



## Building Health Equity Into Workplace DEI Initiatives

Significant effort is put into creating and enforcing laws, policies and standards to make the workplace equitable. However, what happens when the world outside of work leaves many of your employees disadvantaged to the point of damaging their health?

Studies show some Americans face significant inequities when it comes to their health. Not only do they lack affordable and accessible medical care, but they face gaps in vital resources that impact health and well-being.

This whitepaper discusses four health disparities that commonly impact minority and low-income workers. We then offer solutions and strategies employers can put in action to meet DEI efforts and improve wellness across your workforce. Employers may not be able to solve what generations of poor government policy and economic hardship have created, but investment in creative solutions and innovations such as digital health tools can move things in the right direction.

# Barriers to Health

The factors that play into health disparities are broad and deep, touching almost every aspect of an individual's life. They range from safe, affordable housing and clean air and drinking water to an individual's experiences with healthcare that shape future behavior. Here are four common disparities that employers can impact through targeted programs and policies.

## Poor Access to Medical Care

Though more Americans have health insurance than any time in history, many still face inequities in the availability of quality medical care in their neighborhoods. Rural residents and those in low-income city neighborhoods invariably have few options for high-quality primary care in their communities and no options for specialty services. Fewer doctors mean long wait times and poorer quality of care. For example, a [Kaiser Family Foundation survey](#) found that black adults are more likely to report negative health care experiences, like a provider not believing them and refusing to order tests.

The delay or lack of medical care also leads to worse outcomes for what should be preventable or treatable conditions. For instance, black and Native American populations are [more likely to die](#) from diabetes-related complications. Black women are more likely than white women to be diagnosed at later stages and [40% more likely to die](#) from breast cancer, even though they have lower rates of breast cancer overall.

**3.6M Americans do not obtain medical care due to transportation barriers**

American Hospital Association

## Transportation Challenges

An estimated 3.6 million people in the U.S. do not obtain medical care due to transportation barriers, according to the [American Hospital Association](#). They may live in a rural community without public transportation or lack the time or resources to use the public transportation available to them. [The Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) reports the lowest-income workers spend 24% of their income on transportation. Financial and logistical obstacles like these can result in missed or delayed appointments and worse health outcomes.

## Limited Access to Healthy Food

According to the USDA's most recent food access research report, approximately 13.5 million people live in "food deserts," geographic areas without convenient options for affordable and healthy foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables. This forces them to rely on fast food, convenience store items or food pantry donations to feed themselves and their families.

The lack of reliable and nutritionally rich foods can lead to a host of health problems for your employees, like obesity, heart disease and diabetes. It also impacts your employees' ability to concentrate and remain productive on the job.

**13.5M people live in "food deserts"**

USDA

## Health Literacy Gap

Eighty-seven million Americans have low health literacy, according to a [report](#) in the Journal of Health Literacy Research and Practice, meaning they do not know or understand important information that can impact their health.

This is particularly true for older adults, adolescents, people with low income and educational levels and racial and ethnic minorities. The authors of the article cited studies showing low health literacy is an "independent predictor of racial/ethnic disparities in health behaviors," such as not being aware of how certain behaviors increase their risk of disease, or how to best locate in-network health practitioners and navigate the complexities of their health insurance benefits. Those deficits directly impact health outcomes, one example being the [lower vaccination rate](#) and [higher death rate](#) from COVID.



# Employer-Driven Solutions

Though the problem of health inequity is daunting, employers can play a vital role in improving access and availability to health services and an overall healthier lifestyle. Here are a few achievable ideas that can have a sizeable impact in meeting the diverse needs of an employee population:



## 1 Review your company's **health insurance plan** with an eye to equity.

Make sure the plan you offer meets the needs of your population. Are there in-network providers in the neighborhoods where your employees live? And are they taking new patients?

Next, find out whether the health plan's in-network doctors represent a variety of races and ethnicities. Research shows that when patients and physicians share the same race or ethnicity, a number of outcomes improve, including patients' adherence to medication, their satisfaction with the visit, wait times for treatment, shared decision-making and even the amount of pain and anxiety patients experience.

If your current health plan doesn't include the diverse, community-based network of providers your employees need, it's time to shop around for a company that does.

## 2 Empower workers to use **digital health options**.

Digital health technologies have the potential to address some of the inequities your employees face, including improving health literacy, reducing the need for transportation to in-person appointments and improving access to providers. However, your employees will not reap the benefits if they don't know how to use the digital health options you provide.

One simple way to help is by choosing digital health programs based on their ease of use. Programs shouldn't require expensive equipment besides your employees' own cell phones. Even requiring broadband, heavy data plans or the need for a computer can serve as a barrier to participation.

Apps and platforms should mimic the tools employees already use — for instance, using their phone's camera to take a picture and post it — so they seem less intimidating and more manageable to users.

You can also improve health literacy by offering written or video tutorials or in-person lunch-and-learns on how to use the technologies you make available. Consider topics like how to prepare for and connect to a telehealth visit, or how to download and use the mobile health coaching app your company provides. When employees have someone to walk them through the initial learning curve, they are more likely to give it a try.

## 3 Set up an **employee discount program**.

Many employee discount programs offer mainly products and services geared toward upper-income employees, like tickets to Disneyland and memberships to health clubs. But why not secure discounts for things your lower-income employees need to improve access to care? You could work with local businesses to offer discounted cell phone service to help workers take part in digital health benefits, or negotiate reduced rideshare rates so employees can afford transportation to doctor visits.

#### 4 **Bring healthy food to the workplace.**

If some of your employees struggle to access fresh and healthy food near their homes, find ways to make those items available while they are at work. That can mean healthier cafeteria meals and vending machine options of course, but it can go beyond that, like organizing a weekly farmers market at your workplace.

Consider pairing this effort with education about what makes a healthy, balanced diet. That might include cooking demonstrations in the cafeteria, publishing healthy recipes in the employee newsletter or partnering with a digital health coaching program. The best coaching apps allow members to work with real nutritionists on how to make their meals healthier while still eating the foods and ingredients they enjoy and can easily access.

#### 5 **Choose wellness programs that adjust to employee schedules and lifestyles.**

Many weight loss and disease prevention apps expect members to adapt to a specific diet or exercise plan, but that doesn't work for employees who have food preferences, cultural norms or budget constraints. Employers must look for programs flexible enough to incorporate the foods employees have available and already prefer. For instance, someone with limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables may need to use canned or frozen options. A Hispanic employee may want ideas that accommodate economic and cultural staples like beans, rice and tortillas.

Wellness programs also must adjust to your employees' schedules. Weekly calls or meetings with a health coach can be helpful, but transportation or childcare limitations may make scheduled meetings prohibitive. Programs that offer coaching from real experts right when your employees need it will have the best likelihood of improving health long-term.

#### 6 **Expand use of smartphone-based health services.**

It's true that some low-income Americans do not own a smartphone, but for those who do, it's a major lifeline to services like healthcare. The Pew Research Center found that 27% of adults in low-income households are smartphone-only internet users, meaning they use their smartphone to connect with information and services without having broadband internet at home. That's up from 12% in 2013.

The takeaway for employers is that health services can be delivered successfully through smartphones even to low-income employees. For instance, one CDC-fully-recognized Diabetes Prevention Program is using an all-mobile platform to connect members to real nutritionists, fitness trainers and well-being experts. Because the program combines the convenience and accessibility of mobile technology with the power of human connection, it's able to maintain engagement over the course of the one-year program, boosting results.

Employers have a vested interest in a healthy, productive workforce where employees come to work energized and focused to do their jobs with excellence. When you understand and address the needs of the most disadvantaged workers — those with the greatest barriers to health — you will accomplish that goal, building a stronger workforce and a more resilient community in which to live and work.

Learn more about how Yes Health's unique approach to digital health coaching — a balance of high-tech and high-touch — can support your workplace wellness goals by delivering higher employee engagement and improved health outcomes.

Visit [yeshealth.com](https://yeshealth.com) or reach out for a live demo.

