



DON'T LEAVE YOUR ESSENTIAL WORKERS OUT IN THE COLD:

Five essential strategies for healthy employees this winter and beyond



Essential strategies now, and into 2021

This year, you've adjusted the physical working environments in your offices, manufacturing plants, and retail floors. You've adopted the state, local, and CDC guidance with your own new policies for COVID-19. You're even offering free flu shots on-site for your employees.

Wondering what else you can do to support your essential workers?

By analyzing a few key metrics, you can make decisions that support employee health and productivity—now, and into 2021. Here are the five suggested strategies we cover in-depth:

1. [Encourage preventative and on-going care](#)
2. [Monitor mental health](#)
3. [Quantify employee health risks](#)
4. [Analyze COVID test data](#)
5. [Build the right wellness for right now](#)

Let's dive in!





1. Encourage preventative and on-going care



A state health plan found that preventative cancer screenings accounted for 80% of new cases of breast cancer diagnoses alone. And yet, along with many other needed care services, preventative services have just not been an important focus.

The cost of deferred care during the early months of the pandemic is yet unknown, but we surely do not want these patterns to continue, since preventative and on-going care is critical to healthy and productive employees. Help your employees continue or re-engage with care that may have taken a back seat lately. Where can virtual care (or telemedicine) address any obvious gaps in care, primary care physician (PCP) visits, or specific specialty services? Look where you have rapid adoption and build upon it.

Virtual care offers employees new opportunities to access the care they need to maintain their health, while also alleviating pre-existing barriers around accessibility and affordability. Monitor virtual care adoption across demographic segments. Who is adopting virtual visits and for which conditions? In what ways can you boost adoption further?

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, more PCP providers offer virtual visits. Members can avoid expensive care when there is an acute situation by accessing virtual care, which is also increasingly becoming an ER alternative.

How can you use these insights?

Look at your physical environment and shift policies. Ensure that employees are able to attend virtual appointments from your locations. Let employees hear about these new options directly from their supervisor to reinforce this is acceptable and how to log time spent in virtual care appointments that occur during shifts.



2. Monitor mental health



One in five adults in America experiences mental health illness in a given year—and that was before the increase in mental health conditions created by the global pandemic. In the face of this increase and ongoing stress, it is more critical than ever to be vigilant about how mental health affects your essential workers.

You'll want two perspectives: what your employees say and what they do. This lets you anticipate needs based on what you hear and also justify changes based on what you can show.

Consider a confidential employee survey to understand how employees say they are feeling, hear their needs and concerns, and learn what they feel they need from you as an employer, to encourage mental health and alleviate stress and anxiety.

Review survey results in context with claims data. What is the data telling you? Are employees using the resources you've already made available? Do you have evidence of growing needs for cost-effective services?

One client study across 10 HDMS plan sponsors showed a 2.3X increase in total cost of care for members with a mental health condition as compared to members without a mental health condition.

How can you use these insights?

Create leading indicators to anticipate behaviors and costs for 2021. Watch for evidence that suggests growing needs. For instance, you can track the number of new prescriptions commonly issued for stress and anxiety disorders. If you see this metric start to increase above previously normal levels, project what this means financially for your organization.

To ensure long-term viability of any actions you take in pursuit of better mental health among your essential workers, we recommend comparing the total cost of care for employees with and without mental health conditions. In an independent study with our clients, we found health care costs more than double for untreated mental health conditions. With such an increase on overall medical costs, these insights will create clarity on the value of developing programs that help employees cope and de-stress while at work this winter and beyond.



3. Quantify your employees' health risk



Arm your senior management team with important facts that can help them make critical decisions. Give them numbers that help them understand the health risk exposure at important facilities. Highlight any location with high volumes of individuals at risk for severe COVID-19 symptoms. These insights inform better mitigation strategies.

What could this look like?

Quantify the number of people by location with a risk factor for severe symptoms, using the CDC guidelines and applying these factors to your medical claims data to identify the number of employees. Also quantify those with more than one risk factor. You may want to bring in insights around volumes with poor past flu experiences for additional perspective. Ideally you'd want to filter these insights to evaluate for roles with in-person or significant face-to-face interactions as part of their responsibilities.

How can you use these insights?

Ask the following questions as you consider supportive action:

- a. How well are individuals engaging in care management? If not, how can you better partner with your care-management vendor (or a new one) to better serve and support those who really need it? Is now a good time to reinforce the benefits of better-managed conditions, or magnify incentives?
- b. Can you add specific strategies for locations with a high volume of essential workers at risk for severe symptoms?
- c. Are there geographic locations where your workforce is overexposed? Do you have contingency plans specific for those populations, like developing immediate access to a temporary workforce in the event of mass absenteeism?



4. Analyze COVID test data for trends



Analyze the data provided by your COVID-19 testing solution partner and look for patterns and hot spots in your employee base. Dig in beyond general county-level information for actionable insights. Ultimately you are trying to contain spread within the workplace and help those who are sick get the care they need for a swift recovery.

How can you use these insights?

Watch for any clusters of sick days taken in one area where workers share space. Re-test everyone in that location to identify asymptomatic cases.

Consider the outreach you have for those who test positive. Some employers use services to ensure that high-risk employees (testing positive for COVID-19) are automatically introduced to a COVID-19 case management vendor program or flagged for their care management outreach efforts.

Use your testing results and high-risk assessments to anticipate absenteeism and short-term leaves of absence.



5. Build the right wellness for right now



Needs change over time and will likely continue to change as the pandemic continues, so it's important for employers to focus on the right wellness for *now*. Identify the barriers that exist right now that are keeping your essential workers from doing their best work.

For example, a major roadblock to productivity may be the disruption of schools and day care and adult-care schedules. To reduce the incidence of these roadblocks, look across productivity measures to create context for additional care-giving benefits.

Take a measured approach. Calculate the cost and prevalence of unplanned absenteeism. You might also watch for changing patterns in use of PTO (planned) versus sick time (unplanned).

How can you use these insights?

Measured cost impact of unplanned absenteeism may be helpful to evaluate the potential value of supplemental child-care benefits and/or personal leave supplements (paid or unpaid).

When employees are care-givers themselves, either for dependents or aging parents, innovation within leave policies and benefit design may be a way to support these individuals, yet anticipate shift resource planning with fewer unplanned situations this winter. Consider building these changes in a way that allows for more generous changes to be viewed as specific to time lines before the general population is vaccinated.



Data, at your service...

Healthy workers are a critical element for smooth business operations and serving your customers. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt employees' lives, lean into the data you have around you. Because your workforce is unique, develop cost-effective strategies tailored for your organization. Take advantage of your data to guide decisions to keep essential workers healthy this winter.

Contact us for more insights about how you can get more out of data and take positive action this winter and beyond.

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