

Enhancing Employer Mental Health Approaches

PUBLIC REPORT



National Alliance
of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions
Driving Health, Equity and Value

Background



In today's evolving workplace, employers nationwide are recognizing a critical need: Addressing mental health challenges with a meaningful, proactive approach. The impact of mental health on productivity, engagement, and overall employee wellbeing is undeniable, with [recent data](#) showing that nearly 1 in 5 U.S. adults experienced mental illness in 2022. As mental health conditions continue to rise, forward-thinking companies are stepping up to ensure that employees receive the right care, at the right time, through the right approach.

One of the greatest challenges in developing effective mental health strategies is ensuring comprehensive, easy-to-access coverage. Many employees report challenges in finding mental health professionals within their network or facing long wait times for appointments—obstacles that delay support and hinder recovery. Employers are now aiming to overcome these barriers by expanding network access, advocating for mental health parity, and, in many cases, integrating mental health resources into primary care settings. When mental health support is embedded into the

broader healthcare framework, employees benefit from streamlined access to care, reduced stigma, and increased utilization of essential mental health resources.

Employers must be more committed than ever to creating and fostering a supportive environment where mental health is an integral part of the workplace culture. By focusing on the right coverage, approach, and timing, employers can set a new standard for mental health care—one that promises not just to support employees, but to cultivate a healthier, more resilient workforce.

In response to growing mental health challenges within the workforce, a recent national initiative was developed to bring employers together to advance mental health support strategies. Spearheaded by the [National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions](#) (National Alliance), the initiative enabled employers to develop tailored strategies to make a lasting impact within their organizations. Whether it was improving workplace mental health support or enhancing integration with existing healthcare systems, the project equipped employers with tools and knowledge to influence change.

Employers from a variety of regional coalitions took part in this transformative mental health initiative, bringing together leaders from organizations across the nation. Key participants included the [Florida Alliance for Healthcare Value](#), [Greater Philadelphia Business Coalition on Health](#), [HealthCareTN](#), [Healthcare Purchaser Alliance of Maine](#), [North Carolina Business Coalition on Health](#), and [Mid-Atlantic Business Group on Health](#). These coalitions were represented by employers from mid- to large-size companies, all focused on integrating enhanced mental health support into their workplaces. By combining their unique perspectives and sharing best practices, participants have committed to implementing insights gained in the workshops to drive sustainable improvements in mental healthcare for their employees.

Addressing Gaps in Mental Health Coverage and Trust in the Workplace

The first step in closing gaps is defining the problem, then working it into a structure that informs choices such as selecting a vendor, identifying new solutions, and progressing to understanding workforce communications needs.

Recent [data](#) reveals a concerning gap in mental health coverage awareness: Only 43% of employees report that their employers offer health insurance for mental health and substance use disorders (SUD). This limited awareness points to a significant issue. Not only are many employees unaware of the resources available to them, but those with coverage often don't fully understand how to access mental health support when they need it. The result is a perceived lack of coverage and support, which can exacerbate mental health struggles, especially for those navigating recovery and ongoing care.

Building awareness of available benefits through clear, multi-channel communication is vital. Without transparent communication strategies, employees may feel isolated and unsupported, even in workplaces that provide generous mental health resources. By actively promoting mental health benefits and continuously

explaining how to access them, employers can bridge this gap and create a more inclusive environment.

Another challenge is that [42% of employees](#) feel their employers don't genuinely care about their mental health, which points to an issue of trust and communication. When employees believe their mental health isn't valued, they may be less likely to seek help, even when assistance is available. This perceived indifference can create a barrier to open conversations about mental health, leaving employees to cope in silence rather than benefiting from supportive resources. Establishing trust through consistent, empathetic communication is essential.

[About 40% of employees](#) say their work environment negatively impacts their mental health. In high-stress roles—such as healthcare, customer service, or first responder positions—employees often face emotionally demanding tasks that require them to continually express empathy. The work itself can be a mental health stressor, adding urgency to the need for comprehensive mental health support. This means some benefit leaders are working within an environment that inherently compromises mental health, which must be given special consideration when developing a psychologically safe workplace.

Employers are missing opportunities to provide effective support

43%



Only 43% of employees report that their employers offer health insurance coverage for mental health and substance use disorders.

42%



About 42% of employees believe their employers don't care about them

45% of employees believe senior leaders do not understand what employees "need and want" in their lives

40%



About 40% of workers find their work environment negatively impacts their mental health

For U.S. and U.K. employees,

- ▶ **47%** report most of their stress comes from their work
- ▶ **77%** report work stress negatively impacts their physical health

Key Highlights and Takeaways

Addressing Barriers and Issues

Each employer encounters unique barriers while dealing with resource limitations and triaging complex issues within the workforce. The issues include mental health stigma, inconsistent communication about resources, and challenges reaching diverse employee populations. As such, there has been a stronger focus on providing sufficient mental health support for a continuum of needs, especially for underserved groups like those without primary care physicians (PCPs) and dependents who are not utilizing available services. Some of the barriers that employers are encountering include:

- ▶ **Mental Health Stigma** – The National Alliance [Pulse of the Purchaser survey](#) revealed 74% of employers are actively using leadership training and targeted campaigns to reduce stigma and bias associated with mental health needs. Many are also offering [Mental Health First Aid](#) training and creating toolkits to help normalize mental health conversations.
- ▶ **Access to Resources** – Employees can face barriers when trying to engage with mental health resources. Factors such as stigma; racial, ethnic and cultural considerations; lack of awareness; or logistical constraints can prevent individuals from seeking help. Asking the right questions to understand these barriers can reveal valuable insights, providing a clearer picture of changes needed to improve accessibility. Employee surveys are one effective tool for gathering this information, giving them a voice to share experiences and identify gaps.

Many employers have expanded their mental health benefits, such as removing co-pays for behavioral health and increasing the number of therapy sessions. They are also leveraging telehealth solutions to enhance flexibility and access.

- ▶ **Communication Barriers** – Another essential element in a successful mental health strategy is determining the most impactful way to reach specific employee communities. Communicating about available mental health services remains a key challenge, with employers focusing on improving outreach, especially for racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse employees and their families.

“Delivering care in critical life moments can help employers address the pronounced perception gap around employee care – that is, the difference between the number of organizations that say they demonstrate care and the proportion of employees who feel cared for.”

—METLIFE 2024 EMPLOYEE BENEFIT TRENDS STUDY



- ▶ **Intergenerational Workforce** – Given the diverse needs within any workforce, mental health initiatives must be adaptable, catering to the unique demographics and stressors of each workplace. For example, younger employees may respond better to digital therapy options or mindfulness apps, while others prefer in-person counseling. Offering diverse mental health offerings, from digital therapy platforms to employee assistance programs (EAPs), serves a variety of preferences.

► **Availability of Resources** – Understanding the right time to increase promotion of mental health support is important. research shows that proactive outreach during high-stress times (e.g., performance reviews or major organizational changes) can make a significant difference in overall engagement and mental health outcomes. Additionally, training managers and team leaders to recognize signs of mental distress can lead to timely interventions, fostering a workplace culture where employees feel safe seeking help when they need it most.

► **Culture of the Organization** – The culture of an organization plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of its mental health strategy. A supportive workplace culture goes beyond policy; it shapes how employees perceive their value within the organization, especially when they face personal challenges. Supporting employees through their mental health struggles means fostering an environment where they feel genuinely valued, even during difficult times.

This responsibility isn't a burden on the employer, nor is it a shortcoming on the part of the employee. Instead, it's a shared commitment to building a space where people can thrive, regardless of how they feel on any given day.

Emerging Solutions

- **Tele-behavioral Health:** Widely adopted for its accessibility, it offers quick and cost-effective mental health support. However, some employees may still prefer in-person care or may face barriers to accessing virtual services.
- **Onsite Clinics:** These provide immediate, direct access to care but may be costly to implement and maintain, especially for smaller organizations.
- **Enhanced MH Benefits (e.g., more therapy sessions, no co-pays):** These can reduce financial barriers to care but require careful cost management to as they may create significant healthcare cost increases.

Health Equity in Mental Health

Mental health challenges impact people in unique ways based on their background, identity, and lived experience; a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective. Trusted relationships between patients and mental health professionals are built when there is a shared understanding of specific needs.

Many people with lower incomes and from certain ethnically and culturally diverse communities commonly encounter additional obstacles when seeking mental health treatment. One [study](#) found that biases within the provider community can create even greater barriers to getting appointments, and



“Like many people in the African American culture, I grew up thinking that therapy was a bad word, or therapy is not for me—therapy is for white people, therapy is for crazy people. So, it took a lot of work to open my eyes to see that asking for help is not a weakness. In fact, that’s a strength, saying I need this. That’s a superpower.”

—WAYNE BRADY, COMEDIAN, ACTOR, ENTREPRENEUR

mental health stigma is more prevalent in certain communities. For example, there's [historically been a stigma](#) regarding mental health and getting help in Black communities. Data show that just [one in three](#) African Americans with mental health struggles will get treatment.

[Only 5% to 7%](#) of mental health care providers in the US are from racial or ethnic minority communities, so the need for cultural awareness in the broader provider community is critical.

Employers are encouraged to embed these issues into their performance assessment and selection of service vendors to enhance the quality of personalized care. The National Alliance [Behavioral Health Vendor Engagement Template](#), along with the Action Brief, [Raising the Bar for High-Quality Mental Health](#) can help with vendor assessment and selection.



Building a Comprehensive Strategy

To think about mental health effectively, employers are encouraged to develop a comprehensive strategy for mental health support and care for employees. A single solution cannot meet the needs of the entire workforce. Building a comprehensive employer mental health strategy requires an impact-driven approach that incorporates insights from key stakeholders and coordinates the support of health plans, vendors, and employers in ways that are accessible and accountable. The National Alliance publication, [“Employer Mental Health Strategies: An Essential Investment”](#) sets forth actionable options.

A mental health strategy can be the cornerstone for driving conversations around enhancing care management, integrating mental health into primary care, and aligning mental health strategies with broader business goals. Taking the following steps can help assess current initiatives and identify areas for improvement within an existing mental health strategy.



Step 1: Identify Top Access Challenges

- ▶ Start by pinpointing the primary barriers employees face in accessing mental health care, whether these are logistical, financial, or related to stigma within the workplace, through a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures.

Step 2: Choose Optimal Vendors and Health Plans

- ▶ Selecting the right mental health vendors and coverage options that correspond to the identified needs and priorities of the employee populations helps ensure employees have access to high-quality, affordable mental health resources tailored to the unique attributes of the workforce.

Step 3: Develop Key Success Metrics

- ▶ Establishing clear metrics that extend beyond utilization (e.g., employee satisfaction, utilization by target populations, reduced costs for health or disability, reduced absentee or turnover rates, and sustained program engagement) helps track progress and impact over time.

Step 4: Analyze Relevant Data Regularly

- ▶ Regularly reviewing data and comparing to employee insights allows employers to stay responsive to emerging trends, adjust resources, and address areas where support may be lacking.

Step 5: Improve Workplace Benefits and Procedures

- ▶ Comprehensive support for workplace mental health benefits is essential in creating a supportive, stigma-free environment where employees feel encouraged to seek help. Communication strategies that emphasize upstream, along with holistic, interventions can be integrated into formal workplace policies. Similarly, ensuring supervisors and managers are trained to guide employees to the care they need supports consistency across the organization. A robust support system guides employees through different levels of need, offering clear resources and direction.

Using these steps as an approach can deliver tangible, actionable results to enhance an employer health benefit strategy.

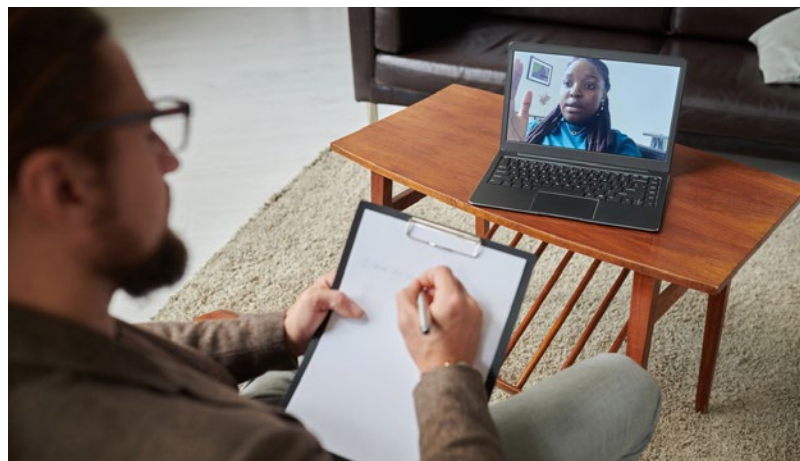
Committed Action Steps

The urgency for enhanced mental health strategies is rooted in a simple truth: Employees perform best when they feel personally and professionally supported.

A well-designed mental health plan goes beyond traditional benefits, meeting employee needs with practical, timely support that integrates seamlessly with broader healthcare coverage. This entails building strategies that provide targeted care when it's needed most, fostering a culture where mental health is prioritized to the same degree as physical health.

To proactively strengthen mental health strategies, participating employers are applying the core principles they gained from the learning initiative. Their shared goal is to ensure their workforce has access to the support needed to navigate mental health challenges, now and in the future. Below are some of their direct reflections on this journey:

- ▶ “We are going to make our mental health awareness training completely virtual/self-led so more employees have access.”
- ▶ “We are considering augmenting our de-escalation training with [Mental Health First Aid](#) training.”
- ▶ “We will be promoting our \$0 co-pay mental health telehealth visits.”



Develop Metrics for Success

- ▶ “We will work to develop metrics to track our utilization and success, as well as gaps in access.”
- ▶ “We are currently developing our strategy, so we plan to look at resources, access, and promotion.”
- ▶ “We will offer a survey about current offerings and how to enhance deliverables.”

Improving Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

- ▶ “Having two to three EAP therapists to present onsite and virtual sessions — different strokes for different folks.”
- ▶ “The earlier the better with EAP.”
- ▶ “We will check utilization of our EAP, which is a value-add from our life insurance provider.”
- ▶ “We will continue to ask vendors to provide accessible services to our employees.”

Participating employers voiced a strong commitment to advancing their mental health strategies by taking targeted, impactful actions over the next two to three years. These actions are designed to address key areas of need within their organizations, with the goal of creating a more supportive and resilient work environment.

Expanding Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and Onsite Support

- ▶ “We will offer a full-blown EAP program.”
- ▶ “Onsite sessions by credentialed mental health professionals for first responders will be added.”
- ▶ “We are exploring implementing a preventive mental health screening option with our EAP provider.”

Enhancing Mental Health Communication and Awareness

- ▶ “We will mention mental health in all health plan communications.”
- ▶ “We plan to look at chronic condition data from the medical plan to tailor our mental health communications.”
- ▶ “We are exploring creating a mental health resource sheet/one-pager to send out to employees periodically and post on the intranet.”

Promoting Workplace Balance and Inclusive Training

- ▶ “We will ensure our workplace offers balance to support good mental health.”
- ▶ “We plan to continue offering training and resources to destigmatize the issue.”
- ▶ “Culturally appropriate sessions aimed at the city’s diverse cultural ecosystem will be enhanced.”

By making these commitments, employers are not only addressing immediate mental health needs but also laying the foundation for long-term cultural shifts within their organizations. These efforts will contribute to reducing stigma, improving employee wellbeing, and creating healthier, more productive workplaces. As companies enhance mental health strategies, they serve as examples of how businesses can take proactive, sustained action to support workforce mental health.

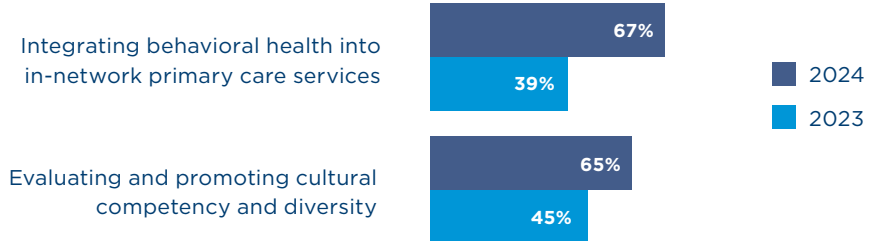


Recommendations for Employers

Purchaser Perspectives on Mental Health

Employers expand mental health efforts; uptake grows by 28% and 12% from 2023 on the following strategies:

Comparison of Currently Doing from 2024 and 2023



Focus Areas	Key Takeaways
<i>Information Gathering</i>	Use employee wellbeing surveys and qualitative feedback through focus groups, health assessments, program participation rates, etc. Some indirect ways to gather information are to use productivity and performance, retention, healthcare claims and costs, culture and engagement scores, or a reduction in stress-related incidents or reports of workplace conflict.
<i>Accessibility</i>	Expanding to a text-based service through an app to reach shift workers and younger demographic employees, consider increasing telehealth options, eliminating co-pays for mental health services, and offering more flexible solutions like increased therapy sessions or on-site care.
<i>Communications</i>	Focus on improving the visibility of mental health resources through tailored communication campaigns and leveraging diverse channels to reach all employees, including dependents. Generational differences in the workforce create challenges for effective communication and mental health support, with different expectations, language, and reported conditions among different age groups. Adding mental health programming to onboarding and role transition resources.
<i>Enhancing Benefits</i>	Provide on-site access to services such as screenings, a mental health resource, etc. Incorporate mental health services into existing onsite primary care clinics and providing telehealth options. Remove non-quantitative treatment limits, such as prior authorizations and step therapies.
<i>Increase Utilization</i>	Reaching out to spouse/home and including families in health fairs and other educational events. Have leaders and managers actively endorse and participate in mental health programming. Share information about flexible resource options like telehealth and 24/7 availability.
<i>Evaluate Vendor Solutions</i>	Carefully assess mental health service vendors to ensure they are meeting the specific needs of the evolving workforce, including culturally relevant care.
<i>Leadership Training</i>	Implement leadership training programs, such as Mental Health First Aid , to equip managers with tools to recognize and support employees with mental health needs. Require manager training on mental health, or mental health check-ins based on specific circumstances to target harder-to-reach groups.

Improve Effectiveness and Impact	Leveraging mental health champions/ambassadors/advocates or leaders in employee business groups/business resource groups within the workforce to tap into experts about what happens within the worksite. Equip them with resources to ensure message consistency.
Third Party Assessment	Explore self-assessment tools or assessments/partnerships to help deliver an effective strategy such as: Mental Health America BELL Seal , One Mind at Work Mental Health at Work Index , National Wellness Institute , URAC Mental Health at Work Accreditation .

Additional Steps Employers Can Take

The five steps presented in this National Alliance resource, [“Employer Mental Health Strategies: An Essential Investment,”](#) are designed to be the foundation of a robust employer mental health strategy. If employers are having trouble understanding where to begin, they can take the following actions:

1. Build internal leadership support for mental health programming and destigmatization within the organization. Train senior leaders and executives on creating a positive mental health culture (e.g., [Mental Health First Aid Training](#)) and consider appropriate leadership opportunities to discuss mental health such as during organization-wide meetings.
2. Speak with colleagues in HR or leadership roles in the same industry to learn how employers

with similar geographic, workforce, or work-type concerns are approaching mental health and deploying support and services.

3. Engage with networks such as the National Alliance and its member coalitions to explore available resources (e.g., the [Behavioral Health Vendor Engagement Template](#)) and engage in discussions about advancing mental health benefits.
4. Bring in external mental health experts to advise on how to tackle certain strategic questions facing the organization, build specifics around mental health programming, and manage challenging employee issues, such as serious mental illness or risky, high-cost behaviors. Staff members from the National Alliance and its member coalitions can help advise on which nonprofit organizations or community providers are most suitable to meet particular needs.



Summary/Going Forward

This learning initiative was just the beginning of a movement toward more comprehensive mental health strategies in workplaces nationwide. Participating coalitions and employers are now positioned to lead by example, showcasing the value of prioritizing mental health in the workplace and how these efforts can create healthier, more resilient organizations. By 2025-2028, the outcomes of this initiative will be seen in workplaces that not only support their employees mental health but are also better equipped to navigate the complex challenges of today's business environment, where employee wellbeing is linked to organizational success.

As the National Alliance looks ahead to continuing supporting coalitions and their employer members, several key areas have been identified as important next steps. Forums that enable participants to learn and collaborate on shared mental health challenges will continue to provide valuable resources and strategies,

showcasing how others are successfully navigating and implementing mental health initiatives.

Additionally, most participating employers want to learn more about how to improve communications as they address the diverse needs of an intergenerational workforce which is becoming increasingly essential. Finally, ongoing efforts to support employers with ensuring the mental health parity requirements are being met, through education and providing resources about regulatory changes, will be vital in driving meaningful progress.

This initiative is creating a legacy, demonstrating that by coming together, coalitions and employers can tackle one of the most pressing issues of our time. Through education, collaboration, and commitment to action, this initiative has laid the groundwork for a future where mental health is not just a priority, but a fundamental component of every workplace strategy. The success of this initiative sets a powerful precedent for other organizations to follow, showing that real change is possible when the right resources, expertise, and partnerships are in place.

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For over 30 years, the National Alliance has united business healthcare coalitions and their employer/purchaser members to achieve high-quality care that improves patient experience, health equity, and outcomes at lower costs. Its members represent private and public sector, nonprofit, and labor union organizations that provide health benefits for more than 45 million Americans and spend over \$400 billion annually. To learn more, visit nationalalliancehealth.org and connect on [X](#) and [LinkedIn](#).