLENGES DURING AND POST COVID-19

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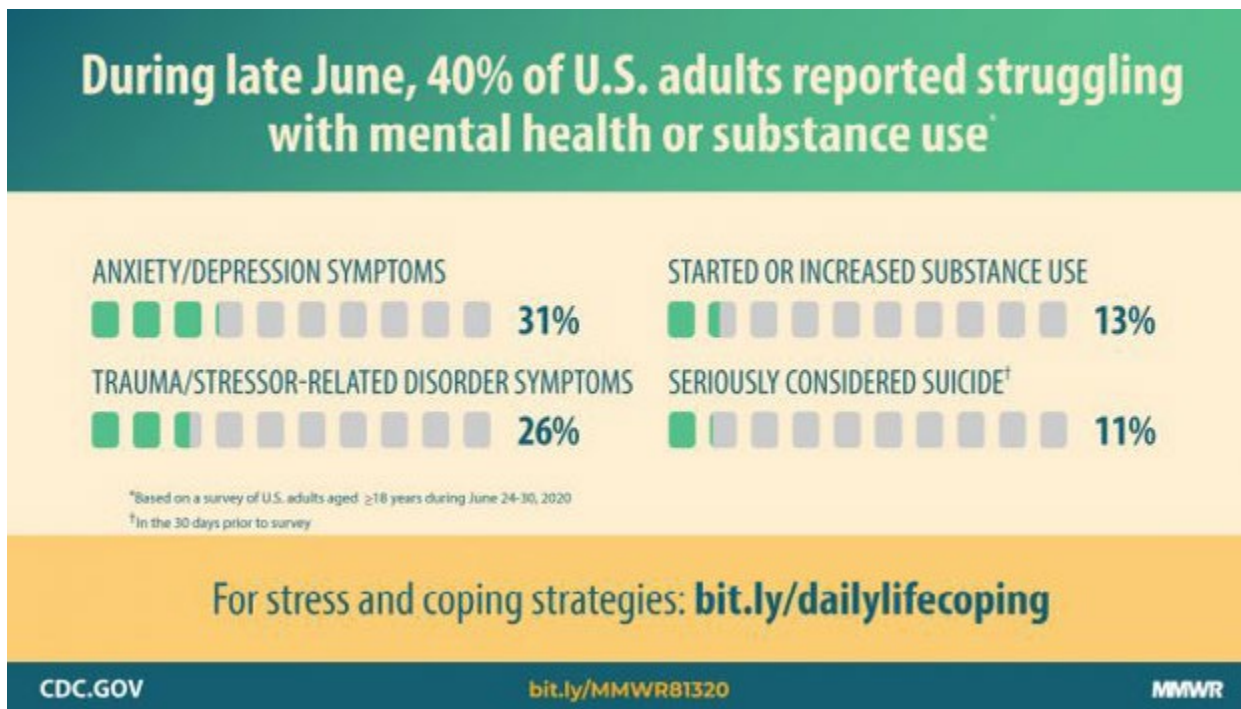
Support for Community Collaborative model galvanizes business leaders, healthcare systems, law enforcement agencies and community organizations toward a meaningful response to behavioral health issues.

Despite the economic fall-out of the current pandemic, COVID-19 is providing an opportunity for employers to reassess, discover and strengthen the fabric of communities and states across the country to proactively address behavioral health challenges created by the pandemic.

A growing number of companies are discovering the extraordinary value and impact of a community collaborative approach to effectively build solutions outside of government programs, take action and set the agenda for tackling the mental health problems that affect employees and their families: many adults report specific negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, such as difficulty sleeping (36%) or eating (32%), increases in alcohol consumption or substance use (12%) and worsening chronic conditions (12%) due to worry and stress over the coronavirus.

The impact upon mental health issues is palpable: findings from a study [The American Worker in Crisis](#) of more than 1,200 U.S.-based employees who receive health insurance through their employer show that 83% of American workers are experiencing mental health problems and are almost equally impacted by both the pandemic and the racial justice movement.

Meanwhile, 40% don't believe their employer cares about their mental health beyond being productive at their job. The research also found that amid all of the uncertainty and work disruption, employees who don't believe their employer supports their mental health are almost twice as likely to be considering a career change.



As the pandemic wears on, many people are experiencing situations linked to poor mental health outcomes, such as isolation and job loss. According to new research from the Economic Policy Institute, over the past seven pandemic-ridden months, more than six million Americans have lost the health insurance they previously received from their employer. Once spouses and children are taken into account, the real number is closer to 12 million. Other estimates from the Kaiser Family Foundation found that as many as 27 million people could become uninsured following job loss.

The good news is that by working together through community collaboratives and with employers and organizations taking the lead in supporting these initiatives, this tragic pandemic serves as a learning experience to move forward toward repair and improved access to care for behavioral health problems. Employers should view this as an opportunity to make positive changes.

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH IS COST-EFFECTIVE

A World Health Organization study reported the cost of mental health disorders in developed countries is estimated to be between 3% and 4% of gross national product, costing national economies billions of dollars in care and lost productivity. The average annual costs, including medical, pharmaceutical and disability, for employees with depression may be 4.2 times higher than those incurred by those without depression. Yet, studies show that the cost of treatment can be largely offset by reducing the number of days of absenteeism and productivity lost while at work.

Employers and company leadership teams are struggling to identify coordinated, cohesive actions to effectively combat these corrosive problems – many of which intertwine with behavior health problems.

A number of forward-thinking community organizations and projects utilize a collaborative strategy to effect change. Unfortunately, too often their outcomes across a complex network of issues, such as behavioral health, remain poorly understood – and can oftentimes generate unintended consequences in unpredictable ways.

UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF A COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVE

Apart from this current pandemic and its impact upon the mental health of employees, the marketplace recognizes and appreciates that businesses and communities across the United States face a barrage of serious issues, such as the opioid epidemic, economic disparities impacting access to healthcare services, gun violence, homelessness and many other problems that affect population health and well-being.

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Complex and severe community issues cannot be resolved by quick fixes but rather require a broad multiple stakeholder perspective and action plan to fully address every dimension.

The approach must be carefully constructed, responsible, far-reaching and lasting. When community organizations coordinate their work and join forces on innovative interventions, they can mitigate the “butterfly effect” that leads to chaos and chance circumstances.

The Community Collaborative model developed by the Thought Leadership & Innovation Foundation (TLI), a not-for-profit (501c3) organization formed in 2011 that is focused on driving innovative

thinking and action on global issues relating to health, education and economic empowerment, is designed to bring together all relevant groups and stakeholders. This includes those who have not traditionally been included to overcome the deep societal challenges related to health and well-being.

As background, TLI is a member of The Well Being Alliance which brings organizations and communities together to accelerate systemic change towards intergenerational well-being for all in the United States.

Alliance members are co-creating a common framework for action; adopting shared standards and metrics; assuring a focus on equity; and advancing organizational practice changes, public policies and investment strategies – in service of a broad-based social movement to achieve population-level well-being outcomes in the nation.

Additionally, TLI has collaborated with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the Institute for Alternative Futures (IAF) to support the Health Equity and Prosperity Project, a national engagement assembling multiple sectors.

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TLI developed common strategic action pathways that directly correlated to the work of 100 Million Healthier Lives (100MHL), convening hundreds of diverse participants who reached out to millions of people through social media to bring people together, share and cultivate ideas and information, and encourage progress toward a national culture of Health Equity and Prosperity.

TLI is a “force multiplier” with an approach that incorporates visionary and practical strategies designed to have a positive, supportable impact on a wealth of projects. Over the years, TLI has solved some of the most staggering societal challenges and is currently focusing its attention on employee access to care for behavioral health issues.

This can be accomplished by eliciting the input of an extensive grouping of local employers and healthcare leaders and serving as a depository for information and guidance needed in the event of a significant healthcare crisis, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic.

By developing partnerships with these leaders in public and private businesses the outcome will be a better-prepared community to deal head-on with behavioral health and related issues, without any hesitation or time lost due to a lack of preparation or resources.

By developing partnerships with business coalitions, hospital systems, community groups and others in targeted geographic locations, community collaboratives are creating plans for businesses to protect their communities and workforces.

This requires extensive experience with implementing community collaboratives, as well as involvement with government and community leaders. These collaboratives can be leveraged to launch a coordinated and educational outreach plan to business groups, coalitions, grantors and others with a vested interest in supporting these programs.

HIGH COST OF DEPRESSION

Depression is a silent epidemic that is widespread and costly to employers who pay an estimated \$44 billion each year in lost productivity due to depression. Employees with depression miss an average of 31.4 days per year and lose another 27.9 to presenteeism. About half of employees with depression go untreated, yet more than 80% who are treated for mental illness report improved levels of work efficacy and satisfaction..

SIX PHASES OF A COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

TLI's six-phase Community Collaborative model leverages various means to bring together organizations, people and data to meet the objectives of the collaborative. As the project progresses through the six phases, hard science is applied to the data collected while benchmarks, best practices and milestones are identified across the community.

The lessons learned, the innovation that emerges and the networks expanded in the community can spread throughout the rest of the country. Community teams will have the opportunity and support to publish their ideas and highlight their successes, as well as their lessons learned on a local, state and national stage.

POPULATIONS AT HIGH RISK FOR MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Mental health conditions are disproportionately affecting specific populations, especially young adults, Hispanic persons, Black persons, essential workers, unpaid caregivers for adults, and those receiving treatment for preexisting psychiatric conditions. Unpaid caregivers for adults, many of whom are currently providing critical aid to persons at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19, had a higher incidence of adverse mental and behavioral health conditions compared with others.

Elements of a learning community are utilized to address the most important issues from the perspective of the collaborative participants. The collaborative is focused on action and utilizes the structures and processes of a formal breakthrough collaborative to move from idea generation to action to implementation of innovation. This unique hybrid model benefits from the rigor of a breakthrough collaborative while maintaining the flexibility seen in learning communities.

CASE STUDY: LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVE (LAC³)

The County of Los Angeles is the most populous county in the United States and leads the nation in terms of job growth, the number of minority-owned business and being one of the top public health systems.

Unfortunately, LA County also leads the nation in unsheltered homelessness, poverty rate and STD outbreaks. While life expectancy is higher than much of the rest of the country, strong disparities exist within the county. A difference in life expectancy of nearly 15 years exists between the highest and lowest performing communities.

California had the fourth highest number of drug overdose deaths in the nation, 4,868 in 2017:

- In LA County, there were an average of 464 accidental opioid-related deaths per year from 2011-2017
- On average, individuals who died from drug overdoses died 30 years prematurely
- Hospitalizations and emergency department visits related to opioid diagnoses have increased 31 percent and 51 percent, respectively, between 2006-2017, with a substantial increase in costs associated with hospitalizations from opioid diagnoses
- According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health 2012-2014, the prevalence rate of misusing/abusing

prescription opioids in the past year in LA County is 4.7 percent, higher than the national average of 4.3 percent.

In most communities, the opioid crisis is slow to develop and lasts a long time. The areas of the country that are not yet in full crisis are experiencing a slow increase in opioid use. Communities may not notice the impending crisis until it is too late to prevent the destruction of lives and community resources.

For this project, TLI partnered with the LA County Department of Mental Health and the Department of Public Health to organize a community collaborative. By fostering the economic and social health of communities – while improving access to care and resources to prevent overdose – this approach strengthens virtually every member of the community. It takes a multipronged approach to build resilience among families and communities through actions that strengthen education, health and economic development.

Communities are empowered with the tools that they need to grow and flourish and develop lasting bonds with other communities. The idea is to harness the diversity, leadership and influence of the most innovative communities to create a model for the nation to propagate social capital and build communities of recovery and wellness in states, cities and rural areas across the country.

LOOKING FORWARD

Given the complicated fabric of society, solutions often overlap, intersect and carry unpredictable results that can be detrimental or sub-optimal unless a systematic collaborative approach is undertaken.

This requires a broad multiple stakeholder perspective and action plan to fully address every dimension of the mental health problems that are deeply associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

When community organizations coordinate their work and join forces on innovative interventions to impact behavioral health problems, they can avoid siloed actions that are not effective in solving complex problems, such as:

- Disparities in access to behavioral health care: race, gender, sexual orientation, rural vs. inner city et. al.
- Return to work, employee safety, productivity

- Social determinants of health (SDoH), such as food, nutrition inadequacies, housing insecurities, transportation challenges, social isolation and loneliness.
- Patient engagement strategies and outcomes measures
- Development of new programs

The COVID-19 pandemic is just another opportunity for business leaders to embrace these changes and proactively tackle the issues related to behavioral health. ■

PROACTIVE EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT = POSITIVE CHANGE

Several business groups are taking action. For example, The Mental Health Collaborative – a group of nine organizations that are members of the non-profit Midwest Business Group on Health – identified access to mental health services as the primary concern in the assessment and treatment of the disease. The group seeks to work across all stakeholders to identify and implement solutions. Their initial goal was to learn more about the barriers to access and benchmark Illinois against the greater United States. The initiative supports the 100 Million Healthier Lives Pathways to Population Health that engages employers and other key stakeholders to positively impact the lives that can be influenced within communities.

Building on existing efforts, this type of approach is based upon a process that organizes community resources, fosters public-private partnerships and supports key stakeholder actions. Well-orchestrated community-based collaboratives deal with the root causes of poor access to behavioral healthcare services and other factors impacting this public health crisis.

It centers on engaging community leaders from all sectors, inviting them to share their stories, ideas and innovation – moving them from dialogue to vision and action. By bringing together multiple groups throughout each city or region, the collaborative engages diverse organizations that deal with socioeconomic disparities, structural racism, resource injustice and the loss of a sense of community.

Interventions to disrupt the symptoms of a distressed community, such as a pandemic crisis, are critical but insufficient to promote community wellness. SDoH are among the most powerful cultural factors at work. They are either re-created by people or altered and can, therefore, be reshaped with the intention of improving mental healthcare services and healing social or economic ills.

Improved mental health has the power to change the position and growth trajectory of a company, helping the business to optimize the potential of all its employees and move toward better health, happiness and prosperity. Well communities that include robust businesses have strong immune systems that protect them from the diseases of despair and enable them to learn to grow through adversity.