

# OPTIMIZING YOUR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH OUTCOMES AND SPEND WITH PERSONALIZED ADVOCACY

Two HR Leaders Share Strategies for Improving Employee Well-being

**Nearly 60 percent of adults with a mental health condition did not receive mental health services in the previous year.**

Source: Mental Health by The Numbers, National Alliance on Mental Illness

Employers are struggling to overcome an escalating challenge: as the behavioral healthcare crisis in our country deepens, people are not getting the help they need to feel better. For HR departments, it can be a frustrating situation. While you continue to invest in Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and other behavioral health services for employees and their family members, utilization of these resources is typically very low. It doesn't need to be that way, according to a pair of HR benefits experts who led a recent web seminar on the topic.

Hosted by *Employee Benefit News* and sponsored by Accolade, the webinar, *Breaking Barriers: Optimize Your Behavioral Health Outcomes and Spend*, featured presenters Junaid Karimi, Manager of Benefits for BJ Services, and Andy Rosa, Vice President of Customer Partnerships for Accolade and a former HR executive.

Accolade is a personalized health and benefits solution provider that combines health advisors, clinical experts and technology to engage employees and their families in their health and act as a catalyst to improve health outcomes. Houston, Texas-based BJ Services is a leading provider of pressure pumping and oilfield services for the petroleum industry. The company has nearly 3,000 employees and a total insured population of approximately 8,300 members.

## Challenging Work Environment and Lifestyle

The demanding nature of jobs in the oilfield presents several challenges for the BJ Services' predominantly young and male workforce, Karimi explained. "This is rugged, physical work that requires a lot of focus and mental alertness. Our employees, mostly men in their 30s, drive out with heavy equipment on big rigs to oil and gas-producing wells, which are almost always located far from major population centers. A typical worker is on the job for two weeks, living away from their family, followed by a week off, when they're driving several hours or flying home. It's a tough lifestyle."

**More than 80% of workers feel stress on the job. Nearly half say they need help in learning how to manage it.**

Source: Attitudes in the American Workplace VII, Harris Interactive Survey on behalf of The Marlin Company

The physical and mental demands of the job, combined with the stress of being away from home for long periods of time, can trigger anxiety and depression, according to Karimi. In addition, because military veterans are very well matched to the physicality and discipline of the work, BJ Services has employees struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleep disorders and other related behavioral health challenges.

### **Well-being Critical for Safety and Productivity**

BJ Services is concerned about each employee's well-being for its own sake, Karimi said, but their mental and emotional health is also core to the company's intent to be a high-reliability and high-performance organization. The company strives to have the safest, most productive environment out there, explained Karimi: "Our focus on safety requires that we have employees who are well-rested and mentally focused. We need them to be functioning at their best at all times to produce safely and to help drive business performance." Success of the company's behavioral health programs is critical to their business strategy, not just a focus for HR.

Furthermore, the company's ongoing challenge of finding and retaining qualified employees for highly specialized roles is substantial. "Once we have someone, they become a strategic asset for us," said Karimi. That means the cost of losing employees due to behavioral health challenges—whether financial stress, family stress, work-related stress, substance abuse or any other issue—is high. So too is the behavioral health related productivity drain of elevated absenteeism and "presenteeism"—workers on the job but minimally productive.

Rosa, citing a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, highlighted for webinar attendees the high cost of presenteeism. According to that research, presenteeism stemming from depression and physical pain causes productivity losses three times as great as those stemming from absenteeism triggered by those same causes ([Source: Harvard Business Review, Presenteeism: At Work – But Out of It](#)). In other words, employees who cannot work productively due to those conditions typically show up for work anyway.

### **Low Awareness and Utilization of BH Programs and Services**

In light of all of these factors, BJ Services two years ago took a fresh look at its "health and productivity delivery model," Karimi said. His team's goal was to analyze and ultimately improve its behavioral health program.


The company's health and productivity delivery model covers employees' physical, emotional and financial wellness, and the benefits programs and vendors intended to address those needs. That review led to the recognition that the various benefit programs and the systems designed to deliver them were "sort of siloed," Karimi said.

The review also revealed an "underwhelming" level of employee awareness of the company's EAP services, and their scope. Many employees who were aware of its existence "thought of it just as an 800 number you call in a crisis, and nothing more," Karimi said.

## A Growing Behavioral Health Crisis



2-3x \$



Medical costs for treating individuals with a chronic condition and MH/SUD comorbidity are 2-3x higher than those without a MH/SUD comorbidity.

Source: Milliman Research Report: Potential Economic Impact of Integrated Medical=Behavioral Healthcare

The EAP had worked well enough in addressing crisis situations, but employees were not using it much for their debilitating “lingering, on-going stressors.” The root of that problem, Karimi concluded, was that employees were obliged to take the initiative to contact the EAP. That’s a move many were reluctant to make when not suffering from an acute problem, partly due to a lingering stigma associated with seeking behavioral health related services.

### Barriers to EAP Utilization

That employee pattern is experienced by many employers, according to Accolade’s Rosa. In the absence of a strong outreach effort, employees harbor a host of concerns and misconceptions about EAPs:

- Can I trust it to be confidential?
- Can I talk openly about using it?
- If I use the EAP will it hurt my standing within the organization?

Rosa also observed that people often lack the ability to fully recognize emotional problems such as stress, anxiety and depression in the first place. “Self-identification for behavioral health issues, or recognizing connections between physical and behavioral problems, can be rare,” Rosa said. “Sometimes you don’t really notice what’s happening so you don’t recognize the need to seek care.”

Given the high stakes, BJ Services recognized the inadequacy of putting the onus on employees to seek out resources that could help them address behavioral health problems. The company’s goal was to thread together all of the components of its health and productivity delivery model. “Instead of just having a product and program approach, we wanted to create an experience for employees where it all comes together, and where they can be nudged and navigated along the way to get the best care at the best value,” Karimi said.



### Whole Mind & Body: A Proactive, Holistic Approach to Care

The need for a proactive strategy that, in Karimi's words, would "treat our employees on a whole body, whole mind basis" led the company to Accolade. An example of a case in which that holistic care model would be particularly helpful, Karimi said, would be when an employee receives a "tough medical diagnosis." Not only could such a person benefit from expert guidance on navigating the purely medical and claims processing dimensions of the matter, but also support for its emotional impact.

An employee who has just received a diagnosis of an advanced stage of an aggressive cancer will almost inevitably be filled with anxiety about all of the potential ramifications. Questions might include:

- How am I going to pay for the treatment?
- How will this impact my family?
- What am I going to do next?
- How am I going to reschedule work for all of my treatments?
- How much should I share with my employer?

"The intention of a proactive holistic strategy," Karimi explained, "is to facilitate this conversation between the employee or family member and their personal health assistant, who would connect the dots, look at the medical issue and tie it back to a resource for their emotional wellness." What Karimi called the "hard data" associated with answers to those questions tends to crowd out the "soft data" emotional health factors operating below the surface in employees' minds, he added.

The dialog, once initiated, is ongoing. "As Accolade's Health Assistants and nurses and clinicians are alerted, Accolade is able to guide and nudge employees along and check up on them because it's a trusted, multi-platform relationship," he added.

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— Junaid Karimi,  
Manager of Benefits  
for BJ Services

Beyond the realm of acute health problems, the ability to take the "whole person" into account is important because of differences in an individual's priorities and personal circumstances have important implications for their overall care. "What's going on with people and their needs doesn't always align with how the benefit system works or how an EAP and other providers may work," Rosa told web seminar attendees.

### **The Importance of a Trusted Relationship**

One can only glean only so much from claims data, he added. That's why a plan member's relationship with a trusted personal health assistant can help to ensure that employees and their dependents get the care they need when they need it. These advisors act as the glue that holds all the moving parts together.

The Health Assistants' effectiveness depends not only on their expertise and interpersonal skills, but their ability to establish a relationship with employees in the first place. That means their existence must be known to employees, and their accessibility must be easy, whether it's via a digital device or telephone.

"The medium almost becomes more important than the message," Karimi said. "Being able to meet employees where they are, on their mobile device at odd hours, is critical."

So too is the fact that Accolade is a third-party service, he added. That gives added assurance to some employees of the confidentiality of their conversations, Karimi said.

In the absence of a serious need identified by employees, these personal health assistants must be able to seize opportunities to strike up conversations with them. They need an opening, without being overly intrusive, to explore employees' potential needs around behavioral health. Without such a trusted and familiar intermediary, employees are less likely to take the initiative to contact an EAP directly, Karimi told webinar attendees.

Even when health concerns are minor, BJ Services has found that its proactive holistic behavioral health promotion strategy implemented by Accolade dovetails with its ongoing employee retention effort. Karimi spoke of the need to "re-recruit" employees even as they remain on the payroll. "We need to have the right tools and resources available to meet employees in their time of need, and be their champion," he said. "When employees feel well looked-after, their loyalty is far stronger."

That loyalty and the underlying sound health that makes it possible for BJ Services employees to stay on the job is certainly a stress-reliever for Karimi as well. It helps to keep his own headquarters position from being as rugged and tough emotionally, as the oilfield workers' jobs are physically.

### **Personalized Advocacy in Action**

How can a "Health Assistant" go to bat for employees? Accolade's Andy Rosa illustrated the answer with a description of an interaction between an employee of an Accolade customer who had simply called in with what Rosa described as a "transactional issue" about a health plan option during open enrollment.

"The Health Assistant asked the employee a few questions about why she was choosing that particular plan," Rosa said. Early in the conversation the employee mentioned, in passing, that it was not a good time of the year for her. With a little gentle probing, the Health Assistant learned that the anniversary of the death of a family member was coming up. A little further into the directed conversation it became apparent that the employee had descended into a serious clinical depression.

"The depression was taking her down a very bad path, but she had not sought out care. She didn't know how to or what her options were," Rosa recalled. Because the Health Assistant was equipped to do much more than just handle enrollment issues and looked at the employee as a "whole person," they were able to direct the employee to an in-network provider, where she ultimately began receiving the care that she needed.

"The assistant was able to bring all of the pieces together," Rosa said. The process involved not simply a few suggestions, but follow-up calls to ensure that the employee was on the best path. "We want to be sure that people get the right care and the right benefits," Rosa concluded.

Along similar lines, BJ Services' Karimi recounted the example of a highly skilled senior technician working in the field who had a "mental health episode" and "went missing for a while." When he was found, he was taken to a hospital and encouraged to contact an Accolade Health Assistant. "We call this a warm referral to an Accolade Health Assistant, who then engaged an Accolade Behavioral Health Clinician right away," Karimi explained.

"The Accolade clinician and Health Assistant combination connected with the employee, their family, and with the nurse and the doctor providing care. As the employee was getting clinical treatment away from home, the Accolade Health Assistant and clinician were able to coordinate care and talk to the family throughout the care process as he transitioned from hospital to home. And it turned into a whole family conversation, with the Health Assistant even supporting them with questions like, 'Have you arranged for transportation? Have you arranged for an airline ticket?'—that sort of thing.

"The Health Assistant, acting at the intersection of clinical and mental health in a very complex case, provided a very positive experience for the employee and his family," Karimi said. "They were very laudatory about how the whole advocacy system worked." The episode also highlighted the understanding that employee assistance can, for all parties involved, be "not just a 'product' but an experience—a service they can relate to," he added.

### **Your Questions Answered: Web Seminar Q&A**

Web seminar attendees posed several questions to the speaker panel. Here are some edited highlights:

#### **Q: What steps have you taken to help employees manage financial stress?**

**Karimi:** Our business is cyclical and many of our employees are away from their families for two weeks at a time leaving others to handle the bills, so there is financial stress. But our blue-collar workers are also very highly paid. As part of our onboarding process we have a very intentional conversation called "money and family." It covers the basics of personal finances but also we educate them about the tools and resources available to them if they run into problems. That includes our EAP, the retirement plan provider and a foundation that helps employees and their families in stress who work in the oilfield. We also encourage them to establish a relationship with an Accolade health advocate.

#### **Q: Do you make behavioral health risk assessments available to employees?**

**Rosa:** Yes. These can be made through a series of questions asked by a Health Assistant. It could be about a particular behavioral health condition by itself, or something that's co-morbid with chronic health issues like diabetes or musculoskeletal pain.

#### **Q: Does the text messaging that goes between employees and their health assistant include clinical medical data, and if so how do you overcome HIPAA issues?**

**Rosa:** With the Accolade platform, each person—the employee and members of his family—have a separate account. These are unique accounts, so you can have detailed information pass between the individual and the Health Assistant. It's not just employee- or family-based. People can allow their family members to see their account, but they don't have to. We follow HIPAA guidelines.

#### **Q: How has your EAP's utilization changed since you added Accolade to the equation?**

**Karimi:** In general terms we have seen engagement go up, including as it relates to financial stress issues. Accolade's Health Assistants have been able to point our members to the EAP and the resources it offers in that area.

#### **Q: Is it useful to give employees and their family members a financial incentive to encourage utilization of Accolade services?**

**Rosa:** That's not commonly done. When an employer uses Accolade as a funnel for employee questions about health and health benefit related issues, and puts the Accolade phone number on the back of their medical ID card, that usually gets people in the pattern of working through their dedicated Health Assistant.