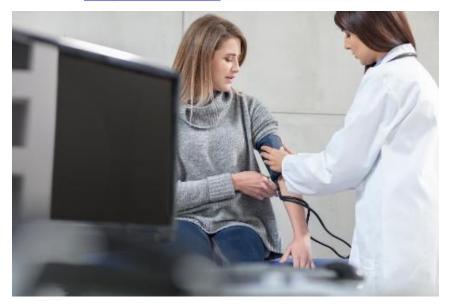# Three Lessons For Employers Who Want To Improve Employees' Health

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"Healthcare is broken." It's a phrase we hear often. The gripes about America's healthcare system consume news headlines, especially during presidential campaign cycles. There is rigorous debate about how to improve the arrangements that are currently in place. The focus tends to be on what does not work.

After serving 1 million patients at workplace healthcare centers across the country, my company is determined to take a more positive view of what does work. As more employers consider options to lower healthcare costs, I want to share what we have learned about how employers can create healthier communities.

Focus on wellness, rather than sickness.

My favorite quote from a patient is, "I used to go to the doctor because I was sick. Now, I go to the doctor so I stay well." Instead of reacting to illness and filling in the gaps when employees miss work, it's important to start with a proactive approach to keep employees healthy.

According to a 2018 study published in the journal *Family Medicine*, physicians studied spent an average of 16.5 minutes in the room with their patients aside from time they spent working on electronic health

records (EHRs). I recommend encouraging employees to visit a doctor who spends more time speaking with them, especially during their first visit. I've learned that when physicians look at the whole picture, which includes diet, exercise and mental health, a plan for wellness can cut down on sickness.

Remember, it takes time to create a healthy population.

There's no simple solution or silver bullet to make a community healthy, but it does involve the entire community. Companies that are dedicated to their employees' well-being can create meaningful partnerships in their communities. However, this requires time and an open mind.

Companies should reach out to local health systems and providers to ask what they can do to manage the cost of care. Historically, I've found that health systems have not been receptive to partnerships. However, this should allow independent providers within the community to come to the table to provide services that would otherwise have been funneled into the local healthcare system. Companies can also work with their plan administrators to create custom, high-value, narrow networks. That can create more opportunities for savings on anything from specialty visits to outpatient procedures. By narrowing the network, there is a chance that you'll see better results with decreased costs.

Take these steps to build cost-effective, company-driven healthcare plans.

With our country's current fee-for-service approach, employers who take an active stance on healthcare can influence quality, access and cost for traditional healthcare systems. Here is what we have learned from serving companies around the nation.

• **Focus on lowering costs.** The healthcare industry sometimes lacks transparency, so it is up to employers to look for quality providers who will provide them with an accurate list of expenses for employees.

• **Create win-win situations.** Like-minded companies can work together to bring in quality vendors that suit their employees' needs and help cut costs. These vendors can include third-party health plan administrators, employee assistance programs (EAP), family doctors and specialists. Even partnering with local gyms can help companies suit employees' needs while cutting health costs. Transparency tools can be critical to illustrate the cost of services before patients select them. It's critical for companies to have everyone in the same room to assess needs and to ask questions like "how will you prove quality and outcomes?" and "how is quality defined?"

• **Create an ongoing dialogue.** Employers who want to improve care and in turn lower healthcare expenses should openly communicate with employees in order to understand their changing needs and goals.

• **Build trust with your healthcare provider.** Honesty about employees' needs and goals goes a long way toward controlling costs and meeting the needs of employees.

• **Innovate, but use technology with caution.** For example, telehealth provides another layer of reassurance and convenience, but it is not a catchall solution.

In my opinion, healthcare is not broken -- the system just needs a plan for wellness, much like our communities. By taking time to develop trusting partnerships between healthcare systems and employers, we can all work toward a goal of lowering costs and delivering exceptional-quality care.

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