

## Thought Leaders' Corner

Each month, Population Health News asks a panel of industry experts to discuss a topic suggested by a subscriber. This month there are two questions:

### Q. What are some ways to address the social determinants of health?

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It is widely recognized that social factors outside the health care system often have a greater impact on health outcomes than medical care itself. In recent years, more and more health care organizations have begun to address social determinants of health. In fact, a 2018 survey found that 80 percent of health payers are doing so.

As the Chief Medical Officer of L.A. Care Health Plan, the largest publicly operated health plan in the country, I am honored to serve vulnerable and low-income communities in Los Angeles County. With a member population of more than two million, almost all of whom are low-income, the only way to move the needle on health outcomes is to also address the social factors that influence health.

So how can a health plan address social determinants of health? There are many ways.

- **Housing**

This is one of the biggest social determinants requiring attention across the country. In L.A. County, the latest count put the number of people experiencing homelessness at nearly 58,000. Studies have shown that homeless individuals are much more likely to suffer from acute or chronic illnesses compared to those who are housed. L.A. Care has committed \$20 million over five years to Brilliant Corners, a housing agency working with Los Angeles County's Housing for Health program. L.A. Care has also contributed to a recuperative care housing project that will provide an appropriate setting for people who are homeless to heal, after they no longer need in-patient care.

- **Food Insecurity**

L.A. Care has addressed food insecurity by awarding \$1.3 million over the past two years to community organizations that provide meal delivery to the elderly, or help low-income individuals enroll in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which is known as CalFresh in California to address an ongoing challenge of increasing participation in a program with historically low participation rates. We also are part of a

pilot program that is providing home delivery of free medically-tailored meals for those with chronic conditions. Medicaid health plans can identify members who are nutritionally vulnerable, and connect them with partner organizations to provide services.

- **Community-based Services**

L.A. Care has opened five Family Resource Centers across L.A. County, with plans for a total of 13. The centers provide a wide variety of programming for both members and the general public that address social determinants of health. Fitness classes are quite popular, providing the community with access to a safe space for exercise. Frequently, Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) staff are on site to help community members enroll in benefits for which they qualify, including CalFresh or CalWorks. Our FRCs also offer parenting classes and reading time for young children to encourage healthy child development and school readiness. Health promoters are another important part of our educational efforts. L.A. Care launched a health promoters program in 2007 with the goal of training community volunteers to teach others about nutrition, general health, and how to access health care.

While we are proud of the work we are doing, there is so much more we'd like to do, such as:

- Use the data we already have to identify populations at risk
- Help our providers incorporate social determinants screenings and referrals into their visits
- Develop or adopt a social determinants screening assessment tool we can incorporate into our daily interactions with members, including those at our Family Resource Centers
- Establish more pathways to evidence-based community programs that are already addressing social determinants

As a public health plan, we will continue to leverage our resources to address the social issues that ultimately impact our members' health, as lack of adequate housing and food-insecurity appear to be worsening. Despite previous efforts we are clearly not doing enough to address social determinants of health, so the health care industry must continue to step up. Together, we can make a difference.

*Dr. Richard Seidman, MD, MPH is the Chief Medical Officer of L.A. Care Health Plan, the largest publicly-operated plan in the country. He is responsible for developing and implementing strategies and initiatives to ensure quality health care delivery to the more than two million members – some of the most vulnerable in the county.*



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