



News Notes

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VOLUME 16 | ISSUE 4 | WINTER 2020 | RECENT EVENTS



COVID-19 IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE (ON-DEMAND)

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a serious impact on employees' mental health, said Mary Elizabeth Myers, RN, BSN, Population Health Consultant. Myers described the impact COVID-19 has had on mental health, substance use and employer considerations during LVBCH's second On-Demand Webinar, COVID-19 Impact on Mental Health and Substance Abuse. The webinar, available at www.LVBCH.com, was presented by Geneia, a healthcare analytics and services company that focuses on improving systems to support personalized, patient-centered care. Geneia helps health plans, hospitals, physician practices, and employers collaborate and align to lower cost, and improve outcomes. LVBCH is partnering with Geneia in the development of its Care Engager too, which uses Geneia's Theon platform to provide insights into performance, risks, costs, and utilization. Care Engager analyzes the health care and pharmacy claim information of several Coalition employer groups – accounting for approximately 53,000 members.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is wrought with hidden consequences of which emotional strain is definitely one,” Myers said. “We have seen the sharpest economic pullback in modern history and a record-breaking spike in unemployment. When you add to that fear of the virus itself with prolonged physical distancing and associated social isolation, it's inevitable that this will compound the impact on the emotional health of our nation.” Surveys have found American employees reporting increase career stress greater than following 9/11 or the 2008 recession and lost daily productivity. Another survey found increased binge drinking, taking prescription drugs for non-medical reasons, and illicit drug use. Prescriptions for antidepressant, anti-anxiety and anti-insomnia medications all increased during the early weeks of the pandemic. Locally, the Coalition's Data Group showed a decline in claims but an increase in the amount paid, indicating a need for more intense services.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic is erasing progress in curbing the opioid epidemic. While opioid prescriptions have decreased by 40% over the past five years, opioid-related deaths are rising in most states. “Addiction is often called a disease of isolation and unfortunately these are the exact pandemic-fueled conditions in the United States,” Myers said. “Social distancing, isolation and uncertainty may have contributed to an increase in substance use disorders. And despite an overall avoidance of hospitals during the nation-wide lockdown, hospitals saw record increase in overdoses.”

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Employer strategies to address this alarming trend include: enhanced navigation support and improve access to affordable mental health services including virtual solutions, ensuring your employee assistance program (EAP) is fit for purpose and includes critical incident response, training managers in areas essential to supporting employees mental and emotional wellbeing, and ensuring senior leaders give mental health the same priority as physical health.

“Fear of the unknown is unnerving,” said Myers. “As employers you have a unique opportunity to intervene and impact your employees’ wellbeing.” Geneia offers specific and cost-effective suggestions:

- Communicate openly and regularly. Seek employee feedback
- Educate on available benefits. Reinforce messaging over a number of channels.
- Encourage regular check-ins.
- Acknowledge stress. Lead by example. Let your staff know they are not alone.
- Normalize seeking help.
- Promote healthy habits by encouraging employee to prioritize self-care and wellness.

“You’ll need to tell employees repeatedly in a variety of ways,” Myers said. “Having your workers know that you’re here to support them through these trying times and reassuring them the organization will work to alleviate their fears and concerns can truly make a world of difference for their mental and physical health.”

For additional information, please contact: Geneia Solutions at 866-267-9894 or Solutions@Geneia.com.

ABOUT MARY ELIZABETH MYERS



Mary Elizabeth H. Myers RN, BSN, is a Population Health Consultant (PHC) within Geneia’s Population Health and Consumer Engagement division. She earned her Bachelors of Science in Nursing from York College of Pennsylvania and brings with her a diverse range of healthcare experiences, from clinical nursing to practice administration. As a PHC, she has a variety of roles, working with internal teams as a clinical subject matter expert and consulting with external clients. She has experience with payers, providers and employer groups, providing population insights, educating on healthcare trends and making recommendations to impact change and improve outcomes.

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