

FUTURE OF HEALTH SUMMIT PRIVATE SESSION SUMMARY

Obesity in the Workplace

What Employers Can Do Differently

During the 2019 Future of Health private session “Obesity in the Workplace: What Employers Can Do Differently,” participants discussed how employers can best support their employees by destigmatizing obesity, promoting comprehensive obesity care, and supporting healthy lives within the microcosm of the workplace.

This private, off-the-record session highlighted leading voices in academia, health care, government, military, and business, including C-Suite-level management, all with the common goal of tackling obesity through workplace interventions. The session reinforced the severity and rapid progression of the obesity epidemic in the US. Participants recognized the importance of framing the condition as a disease rather than a lifestyle failure and supported the call to destigmatize obesity by using “people-first language,” which aims to eliminate weight bias by not labeling the person by their condition. Instead, the person is acknowledged first, followed by their condition (i.e., “person with obesity” rather than “obese person”).

The discussion included a presentation highlighting the ambiguity regarding what comprehensive obesity coverage and benefits should look like for an employee living with obesity and how employers should monitor the uptake of their offered services. Experts stressed the need for employer engagement at all levels of intervention from prevention to treatment, as well as continued interest and support from top-level management. As researchers and wellness organizations work to identify best practices, employers should respond accordingly to best support the health of their employees and their companies.

The Challenges for Employers

Employers can cultivate an environment that promotes health and wellness, and they have to leverage this capacity to benefit all employees. Obesity is a chronic, progressive disease, and the complexity of this disease contributes to many perceived barriers, all of which must be overcome to address obesity in the workplace successfully.

Participant Perspective

“Obesity is a chronic, progressive disease.”

“If we’re going to be effective in arresting this problem...we also have to work on the prevention side.”

“The only way we really will be able to control health cost is to allow people to have better health.”

This private session is part of the Milken Institute Center for Public Health’s initial effort to gather and aggregate best practices for addressing obesity in the workplace. To supplement the insights from this session, the Milken Institute Center for Public Health team is following up with each participant to conduct a phone interview. The findings from these interviews, along with the content from this private session, will be used to inform a white paper developed by the Center for Public Health team in the coming months.

Making a real change in the obesity epidemic will require societal changes, including evidence-based policy and community-level supports, that treat obesity as a disease. The workplace is a smaller ecosystem where various stakeholders can address obesity to improve company performance, promote employee health, and create a sustainable culture of wellness.

Perceived Barrier	Insights
Coverage and broader wellness programs are not consistent and rarely comprehensive	Comprehensive obesity coverage should include an employee-wide assessment to determine what each employee needs to sustain or improve their health
“Comprehensive coverage” definition is ambiguous	Interventions should be tailored to the severity of the disease state, beginning with aggressive behavioral therapy to pharmacotherapy to bariatric surgery for employees with severe obesity
Employees rarely use benefits when they have inconsistent coverage	Employers need to continuously assess the extent to which employees are utilizing their coverage plans and associated benefits
Workplace wellness programs can be stigmatizing for employees living with obesity	Employers should seriously consider how financial incentive programs, especially without other treatment options, might be counterproductive to creating a healthy and supportive work culture
There is no one-off, silver bullet solution	Going beyond worksite wellness programs and incentives, employers can instead move toward making small changes to improve the culture of health for everyone—for example, considering cafeteria food choices, office equipment and layout, and insurance benefits