

MAY 2023

The Opportunity Health Plans Have to Advance Equity As Employers

Operational Guidance for Health Plans

The Opportunity

This guidance document outlines recommendations health plans can use to raise the bar for maternal health equity and excellence as **employers**.

Maternal care delivery and health outcomes are improved when the workforce and leadership are committed to health equity and reflect the diversity of the communities served. Health plans and their provider partners are some of the largest employers in their communities. As employers, health plans can raise the bar for maternal health by implementing and modeling practices that allow their workers to thrive.

Health plans are in a position to improve health outcomes and reduce inequities for patients and communities by investing in and assembling a leadership team committed to advancing health equity that also reflects a diverse and robust workforce – of both direct employees and contracted staff. Equitable policies and practices that support the wellbeing of the entire workforce are also vital.

Benchmarking Checklist

The checklist below was developed for health plans to benchmark current organizational practices. In completing this checklist you will be able to see where your health plan stands in terms of implementing and modeling practices that allow workers to thrive and where there are opportunities to enhance efforts.

Recommendation: Invest in and grow leaders who advance and embed equity, quality and value across the health plan.

This includes active efforts to dismantle existing structures of inequity within the institution by creating career pipelines, leadership pathways, mentorship opportunities and other structures and programs that will keep staff engaged and committed to shared success.

Meaningfully embed diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) into workplace culture and organizational operations.

- Work directly with your board of directors to diversify the organization.
- Work directly with your board of directors to diversify executive leadership.
- Adopt metrics tied to key performance indicators to monitor DEI progress and hold the C-Suite and department heads accountable.
- If a senior level DEI position does not exist, create it, with appropriate staff and resources.
- Consider hiring and tasking a DEI leader with responsibilities tied to the health plan's support and coverage of maternity care.

Provide career pathways and leadership opportunities for existing racial and ethnically diverse staff.

- Set and share goals to increase representation of diverse individuals (by race/ethnicity, disability status, age, gender, etc.) in executive leadership.
- Develop and disseminate criteria necessary for advancement to create equitable opportunities for staff promotions to senior-level positions.
- Develop and resource formal mentorship programs, especially those that cultivate relationships between executive leadership and racially/ethnically diverse staff.
- Provide support for diverse entry- and mid-level executive staff to participate in leadership development programs.

Recommendation: Employ and cultivate a representative workforce at all levels that is trained, equipped and supported, in service both to the health plan workplace and to advancing maternal health at beneficiary institutions.

Set a measurable expectation that all staff incorporate anti-racism in their work.

- Provide anti-racist training for executive leadership, leadership across the organization (ex. department heads and program directors) and all staff.
- Set and share metrics for how success of anti-racist objectives will be measured.
- Tie performance on equity and anti-racism metrics to performance reviews, with the potential to impact compensation and promotions.
- Understand the impacts and drivers of the maternal health crisis and effective solutions, including those identified by individuals with lived experience/who are members of communities experiencing the greatest inequities.

Set and pursue goals to cultivate a diverse workforce.

- Develop metrics related to diversity, equity and inclusion for all staff, with a priority focus on the maternal health workforce.

- For transparency and accountability, publicly report the assessment data and your goals.
- Educate staff about the benefits of diversifying the maternal health workforce on patient care, experience and outcomes (e.g., improved trust, engagement, experience and outcomes with racial and ethnic concordant care) – empowering them to support customers’ efforts to diversify.

Redesign recruitment and hiring practices to drive diversity across your entire organization, and especially in roles that directly interface with providers of maternity care.

- Develop a blind resume review process, set standardized interview questions and establish hiring criteria that exclude subjective perceptions of a candidate’s “fit.”
- Diversify and expand network and referral pools, such as by meaningfully partnering with minority-serving institutions, schools and organizations.
- Contract with recruitment firms with diverse personnel and a demonstrated track record of recruiting diverse candidates.
- Use reference checks to assess professional experience, which is often more relevant and valuable than specific degrees or credentials.

Develop programs, policies, procedures and personnel to address and protect health plan workers from racism and bias.

- Provide an ongoing support system for people of color and other underrepresented groups in the organization, such as affinity groups and peer support programs.
- Regularly seek and respond to staff feedback.
- With affected populations, co-develop and periodically disseminate anti-racism and anti-bias policies and a system for reporting complaints and harm that is not limited only to what is prohibited by law, with reliable, consistent and well-publicized investigative procedures and strong protections against retaliation.

Address financial, time and other barriers to education and professional development.

- Provide professional development stipends, tuition reimbursement, on the job training and paid time off to support career advancement.

Recommendation: Create and sustain workplaces and jobs where employees can be healthy and thrive, while setting standards that support effective and equitable maternal care.

Create policies and a workplace culture that support all staff, including pregnant and parenting staff, in maintaining their health and well-being and that of their families.

- Provide reasonable accommodations for pregnant workers.
- Supply space and time to support lactation.
- Provide childcare benefits.
- Include fertility care in health benefits.

- Provide support for workers' reproductive healthcare needs.
 - Develop mentorship programs to support pregnant employees through advice, advocacy and modeling.
- Adopt workplace paid leave policies and culture that promote health, well-being and economic security of all employees and families.**
- Provide robust paid family and medical leave policies.
 - Provide robust paid sick day programs and supportive time off policies for attending prenatal, postpartum and other health care visits and needs.
- Model use of workplace benefits and signal strong support for family-friendly workplace policies.**
- Model taking leave and needed time to take care of self and family.
 - Encourage employees to use the full scope of their benefits.
- Ensure that the health plan's own health insurance benefits provide excellent maternity and reproductive health coverage and benefits.**
- Ensure that employees and beneficiaries have access to the full complement of care that they may need from pregnancy through the postpartum period with affordable cost-sharing.
 - Provide employees/beneficiaries with access to a choice between midwifery and physician care, including maternal-fetal medicine specialists, as needed. Provide them with a choice among birth settings.
 - Ensure coverage of childbirth education, full-spectrum doula support, lactation personnel and care navigators (who may be associated with community-based organizations).
- Provide and encourage the use of mental health and wellness services.**
- Formalize peer support among traditionally underrepresented staff (including people of color, women and workers with disabilities).
 - Contract with mental health providers, including those that meet the unique needs of BIPOC communities.
 - Reinforce a workplace culture that supports using sick leave for mental health and self-care days to mitigate the impact of burnout.
 - Recognize the prevalence of anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions during pregnancy and in the postpartum period, and support the healing of childbearing staff and beneficiaries with these conditions. Make staff aware of and encourage them to use short-term disability benefits for maternal mental health.
- Reinforce institutional commitment to workplace safety, both physically and psychologically.**
- Institute strong policies against retaliation to prevent retribution for identifying bad actors or practices within the workplace.

- Promote a culture in which leadership and management support staff and champion their safety and security.
- Develop, implement and refine workplace policies to prevent and address harm from other staff/leaders and customers.

Pay a living wage and pay equitably across all roles.

- Provide fair pay to all employees at all levels of the organization by ending wage discrimination by race, gender or other protected characteristics.
- Offer a living wage with a comprehensive benefits package.
- Conduct regular reviews of compensation structures to ensure salaries are equitable and nondiscriminatory. Adhere to these criteria during hiring processes.
- Provide pay transparency and transparent criteria for promotion and salary increase.
- Refrain from using an applicant or employee's previous salary level to determine their current salary.

Ensure that employees and beneficiaries understand the benefits for which they are eligible; their rights under federal, state, and municipal laws; and how to activate and access these programs and services.

- Human relations staff should maintain up-to-date information about the full complement of programs and policies noted above, as well as community services that can assist with social needs. Dedicated HR personnel should be tasked with assisting with information and access to these programs and services.
- Up-to-date details of eligibility and access should be available and pro-actively directed to all pregnant and parenting staff and beneficiaries as both web-based information and paper handouts.

The Alliance of Community Health Plans (ACHP) represents the nation's top-performing nonprofit health companies, serving tens of millions of Americans in 37 states and D.C. ACHP is the voice of a unique payer-provider partnership model advancing proven solutions that deliver better value for patients, employers and taxpayers, and their participation focused on reimbursement structures in provider-aligned health systems.

Find detailed recommendations and more resources at nationalpartnership.org/raisingthebar

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