

52 SHADES OF SUCCESS CAREER & WORKPLACE

UNMASKING THE STIGMA

Businesses are looking to provide a more comprehensive, holistic approach to mental health in the workplace

Fara Palumbo, chief people officer at Blue Cross NC.

BLUE CROSS NC



By [Connie Gentry](#) – Freelance Writer, Triangle Business Journal
May 5, 2022

About this project: *The 52-week project showcases accomplishments, challenges and opportunities of individuals and businesses run by people of color, women, immigrants, veterans, representatives from the LGBTQ+ community and a few other groups forwarding the mission of diversity, equity and inclusion in the greater Raleigh-Durham metro area. The project also will delve into important trends and issues relating to DEI.*

Businesses of every size and across every industry face a new health care imperative: the need [to prioritize and support the mental health of employees](#) in the same way as their physical health. Before the pandemic, 11 percent of adults in the U.S. reported feeling anxious or depressed; by November 2020, that number had jumped [to 42.6 percent of the adult population](#), according to the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF).

While the pandemic has waned in the U.S., the mental health struggles persist. In March of this year, roughly a third (31.5 percent) of adults were struggling with anxiety or depressive disorder, according to KFF. The need to support mental wellness has become an undeniable reality and forced a new reckoning of what wellness entails.

The transition starts with business leaders and co-workers who are willing to confront the inherent bias that has stifled support in the past.

Now, two of the Triangle's largest employers, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of North Carolina and UNC Health, are tackling that challenge head on – not only in the work they do in caring for customers and patients, but also starting in their own houses, providing care and support to thousands of employees.

“Employers need to recognize that we can't stigmatize mental health; it is a fact of life,” said Fara Palumbo, chief people officer at Blue Cross NC. The pandemic produced heightened levels of stress, and “we have world issues that are very stressful and national issues that are stressful.”

“It is a confluence of all these events that place a burden on people and make them worried about the future. It is critical that we give individuals space in the workplace to be supported from a mental health perspective,” she adds.

At the start of this year, Blue Cross NC expanded its benefits package to add two days to every employee's PTO (paid time off) quota, designating the additional time off for mental wellness.

“We felt it was critical to add the well-being days to support the emotional and mental health needs of our workforce because there are times in anyone's work life where they may simply need to call a time out and tend to their psychological needs just as they would to physical needs,” Palumbo said.

Ironically, that admission has been hardest among essential health care professionals, who were subject to burnout and often didn't take the PTO days they had accumulated even before the pandemic demanded excessive hours and relentless schedules.

At UNC Health, Dr. Lynne Fiscus, president and CEO of UNC Physicians Network, said increasing the PTO quota won't help if the employees aren't using what they have. “Health care professionals are so busy taking care of others they don't use all the days off they earn; the first step here is normalizing taking time off and helping them understand this is a part of being well,” she said.

UNC Health's internal wellness program was focused initially around employee burnout, but now they've expanded how they are talking about wellness to encompass the employee's overall behavioral health.

“If I look back three years ago, we didn't talk about anxiety and depression openly at work,” Fiscus said. “The transformational piece is how we talk about it all the time now

and, as a leader, I'm trying to encourage and destigmatize the seeking of mental health care. There is no medal at the end of Covid for getting through this without professional help. We want people to seek help, to understand that physical health and mental health are interrelated."

For businesses, the intersection of physical and mental health resides to a large extent in the benefits and health plans being offered to employees. "Most organizations spent years building wellness plans that are very much tied to physical well-being and it's really time for us to think differently about that," Palumbo said. "It is critical that [benefits plans] give the same attention to mental health as we've been giving to physical wellness."



[Enlarge](#)

Dr. Lynne Fiscus, president and CEO of UNC Physicians Network

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In its 2021 Employer Health Benefits Survey, KFF determined that 39 percent of the firms surveyed have made changes since the pandemic to meet the mental health needs of employees. Among the firms, all of which had 50 or more employees and offered health benefits, the most prevalent change (31 percent) was an expansion of the ways in

which enrollees could access mental health or substance abuse (MHSA) services, with telehealth services leading the way.

The goal for businesses, Fiscus suggests, is to bring parity in behavioral health care coverage closer to that of traditional medical care for physical health. Access to care, both in terms of logistics and affordability are key. During the pandemic, behavioral health became one of the most utilized services of telehealth, and at Blue Cross NC, about half of all telehealth claims were for behavioral health. “A lot of counseling and therapy services are not well-covered, so out-of-pocket costs become a significant barrier to people getting the care they need,” Fiscus said. “As businesses work with health care benefit providers, they should pay attention to the choices they have that will make it easier for employees. Check into the employee assistance program you are offering and make sure it is comprehensive.”

Parity and equity go hand-in-hand, and both are sorely lacking in behavioral health services for under-represented communities. The pandemic created a disproportionate impact on mental health among communities of color: 48 percent of Black adults and 46.3 percent of Hispanic or Latinx adults reported anxiety or depression, compared with 40.9 percent of white adults. Among Asian adults, 33.1 percent reported anxiety or depression.

“We want to make sure everyone, our employees as well as the communities we serve, have access to high-quality behavioral health care,” said Dr. Tedra Anderson-Brown, behavioral health medical director at Blue Cross NC. “Part of this is recognizing that communities of color as well as rural communities have been more adversely impacted by Covid.”

For example, Blue Cross NC is supporting El Futuro, which works to improve the quality of mental health care for Latinx families in North Carolina, and Eustress, which is raising awareness of the importance of mental health in the Black community.

“Our company has committed \$1 million to support community-based initiatives that will improve access to behavioral health care for historically underserved communities and rural areas, and we’re investing in nonprofits in communities that have been designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) across the state to make sure that people in those communities have access to behavioral health resources,” Anderson-Brown said.

In a report released March 31 on the designated HPSAs across the country, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said North Carolina is meeting only 13.23 percent of the state’s needs for mental health care. Only four states ranked lower than North Carolina in failing to meet needs for mental health care.

“I do believe there is a significantly lower proportion of minority patients seeking care for behavioral health and a higher stigma in some minority communities about seeking mental health care,” Fiscus said. “As employers, there is an important role that we can play in normalizing and encouraging [mental health care] and removing any barriers.”

Stan Kimer, president of Total Engagement Consulting, has witnessed that throughout his career, first in the three decades he worked at IBM, including four years as IBM's global LGBT diversity manager, and over the past 12 years coaching businesses on how to build a DEI strategy.

"I'm not a mental wellness expert, so when I'm leading diversity training I start with the diversity strategy and then drill down to mental wellness," said Kimer, who also facilitates a diversity certification program for The National Diversity Council.



[Enlarge](#)

Stan Kimer

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Supporting mental wellness is a key factor for hiring and retaining employees. "There's more demand than supply for people, so companies have to treat their people right, value them as full human beings, and do things to address their mental wellness," Kimer said.

A recent study of 3,000 full-time employees conducted by the mental wellness app Calm for Business found that 97 percent say their employers should be working to improve

mental health of employees and 76 percent say mental health benefits were critical to them when evaluating a new job.

It starts at the top, but businesses have to embed mental health inclusion throughout the ranks. “You have to operationalize it, get [the message] down to middle management and to the actual individual contributor level,” Kimer said.

Businesses can engage with local organizations and partner with faith-based or community groups that serve [under-represented] communities to make care more accessible and more inclusive across populations.

NAMI-Wake, the local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, provides free resources and support to anyone impacted by mental illness. James Miller, the organization’s engagement and outreach coordinator, said the support extends across the Triangle and is not limited to those in Wake County.

He encourages businesses to promote interpersonal communication among co-workers. “Many times, people are more honest and direct with a co-worker, and talking with [peers] can be just as effective as talking with a boss.”