



# 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 1 in 4 U.S. adults live with a mental illness,<sup>1</sup> more than one-third of Americans live in areas where there is a shortage of mental health professionals.<sup>2</sup> In fact, nearly 6,200 providers would need to be added to rightsize the deficit.<sup>3</sup>

Diversity within the mental health workforce is also lacking. Studies show that when patients share the same gender, race or ethnicity of their providers, everything from communication to health outcomes improve.<sup>4</sup> Yet about 7 in 10 psychologists are female and about 8 in 10 are white.<sup>5</sup>

**Employers can help combat these challenges by:**



## Selecting

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



## Providing

preventive mental health support to help avoid crises



**More than  
1 in 3**

Americans live in areas where there is a shortage of mental health professionals<sup>2</sup>

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

Ideally, a provider network offers 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, employers should consider whether their carrier and network selection provides employees and their covered family members with a breadth of options to choose from. This includes ensuring access to providers who are diverse in terms of the conditions they specialize in, how they deliver care – in-person, virtually or hybrid – and their demographics, such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and primary language.

UnitedHealthcare and its parent company, UnitedHealth Group, are focused on tackling the shortage of mental health professionals head-on. In fact, since 2020, UnitedHealthcare has increased its national network of behavioral health providers by nearly 90%.<sup>6</sup> Plus, UnitedHealth Group committed \$100M to help recruit, train and fund scholarships for 10,000 clinicians.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps more notable over the past 5 years is the growth that has been seen in the virtual mental health space. UnitedHealthcare networks consisted of 6,600 virtual mental health providers in 2020.<sup>6</sup> That number has grown by over 3,216% to 218,000+ virtual mental health providers as of 2024.<sup>6</sup>

“Today, we see that many members prefer the convenience of virtual appointments. Virtually connecting with a provider reduces the time employees have to spend away from work, commuting or in the waiting room,” explains Trevor Porath, vice president of behavioral health solutions for UnitedHealthcare Employer & Individual. “By removing those obstacles, members can get the mental health care and support they need when they need it.”

These virtual visits can be critical to employees who live in areas where provider shortages are more significant, such as rural communities.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the day, it's vital that employers work with their carrier to understand their options, so they can feel confident they are selecting the right network for their employees. This includes ensuring that the providers in these networks are committed to delivering quality care in a timely manner with measurable outcomes.

For instance, UnitedHealthcare offers a specific solution that brings together behavioral health providers who offer guaranteed speed-to-care along with assessments that show quality-oriented outcomes.

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

**Stacie Grassmuck**

Director  
Behavioral Health Product and Innovation  
UnitedHealthcare Employer & Individual



# 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 a 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.

This can take shape through the form of education, self-care tools, telephonic emotional support or coaching. For example, UnitedHealthcare offers eligible members access to self-guided educational content and resources, mindfulness and resilience support through top-rated wellness app **Calm Health**, in addition to offering an **In-the-moment support** help line, access to cognitive behavioral therapy techniques and **1-on-1 in-app messaging** with coaches.

"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 potentially 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.



## Learn how UnitedHealthcare supports a whole-person health approach >

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<sup>1</sup> About Mental Health, CDC, Aug. 8, 2024. Available: <https://www.cdc.gov/mental-health/about/>.

<sup>2</sup> Health Resources & Services Administration: State of the Behavioral Health Workforce Report, 2024. Bureau of Health Workforce: National Center for Health Workforce Analysis (NCHWA), November 2024. Available: <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bureau-health-workforce/state-of-the-behavioral-health-workforce-report-2024.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Mental Health Care Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). KFF, Dec. 31, 2024. Available: <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/mental-health-care-health-professional-shortage-areas-hpsas/>.

<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: April 2, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Data Tool: Demographics of the U.S. Psychology Workforce. American Psychological Association, 2023. Available: <https://www.apa.org/workforce/data-tools/demographics>. Accessed: April 2, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> SURE Network Summary Dashboard, Commercial E&I and Commercial non-E&I Q4 2024 (Dec. 31, 2024 data); Jan. 14, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Investing in the health workforce. UnitedHealth Group. Available: <https://www.unitedhealthgroup.com/uhg/people-and-culture/our-foundations/scholarships.html>. Accessed: April 7, 2025.

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.

Calm Health is not intended to diagnose or treat depression, anxiety, or any other disease or condition. If participants feel their condition is severe and needs attention, they are instructed to contact their treating provider or mental health therapist for help. This program is not available to UnitedHealthcare E&I Fully Insured customers/members in District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia due to regulatory filings.

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