

Voluntary Benefits: An Employer's Secret Weapon Against COVID-19

AUG 13, 2020 | COVID-

19, FINANCE, HEALTHCARE, MONITOR, PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

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What if?

What if the most overlooked benefit your company could offer your employees was not only highly valuable but also at no cost to your company?

Six months have passed since Alaskans had to “hunker down,” and as a twenty-five-year veteran specializing in voluntary, employee-paid benefit programs, I started to realize how important changes in the workplace, concerns about the financial security of Americans, and a dangerous pandemic with no vaccine in sight would change the workplace forever.

An advocate for disability, life, critical illness, and hospital plans, employers need to understand why now is the time to invest in learning about how your organization can leverage voluntary benefits to allow your employees the opportunity to protect their finances and build a safety net with minimal costs.

COVID-19 has dramatically changed the workplace in many ways:

- Employees were in a fragile state already, and the expenses are stacking up: with the cost of hospitalization (as high as \$97,000 on the West Coast), the cost of testing (yes, not all tests are free), and the cost of having to miss work... there goes the paycheck (without disability coverage).
- Where is the workplace now? In the [video on my website](#), I articulate the challenge of shifting from voluntary benefit enrollers coming to the workplace (the old Aflac and Colonial Life model) to scenarios where your employees are at home—and doing so virtually...yet effectively. This takes skill and talent, as employees are already burned out on Zoom meetings.

- Employers should be asking more of their current voluntary benefits to ensure they rise to meet employees' financial needs (and rightfully so) should they get the virus. Many new carriers have entered the market to the great benefit to the employer and employee; more carriers on the market drive premiums down—and this is where you, the consumer, win.

One of the most important studies in recent months talks about the need for managers and leaders to show compassion, to be on the “front lines” during this time of dramatic change and uncertainty. The right kind of voluntary benefits offered to your employees will align with your company’s message that you are a concerned employer who cares about your employees and their families.

I often hear employers who mistakenly devalue voluntary benefits because they envision “old-style” programs that involved pushy salespeople and forcing the employer to meet with staff one-on-one. Those days are gone. It’s akin to comparing a computer twenty years ago to our smartphones now: they are not the same. And if you do have a twenty-year old “voluntary computer” in your organization, now is the time to upgrade.

Why? I have a deep concern that while much is still unknown regarding the damage this virus does to the human body, enough is known now to make doctors deeply concerned. In autopsies of patients (some asymptomatic), the damage can be internally severe and potentially long-term. If you were an insurance carrier offering disability, life, and other plans, would you consider a prior COVID-19 diagnosis to be a “pre-existing condition” and fail to ensure someone in 2021 and beyond because of it? Who knows, but chances are this may happen. Therefore, my suggestion is to allow employees to obtain these valuable types of coverages now while they still have zero health questions—who knows how many will be diagnosed in the future?

As many companies move in fourth quarter and evaluate their benefit offerings, my advice is to look to experts that can evaluate the exciting carriers on the market which can bring benefit offerings that speak to the new concerns of the workplace:

- **Critical Illness** policies that pay for a COVID-19 diagnosis (with some requirements such as hospitalization) and no health questions up to \$40,000 of benefit.
- **Life plans** that double as a Long-Term Care policy (with no health questions up to \$100,000).
- **Disability plans** (short and long term) that will replace a paycheck due to hospitalization.
- **Hospital plans** that will pay cash for hospitalization.
- Good old **accident plans** that have features and benefits that blow away the old individual plans by savings of around 40 percent savings.

In closing, your employees are living in a fragile state as Alaska has the highest cost of healthcare in the world. As an employer, you cannot be expected to pay for every benefit your employees need and want, but you can help them with employee-paid programs that will lessen their financial risk for pennies a day. Work with a voluntary benefit broker who knows how to drive success with virtual tools and HR shine.

Make 2020 the year that your organization looked COVID-19 in the eye and said, "COVID-19, you may be here (to stay), and we may not know what our workplace is going to look like, but we have brought the best financial solutions to our employees so they have options to financially survive."