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Mental Health & Chemical Dependency Services

Mental Health Parity Expected to Drive Growth for Employee Assistance Programs in 2010

The January 1, 2010, implementation of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA) of 2008 will encourage affected employers to rely on their employee assistance programs (EAPs) as gatekeepers, medication managers, and disability managers to control potential increases in mental health and substance abuse treatment costs. These are the conclusions of Sean Fogarty, senior vice president of CuraLinc Healthcare, a national EAP provider. Mr. Fogarty identified five other trends that he believes will also drive EAP growth in 2010:

1. EAPs with a mental health and substance abuse gatekeeper component will be used to combat rising health care costs stemming from the MHPAEA.
2. EAPs will increasingly be integrated into an employer's pharmacy benefit and will be asked to help combat psychotropic medication cost increases.
3. EAPs will play a more active role in working with employees who file a disability claim.
4. Employers will require more connectivity between their EAP and the other components of their population health management strategy.
5. Employers will be proactive in working to overcome the stigma surrounding an EAP program.

Mr. Fogarty said he expects EAP usage to increase because the MHPAEA prohibits group health or self-insured plans covering more than 50 employees from imposing caps or limitations on mental health treatment or substance use benefits that are not also applied to medical and surgical benefits. The requirement will force many employers to increase the mental health and substance abuse coverage in their existing benefit plan. He noted that employer groups, particularly those that are self-insured, are concerned about the potential increases in health care costs that will come as a result of the legislation. EAPs with the gatekeeper component can optimize patient care and control overall costs by guiding employees and their covered dependents to an appropriate level of care within the benefit plan. In addition, EAP-based pharmacy intervention programs can complement care for mental health issues such as depression or anxiety provided by general practitioners who may not be trained in behavioral health medication management issues. An EAP clinician can review the general practitioner's prescribed treatment and recommend additional short-term counseling as a complement to the medication, or help the member find a mental health practitioner who can more precisely treat the condition to reduce recidivism and ensure treatment compliance. EAPs are able to help workers on disability leave address related co-morbid behavioral health issues, such as depression or anxiety. Research indicates that by addressing the behavioral issues, the EAP can help reduce the duration and frequency of disability claims.

Continued EAP integration and connectivity with other components of employers' population health management strategy is likely because of the EAP's ability to focus on behavior change. Research indicates that lifestyle choices and decisions put individuals at-risk for developing numerous chronic conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancers, kidney disease, lung conditions, and back, knee, and hip problems. An EAP-driven population health management initiative can help employers achieve lower health care costs, disability expenses, and worker's compensation costs, and decrease absenteeism, increase motivation, and increase productivity.

To leverage EAP benefits appropriately, employers may need to seek to reverse the negative stigma that has accompanied these programs for decades—only 'low-performing' employees are referred to the EAP. For an EAP to be effective, employers should promote the preventive nature of the program, the confidentiality, and the nontraditional services such as financial, legal, and work/life assistance, in addition to the traditional counseling and management consultation resources. The key will be communicating to employees that the EAP can help them address challenges in their lives before work performance is impacted.

CuraLinc Healthcare is a privately owned company that provides behavioral health and work life services, EAPs, corporate health and wellness programs, and critical incident response services through its SupportLinc, EmpowerLinc, PerformanceLinc, and ResponseLinc brands. Based in Chicago, Illinois, CuraLinc provides programs to more than 148,000 members from 119 organizations nationwide.

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