



# The impact of social health on your workforce

Caring for your employees'  
social health is essential to  
ensuring their optimal health

## Do your employees face barriers to taking full advantage of their health care?

When faced with tough choices, employees may put aside health needs to ensure basic needs are covered. **In fact, nearly 50% of workers are struggling with basic needs – like paying rent, putting enough food on the table, or keeping up with bills.**<sup>1</sup>

As a business leader, you have a unique opportunity to help address the social drivers of health affecting employees. Use this guide to make small steps that can have a positive impact on employee wellness and the health of your business.

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The pandemic created additional barriers to good health, particularly for those already challenged by health inequities. In addition to mental health support, employers now also recognize their role in helping employees achieve their optimal health.

It is becoming clear how social drivers of health, like financial stability or access to child care, are linked to employee wellness – and are closely related to fostering a healthier workplace.

**In fact, the communities where employees live, learn, and work has more to do with health than individual behaviors; accounting for up to 40% of health outcomes.<sup>2</sup>**

Among all of the other things you have to do to promote a positive workplace, factoring in social health needs can feel overwhelming. However, small actions today can make a big difference tomorrow.

Just by developing a holistic understanding of your employees' physical, mental, and social health needs, you can create more effective health and wellness resources that benefit both employees – and businesses alike.

Before we dive into tips on how you can begin to address your employees' unmet social needs, here are facts on how social health impacts them.

# Social health is connected to overall wellness

After the Great Resignation, employers are now asking themselves what more they can do to foster a healthier workforce. It's clear that it takes resources, knowledge, and employer-investment to maintain employee well-being.

Before you can support employee health in the workplace, consider the influence their home life has on health. Although it is often overlooked, where employees spend the majority of their time directly contributes to their physical and mental well-being.

Underlying social health factors like access to fresh produce, a quality education, finding a secure job, or paying for safe housing, are inextricably tied to employee wellness and their overall health outcomes.

Imagine, an employee commutes from an area with higher crime rates, where the air is polluted, and there is limited access to fresh food options, or safe areas for physical activity. A lack of healthy community resources makes it that much more difficult for an individual to thrive.

Social health factors are often unseen or associated with lower socio-economic areas – but the truth is – **employees of all income levels can experience need.**<sup>3</sup>

Given the rising costs of living and mounting debt in many households, even well-paid employees could be walking a financial tightrope. **Studies show that 40% of U.S. employees could not cover a surprise \$400 expense, and 26% have a less secure living situation now compared to 2020.**<sup>4</sup> Both financial and housing instability are top concerns for much of your workforce.





Currently, 36% of U.S. employees with salaries of \$250,000 or more live paycheck to paycheck.<sup>5</sup>

## How does that impact your employees' health?

When forced to choose between covering a necessity such as housing, food, or even a car payment versus meeting a health care deductible; employees will choose the former over the latter. **In fact, 1 in 5 individuals prioritized paying for food or rent over health needs in the past year.**<sup>6</sup>



Employees with unmet social needs were almost

**7x**

more likely to report poor mental health.<sup>7</sup>

Employees don't leave social health at the door, they bring it with them to work every day. **Studies show that employees with unmet basic needs are around 2.4x more likely to have not received needed health care, and to have missed 6 or more work days in the past 12 months.**<sup>8</sup>

When employees are stressed about unmet basic needs they are unable to bring their full selves to work, creating a less than healthy workforce.

## Racial inequities impact employee health

As organizations begin to tackle implicit bias in the workplace, we also need to think how systemic forces can create disparities in health care and health outcomes.

**People of color in the U.S. experience higher rates of many illnesses, and shorter life expectancies.**<sup>9</sup> Studies show that people of color are screened for cancer at lower rates, and tend to get diagnosed at later stages – **resulting in Black people having the highest mortality rate for most leading cancer types.**<sup>10</sup>

Systemic barriers may be present in the communities where your employees live, work, and play, which can impact their ability to achieve optimal health outcomes.



An employee's inability to find, receive, and afford care can lead to more missed work days.

If Black, Latino, and Asian employees could meet their health needs – while missing the same number of days as white employees – the U.S. economy could expand by \$20B.<sup>11</sup>



One study found that individuals in the Armour Hills neighborhood of Kansas City, Missouri, live 14 years longer on average compared to those living in Blue Hills – only 3 miles away. Their health was directly impacted by environmental factors like exposure to air pollution, accessibility to healthy food, green space, and quality of local medical care.<sup>12</sup>

While many of these factors are out of the control of employers, understanding employee holistic health will help you create wellness solutions that fill in the gaps some of your employees may experience – for a healthier, more loyal, and engaged workforce.

The same person could achieve different health outcomes depending on where they live – and what health inequities they encounter.

## Neighborhood A

Ranked the healthiest neighborhood in town



Bike lanes and no litter



Fresh food nearby



Good school nearby and minimal crime



Parks and sidewalks for physical activity

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## Neighborhood B

Ranked most unhealthy neighborhood in town



Long commute and poor public transit access



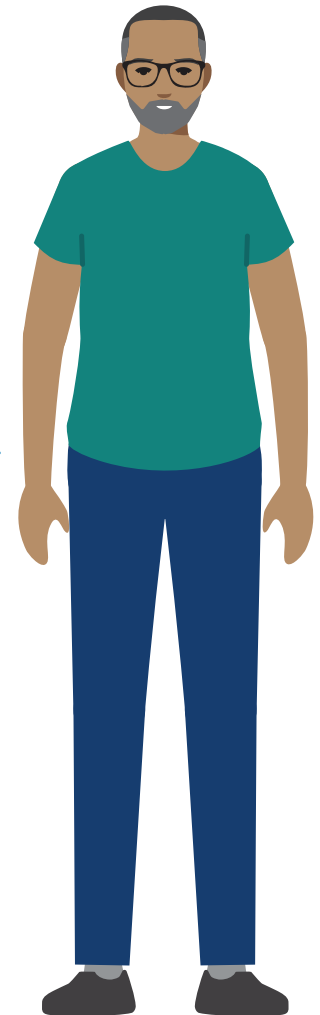
No fresh food nearby



High levels of crime and violence



Poor air quality



## Unmet social needs drive chronic conditions

When an employee is faced with living in a food desert – an area with limited access to healthy foods – they may have to settle for what is available at fast food or convenience stores. A lack of nutritious options can contribute to many illnesses.

These environments drive many chronic conditions such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and hypertension, which are the most expensive chronic conditions to manage.

**Chronic conditions affect 60% of employees and 90% of U.S. health care costs making it a top workforce wellness concern.**<sup>14</sup> Putting policies in place that encourage a healthier workforce can mean lower health care costs, reduced workers' compensation claims, and fewer sick days.



**Chronic conditions are the leading drivers of employer health care costs.**<sup>13</sup>







**Many employee wellness programs focus solely on physical health – like preventing chronic conditions, encouraging physical activity, or quitting tobacco.**

But leaving mental health out of the equation could be compromising the effectiveness of your current initiatives since mental health plays an important role in our physical health. Employees suffering with mental health conditions are more likely to:

- Smoke cigarettes more heavily and frequently, and are less likely to quit.<sup>15</sup>
- Develop obesity, as food can be used as a coping mechanism.<sup>16</sup>
- Have other health problems that wellness programs are designed to prevent, like diabetes.<sup>17</sup>

Incorporating mental health into your workforce wellness strategies can help support employees as they manage their symptoms, but only if the underlying causes are addressed.



**Depression is the leading cause of disability and the second costliest disease, behind diabetes.<sup>18</sup>**

**Mental health is shaped significantly by our social, economic, and local environments. Our environment and community shape how we see the world, how we respond to stress, and whether we have a better chance to thrive.**



The health of the world around you affects your mental, physical, and social health and impacts your quality of life.

# The cost of financial stress on you and your employees

Other social factors like financial instability can also impact employee mental health. With increasing cost of living expenses, many employees may be worrying about putting food on the table, or paying their mortgage. The mental health of your workforce and your company's bottom line are closely linked.

**When employees are stressed, they may not get enough sleep or exercise, impacting their overall health. Employees suffering from financial stress are 8x more likely to have sleepless nights and are 4x more likely to suffer from depression.<sup>20</sup>**

By understanding the source of employee stress, you can begin to tackle the root of their concern and create policies that directly impact their well-being. Let's discuss the immediate ways you can begin to address employee social health needs in the next section.



Untreated depression costs employers \$15,702 per employee, per year in health care costs, absenteeism, and lost productivity.<sup>19</sup>

# Strategies for employers to address employee well-being

Putting the pieces together helps complete the puzzle of employee total health and provides you with the power to transform your approach to benefits planning – for employees that thrive at work and at home.

With employees at every socio-economic level struggling to meet all of their social health needs, it's a workforce issue that needs immediate attention. To improve employee retention and attract a diverse workforce, consider implementing some of these social health strategies.

## Where you can start:

### Gather insights to make informed decisions

Identify employees' potential social needs by looking into demographic and utilization data, or by leveraging employee surveys. From there you can tackle the top needs in your workforce.

### Select a health care provider that prioritizes equity

You have the power to select a health care partner that champions equity through their care delivery. Ask your prospective providers if they:



Offer culturally responsive training to their employees

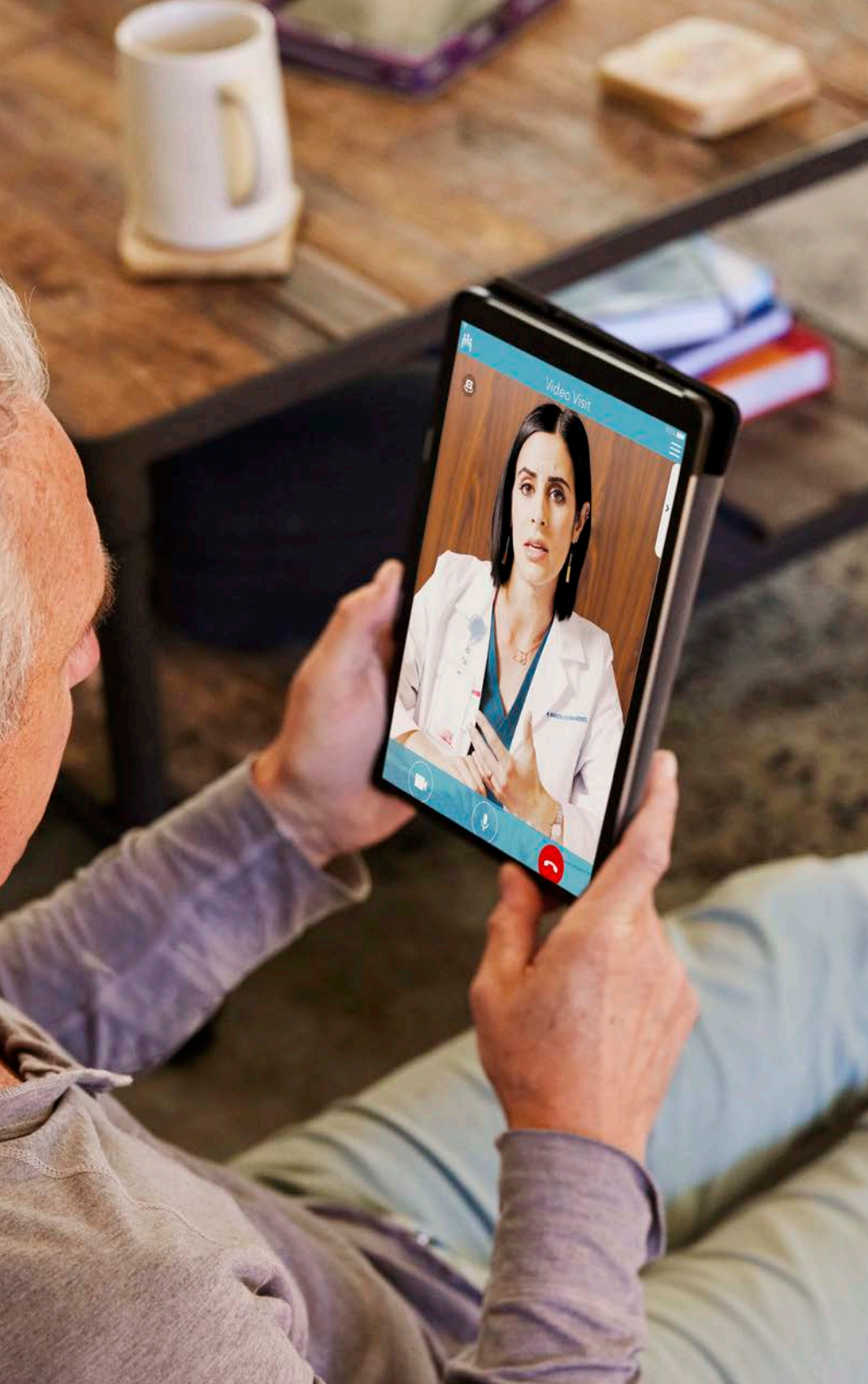


Ensure their own workforce is diverse



Collect and use data on race, ethnicity, and language to improve their quality of care





Let's look deeper into how you can support your employees' social needs holistically:



Social health need #1

## Access to health care

Look for health care partners that offer virtual care services integrated with in-person care. Virtual care helps remove barriers to care for your employees by alleviating some of the challenges they face in staying on top of their health – like transportation to appointments or needing child care.

With cost-effective and convenient virtual care, your workforce can:

- Help lower care costs
- Reduce time away from work
- Avoid expensive, unnecessary ER and urgent care visits



Social health need #2

## Food security

As the cost of groceries continues to climb, policies that address food security will become even more important. Increase your employee's access to healthier foods by:

- Offering discounts on meal or grocery delivery services
- Partnering with local grocery stores to provide employee discounts on nutritious foods
- Bringing produce markets on-site



Social health need #3

## Transportation

Access to transportation is one of the most important social health factors, according to the CDC. Whether your employees use public transportation, rideshare, or a car to get around reliability is essential. You can address this challenge by:

- Providing company-sponsored transportation to work for employees living in communities with unsafe or unreliable transportation
- Offering vouchers for Uber, Lyft, and other ride-sharing applications so employees can easily get to health appointments



#### Social health need #4

## Child care

Accessible and affordable child care has long been a drastically unmet need for working families and greatly impacts employee presenteeism. Support your employees with young children by:

- Enacting no-meeting days to allow for more schedule flexibility
- Subsidizing child care expenses for both in-person and remote employees
- Creating flexible work arrangements like remote work or reduced hours – and a culture that reinforces this policy



Social health need #5

## Housing stability

Housing instability encompasses many things like difficulty paying rent, or spending the bulk of household income on housing. This can negatively impact employee health as employees will likely prioritize a roof over their head rather than health care.

Begin to address employee housing concerns by:

- Assisting employees in navigating state and local financial assistance programs
- Creating rental assistance programs
- Offering homebuyer workshops or homeownership counseling courses



Social health need #6

## Education

Employees who have access to quality education throughout their lives tend to stay healthier as education not only gives individuals a chance at better financial circumstances, it also keeps them better informed about how to take care of their health.

Create equitable chances for all employees to advance by:

- Ensuring the pathways and qualifications to promotions are clear for increased transparency
- Allowing flexible scheduling for employees to take additional classes, receive certifications, or advance through degree programs





## You have the power to impact employee well-being

When employees' basic needs are met, they are relieved of making the tough choices between addressing their own social health and receiving necessary health care – allowing them to more fully participate in the benefits you offer.

From increased productivity and better management of care costs to staff retention and increased quality of life, business leaders are on the front lines of the talent wars, adapting by creating programs that more accurately address the needs of their workforce.

While you cannot solve all of your employees' social health needs, just understanding and working towards removing barriers will foster a workplace focused on total wellness.

**Interested in learning more? Let's talk!**

[Contact us](#)

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