ENGAGING LARGE EMPLOYERS REGARDING

Evidence-Based Behavioral Health Treatment

An Employer's Implementation Toolkit for Comprehensive Behavioral Health Services

PART I
Current Mental Health Benefit/Productivity Strategies and Receptivity to New Methods: Assessment of Employer Practices

PART II
Translating Science into Practice: Guidelines for Implementing Evidence-Based Practices

PART III
Disseminating Evidence-Based Practices: Case Studies for Disseminating Evidence-Based Studies

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Executive Summary

The National Business Group on Health (Business Group) has established behavioral health as a core focus of the organization. The primary reasoning behind this decision is based on the following tenets:

1. Behavior and environment are the most significant determinants of employee health, and employee health affects performance on the job as well as overall business results.
2. Many employers are aware that new and innovative approaches to healthcare cost containment, while preserving and enhancing employee health, are imminent. This is essential to maximizing employee productivity, especially as the workforce ages.
3. Strategies aimed at improving employee health can help improve employees’ lives and improve companies’ returns on investment (ROI) of their health care expenditures.
4. Preserving health of employees and their beneficiaries through prevention, access to treatment and treatment is vital to managing to full employment and productivity.
5. Behavioral health benefits, services and programs are essential to improving and maintaining the health status of employees and beneficiaries.

In 2008, the Business Group, in collaboration with The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), developed an implementation toolkit that is designed to improve the methods used by employers when responding employees and their dependents who experience behavioral health disorders. This project effort focused on several NIMH objectives that ranged from assessing employer’s general knowledge of behavioral health disorders, to identifying evidence-based practices and implementation strategies that employers use to address these disorders. The results of this project include an employer benchmarking analysis, a comprehensive set of implementation tools, and the results of several implementation focus groups that specifically address the implementation tools. The following summary provides an overview of the project, the project objectives and the approaches used by the Business Group to achieve these objectives.

Background

Approximately 170 million Americans have employer-sponsored health insurance, and around half of them receive insurance via one of America’s 500 largest employers (i.e., the "Fortune 500" firms).
If these largest firms can be engaged in improving mental health care, it seems plausible that care will improve for the firms' employees and other beneficiaries. If these firms are not receptive, and cannot easily be engaged, then policy-makers and researchers may need to consider alternative strategies to achieve the societal benefits of improving access to and quality of mental health care.¹

**Project Overview**

NIMH, for the last several years, expressed interest in gathering information on the interests and current practices of large employers, as purchasers of healthcare coverage and other relevant benefits for employees relating to mental illness.

First, NIMH sought to understand how knowledgeable the largest private employers in the United States are in regards to behavioral health, collaborative care, and the research supporting its effectiveness. Furthermore, NIMH wanted an analysis that:

- examined employers’ current behavioral health benefits and strategies,
- identified the methods employers use to address other health and productivity issues, and
- could be used to gauge employers’ receptivity to initiating new strategies to improve behavioral health treatment and outcomes as well as assess potential barriers to change.

The Business Group worked with an National Leadership Committee on Behavioral Health (NLCBH) advisory group along with NIMH staff to develop an employer survey that could be used to identify employers’ current behavioral health benefit offerings, understand the strategic thinking behind those benefits, the process employers use to change their benefits, and what types of new benefits employers might consider. In addition, the National Business Group on Health augmented the knowledge gained from this survey by conducting in-depth phone interviews with leading behavioral health benefit consultants and behavioral health management companies.

Second, NIMH wanted to determine the behavioral health service recommendations and implementation strategies that are relevant to large employers. The Business Group, with input from the advisory the NLCBH and NIMH, identified practice recommendations for employers that included: best practices, evidence-based practices, collaborative care, and implementation strategies. Additionally, the Business Group developed an evaluation protocol and related recommendations for improving these practice recommendations. The assessment process used to evaluate these practice recommendations included criteria such as whether the practices have historically been implemented by large employers, the degree of objective or subjective criteria used in evaluating the recommendations, the relative cost of implementing the recommendations, any documented cost offsets associated with the recommendations, and whether the desired results associated with the recommendations were sustained overtime. The following categories represent known areas of concern and were used to frame the recommendations for the NLCBH:

- General medical and behavioral health benefits design,
- Business partner relationships and benefit administration activities,
- Disability management protocols and operations,
- Employee assistance program design and administration activities,
- Overall behavioral and general medical plan integration, and
- General medical and behavioral health benefits evaluation protocols.

Third, NIMH indicated they wanted to conduct case studies of disseminating evidence-based practices recommendations for improving behavioral health treatment and outcomes to individual
large employers. The National Business Group on Health will Group worked with a group of large (i.e., Fortune 500) employers to support this effort.

**National Leadership Committee on Behavioral Health (NLCBH)**

The Business Group, as part of this project, created an advisory group to help guide and inform this project. The mission of the NLCBH was to review and develop an integrated structure for achieving the goals of the Business Group’s publication entitled: *An Employer’s Guide to Behavioral Health Services.*

**National Leadership Committee Composition**

The NLCBH’s membership represented professionals of both academic research (the “science”) and practical corporate experience (the “art”) who work in the behavioral health field. More specifically, members of this group had experience and/or knowledge in one or more of the following areas:

- General medical and/or behavioral health benefit design and administration
- Pharmacy benefit design and administration
- Employee Assistance Programs
- Family Medical Leave
- Short-Term Disability
- Long-Term Disability
- Wellness / Health Promotion

**Project Objectives**

The following project objectives describe how NIMH intended to meet its project goals along with the methods used by the Business Group to achieve these objectives.

1. Develop an understanding for how knowledgeable the largest private employers in the United States are in regards to behavioral health, collaborative care and the research supporting its effectiveness.
   - The Business Group developed a structured survey and stakeholder interview protocol to assess employers’ general understanding of behavioral health disorders, the business impact of these disorders, and the techniques used by employers to address these disorders. The Business Group collected survey responses from 106 employers and feedback from 17 industry stakeholders. The results of this effort suggest that employers continue to have a limited understanding of behavioral health disorders and the business impact of these disorders.

2. Analyze employer’s current behavioral health benefits and strategies, as well as methods employers are using to address other health and productivity issues.
   - Using the same structured survey to assess employer knowledge of behavioral health disorders, the Business Group also examined employers’ approaches to designing and administering health and disability benefits that address behavioral health disorders. The results suggest that employers have relatively few policies and protocols in place for directly
addressing behavioral health disorders, and the majority of employers rely on external resources to design benefit strategies to support these disorders.

- The Business Group also developed and administered an employer implementation survey to a select group of large employers that focused on the methods employers use to implement evidence-based practices. The results of these interactions, which are located in the Task Three Implementation report, reinforced the survey findings that employers have not developed a fully integrated strategy for addressing behavioral health disorders.

3. Gauge employers’ receptivity to initiating new strategies to improve behavioral health treatment and outcomes as well as assess potential barriers to change.

- In addition to assessing employers’ knowledge about behavioral health disorders and strategies to support employees and their dependents who have behavioral health disorders, the Business Group used the employer implementation survey to explore employer’s interest in learning how to design and administer benefits that could improve behavioral health treatment, outcomes and impact on work performance. Every employer showed high levels of interest in learning more about how to design and administer benefit strategies that would help employees and their dependents who experience behavioral health disorders.

4. Understand the behavioral health services recommendations and implementation strategies that are relevant to large employers

- Using knowledge gained from the structured employer survey and stakeholder interviews, the Business Group developed an approach for aligning evidence-based practice recommendations with employers’ annual health benefit lifecycle. Employers can use these tools to support the various activities and tasks associated with the design, solicitation, implementation and evaluation of their benefit strategy and related vendors that support the health benefit plan.

5. Develop practical materials for employers that include: best practices, evidence-based practices, collaborative care practices, and implementation strategies.

- The Business Group created an advisory group of industry experts to develop an implementation toolkit that employers could use to design, administer and monitor evidence-based behavioral health practice recommendations. This collection of tools is aligned with an employer benefit lifecycle, reflects current research and state-of-the-art techniques for helping employers develop and maintain behavioral health benefits and programs.

6. Conduct case studies of large employers for disseminating evidence-based practice recommendations for improving behavioral health treatment outcomes.

- Upon completion of the implementation tools, the Business Group developed an implementation survey that was designed to assess the process that employers use to gather and evaluate evidence-based practice recommendations. This survey was administered to approximately ten (10) large employer and the results are summarized in the Task Three Implementation report.
7. Understand large employers’ decision-making process for deciding which recommendations to implement, and their implementation strategies and insights associated with the challenges experienced with improvement efforts.

- As part of the initial structured survey, the stakeholder interviews and the implementation survey, the Business Group examined the process employers use to adopt evidence-based practice recommendations. Employers have adopted an array of approaches and techniques for adopting evidence-based practice recommendations and are influenced by multiple stakeholders. These stakeholders include labor unions that represent employee groups, health plans, consultants, and to a lesser degree, providers. The results of this examination are also summarized in the Task Three Implementation report.

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1 Division of Services and Intervention Research (DSIR) of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Request for proposal, attachment one – SOW– RFP–NIMH – 07-DS-0004, page 1.
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