



# Behavioral health network strategies designed to help expand access to care

A shortage of mental health providers is challenging employers to find new approaches to help meet the growing demand.



The demand for mental health services is outpacing the availability of providers.<sup>1</sup>

While an estimated 51.5M—or 1 in 5—people are living with mental illness,<sup>2</sup> there are only approximately 1.3M providers who offer behavioral health services in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> What’s more, 6 in 10 providers reported that they are unable to accept new patients.<sup>1</sup>

Diversity in provider networks is also lacking. Studies show that when patients share the same race or ethnicity of their providers, everything from communication to health outcomes are improved.<sup>4</sup> Yet about 8 in 10 psychologists are white, which may be a contributing factor to people of color receiving a lower quality of care or deterring them from seeking care at all.<sup>5</sup>

To help address these challenges, employers should focus on strategies designed to give employees access to a broader and more diverse provider network while also working to reduce barriers to care and drive engagement.

**“When we think about our behavioral health network strategy, we are building in ways to improve quality, provide greater value and drive affordability.”**

**Stacie Grassmuck**

Director  
Behavioral Health Product and Innovation  
UnitedHealthcare Employer & Individual

**These strategies can include:**



**Selecting**

a network with a broad and diverse set of providers and care options



**Offering**

specialty behavioral health care benefits



**Providing**

preventive mental health support to help avoid crises

# Selecting a network with a broad and diverse set of providers and care options

Ideally, a provider network provides different methods to help employees access the care they need, in the way they prefer—from in-person care to virtual health or self-help options. To that end, UnitedHealthcare has worked to expand its behavioral health networks.

This past year alone, UnitedHealthcare has added 52K+ behavioral health and EAP providers to its network in addition to 12K+ prescribers and 5.6K+ child and adolescent specialists.<sup>6</sup> And continuing to build upon the growth from 2020 in the virtual mental health space, UnitedHealthcare added 41K+ providers to its virtual provider network.<sup>6</sup>

Mental health conditions impact all populations but disproportionately affect women, racial minority groups and young adults.<sup>7</sup>

## That's why UnitedHealthcare is continually working to:



Recruit and provide scholarships to diverse providers—both in terms of their demographic background and what conditions they specialize in



Train providers in delivering care that is characterized by cultural humility



Add ethnicity, gender and language into provider search criteria

“Data shows more licensed professionals in all 50 states, but some areas of the country lack certain types of mental health professionals,” says Dr. Rhonda Randall, chief medical officer for UnitedHealthcare Employer & Individual. “We’re always looking for ways to expand and diversify our network while supporting providers who are feeling the strain of increased demand.”

The use of virtual health for mental health services spiked from 39.4% in 2019 to 88.1% in 2022 and is predicted to continue being a popular platform going forward.<sup>8</sup> In fact, 2 in 5 surveyed adults used virtual health care in 2022, and nearly 4 in 5 said it made it easier for them to get the care they needed.<sup>9</sup>

“Today, we see that many members prefer the convenience of virtual appointments. Meeting online eliminates commuting and wait times in the office. And by removing those barriers, members can get the care they need when they need it,” explains Trevor Porath, vice president of behavioral health solutions for UnitedHealthcare Employer & Individual.

Given that more than half of U.S. counties have no available psychiatrists,<sup>10</sup> virtual offerings have a critical role to play in helping to improve access to care. Virtual health options—including 1-on-1 counseling appointments, online chat capabilities and mental health apps—also provide a level of privacy that may help reduce the stigma around seeking mental health support. This is especially true among older populations, who are less likely to seek out behavioral health support compared to younger generations.<sup>9</sup>



## Offering specialty behavioral health care benefits

In some cases, an employee may need help with a higher severity or more complex condition that requires facility-based care, such as substance use, addiction or an eating disorder.

47.8M Americans live with a substance use disorder, and millions more misuse alcohol or prescription medications each year—putting them at risk for developing an addiction to these substances.<sup>11</sup>

Specialized solutions may help support employees and their dependents who have these more complex behavioral health conditions. The UnitedHealthcare Opioid Management Program, for instance, is designed to provide pharmacy and medication management services and medication-assisted treatment with therapy for opioid addiction.

If an employee's dependent is struggling with a complex behavioral health condition, the **parent or guardian's mental health** and workplace productivity may be affected—causing them to require support as well. In this situation, programs like the Family Support Program through UnitedHealthcare may help simplify navigation of the health care system and improve clinical outcomes for families dealing with complex conditions like autism spectrum, substance use or bipolar disorder.

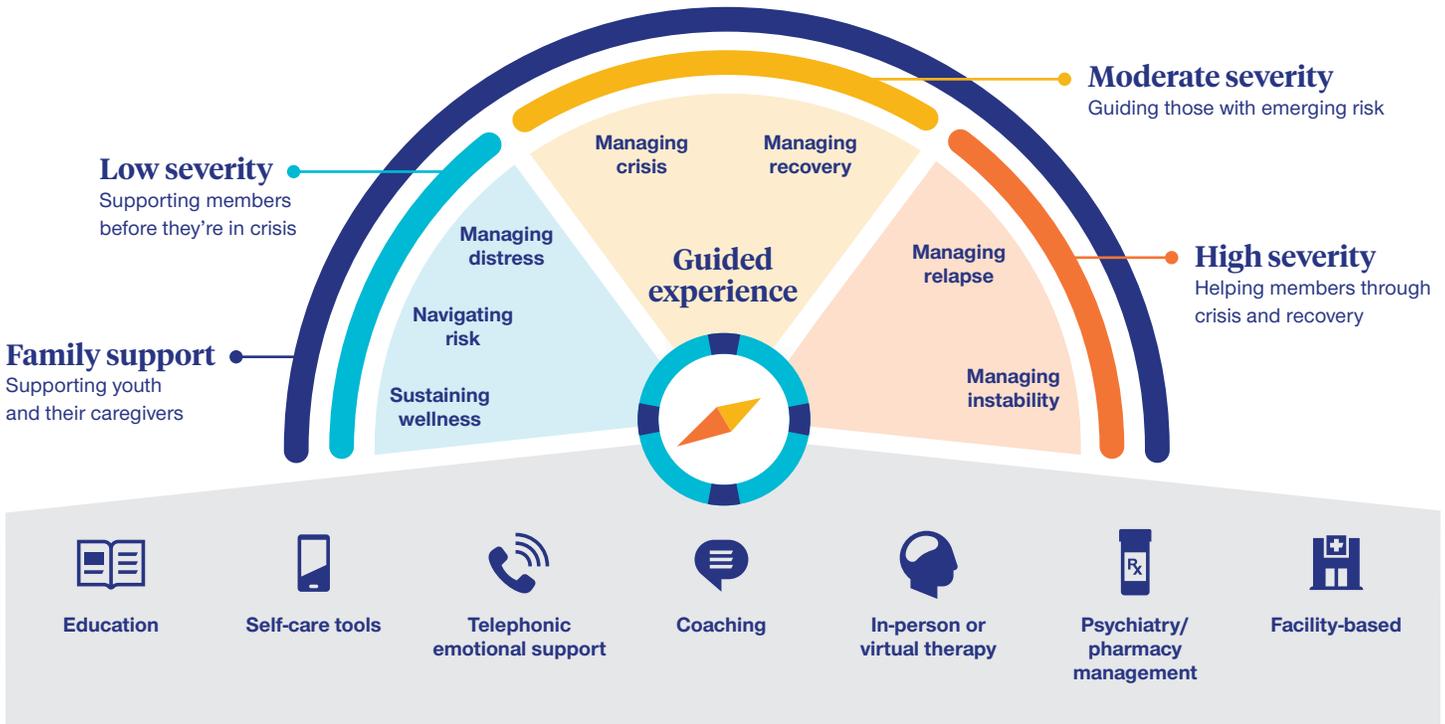
UnitedHealthcare has 48K+ network providers who specialize in substance use disorders,<sup>12</sup> and nearly 9.6K medication-assisted treatment locations, with 97% of members living within 20 miles of a provider.<sup>13</sup>



# Providing preventive mental health support to help avoid crises

It's important to note that not every mental health need is severe or debilitating to the point of needing intervention from an in-person behavioral health care provider. That's why employers should look to make resources available to their employees that allow them to proactively manage their mental health before they're in crisis.

## UnitedHealthcare behavioral health care continuum



This can take shape through the form of education, self-care tools, telephonic emotional support or coaching. For example, UnitedHealthcare offers members access to self-guided educational content and resources, mindfulness and resilience support through its top-rated self-care app, with an in-the-moment emotional support help line, access to cognitive behavioral therapy techniques and 1-on-1 in-app coaching with licensed therapists.

“Historically, a member’s first step into behavioral health has been through a therapist or psychiatrist. What we found is that not all members need that level of care,” Grassmuck says. “We’ve brought forth more options like a self-help app that can help get at contributing factors of depression and stress, and behavioral health coaching that can help mitigate triggers—to hopefully prevent a member from reaching the point of needing in-person care.”

Prioritizing and promoting preventive mental health care can eliminate the barriers that come with provider shortages while still giving employees and their families the support they may need—without having to wait weeks or months to see the next available behavioral health care provider.



## 5 ways to help employees find the behavioral health care they may need

As behavioral health care needs continue to increase, strategies designed to help members access care are becoming essential to employer benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> Increased need for mental health care strains capacity. American Psychological Association, Nov. 15, 2022. Available: <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2022/11/mental-health-care-strains>. Accessed: Apr. 8, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Weiner, S. A growing psychiatrist shortage and an enormous demand for mental health services. Association of American Medical Colleges, Aug. 9, 2022. Available: <https://www.aamc.org/news/growing-psychiatrist-shortage-enormous-demand-mental-health-services>. Accessed: Apr. 8, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> The Behavioral Health Care Workforce. National Institute for Health Care Management Foundation, June 8, 2024. Available: <https://nihcm.org/publications/the-behavioral-health-care-workforce-shortages-solutions>. Accessed: Apr. 8, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Moore, C. et al. "It's Important to Work with People that Look Like Me": Black Patients' Preferences for Patient-Provider Race Concordance. National Library of Medicine, Nov. 7, 2022. Available: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9640880/>. Accessed: Mar. 18, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Verdieu, E. Why aren't more people of color in the mental health workforce? Christenson Institute, Jan. 25, 2024. Available: <https://www.christenseninstitute.org/blog/why-arent-more-people-of-color-in-the-mental-health-workforce/>. Accessed: Apr. 8, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> SURE Network Summary Dashboard, Commercial E&I and non-E&I UBH General Networks Q4 2023 (Jan. 1, 2024 data); Deanna DuBois, Jan. 31, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Duszynski-Goodman, Lizzie. Mental Health Statistics and Facts. Forbes, Feb. 21, 2024. Available: <https://www.forbes.com/health/mind/mental-health-statistics/>. Accessed: Apr. 8, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Joshi, A et al. Telehealth and Mental Health: Strengths and Drawbacks. Forbes, Jan. 19, 2024. Available: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbooksauthors/2024/01/19/telehealth-and-mental-health-emerging-opportunities-and-limitations/?sh=a312a457a6d4>. Accessed: Apr. 8, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Survey of Telehealth Use by Commercial Insurance Enrollees. AHIP, Dec. 1, 2022. Available: <https://www.ahip.org/resources/survey-of-telehealth-use-by-commercial-insurance-enrollees>. Accessed: Apr. 8, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Telehealth. National Alliance on Mental Illness. Available: <https://www.nami.org/Advocacy/Policy-Priorities/Improving-Health/Telehealth>. Accessed: Mar. 18, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> HHS, SAMHSA Release 2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health Data. SAMHSA, Nov. 13, 2023. Available: <https://www.samhsa.gov/newsroom/press-announcements/20231113/hhs-samhsa-release-2022-nsduh-data>. Accessed: Apr. 8, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> SURE Network Summary Dashboard, Commercial and UBH General Networks Q4 2022; (Dec. 29, 2022), DuBois, Jan. 23, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Behavioral Health Source of Truth (Dec. 2023 data). Mitch Thul, Jan. 2024.

When you sign up for Virtual Behavioral Coaching, you will be asked a series of questions to ensure that this program is the right fit for you. You may be directed to another resource if your answers indicate that a different type of program may better suit your needs.

Family Support Program should not be used for emergency or urgent care needs. In an emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room. This program is not a substitute for a doctor's or professional's care. Due to the potential for a conflict of interest, legal consultation will not be provided on issues that may involve legal action against UnitedHealthcare or its affiliates, or any entity through which the caller is receiving these services directly or indirectly (e.g., employer or health plan). This program and its components may not be available in all states or for all group sizes and are subject to change. Coverage exclusions and limitations may apply.

The AbleTo mobile application should not be used for urgent care needs. If you are experiencing a crisis or need emergency care, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room. The Self Care information contained in the AbleTo mobile application is for educational purposes only; it is not intended to diagnose problems or provide treatment and should not be used on its own as a substitute for care from a provider. AbleTo Self Care is available to members ages 13+ at no additional cost as part of your benefit plan. Self Care is not available for all groups in District of Columbia, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia or West Virginia and is subject to change. Refer to your plan documents for specific benefit coverage and limitations or call the toll-free member phone number on your health plan ID card. Participation in the program is voluntary and subject to the terms of use contained in the mobile application.

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