

Jeff Bernhard:

Hi, I'm Jeff Bernhard, senior vice president of commercial markets at Highmark. Welcome to Hitting a Higher Mark. In this podcast we explore topics that are transforming how healthcare is delivered and paid for. Today, we will be specifically discussing social determinants of health. We have two special guests here today with me to expand on this very important healthcare topic. First, Barb Gray. She's the senior vice president of social determinants of health at Highmark Health. We also have Erine Grey, not brother or sister. Chief executive officer at Aunt Bertha, a mission based software organization, working to connect people with a variety of social services.

Jeff Bernhard:

Welcome to you both and thanks for joining us. Now, let's get started on today's topic. Barb, let's start with you. Can you explain a little bit about social determinants of health?

Barb Gray:

Jeff, I'd be happy to and thanks again for having me. Jeff, as you know, I'm a clinician by training and a registered nurse for many, many years. And so I can say with great honesty that clinicians and healthcare providers typically have looked through a clinical or maybe a mental health lens when we're taking care of our patients. And what we're learning now is that roughly 80% of health and well being is tied to nonclinical factors, which affect people's health before they can even connect with the healthcare system. When we think about these nonclinical factors, so we're talking about social determinants of health or drivers of health. So for example, financial strain or food insecurity or housing insecurity, maybe transportation needs or safety or social connections, but two key things to keep in mind here.

Barb Gray:

One, typically folks aren't impacted by just one social need. There are usually three or more and two, and this is surprising to many people is, that social determinants don't affect or apply just to the Medicaid or the CHIP populations. All lines of business, whether it's ACA or commercial business or whatnot. It has shown to be really impacted by social determinants of health. And this has been especially true during the COVID pandemic. And basically our goal is to first identify and then effectively address barriers to health. So in other words, just knowing our customer social needs isn't enough. We need to connect our customers to needed services. And that's why we came together with Erine's organization, Aunt Bertha to create Highmark community support powered by Aunt Bertha.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks Barb. I think, you make a good point that social determinants of health, maybe some people, maybe traditionally think of Medicaid or Children's Health Insurance Programs. And they are in fact, throughout all types of insurance employers, individuals, all incomes, because we're all touched and impacted by people that have different social needs, personal needs, et cetera. Whether it's a parent, a loved one, a neighbor you're trying to help, whatever it may be.

Barb Gray:

Absolutely.

Jeff Bernhard:

All right. So Erine, can you explain how Aunt Bertha is working with Highmark to facilitate the connection of community benefit organizations to people in need of these type of services?

Erine Gray:

Sure. Thanks Jeff. So if you think of the problem, we use the term seekers at our organization and a seeker is somebody in need who is seeking services at some stage within their lives. And really we take a seeker's first approach. And what that means is, if I'm struggling with a life changing event, maybe I find out that my child has a rare disease, or maybe I'm recently unemployed. There's two big problems to solve. The first, is how do I find out what services are available to me, if I'm in that situation? And the second is, once I find a community based organization, how do I connect? How do I apply for the services and how do I get the dignity of a yes or no? And that's part of our belief system, is that everybody deserves the dignity of a yes or no, when they apply to a program.

Erine Gray:

And so our company has been around for about 10 years and we built a nationwide search platform that allows anybody to enter their zip code. And I can see housing programs, reduce cost transportation programs, camps for kids that have a rare disease. And by getting that information at my fingertips, either through mobile or through the web or any other sort of interface. I have the ability to navigate on behalf of myself because a lot of people may not understand this or may forget there's a stigma associated with applying for and getting social services. And there shouldn't be because throughout all of our lives, we're all going to be a seeker at some point, that's the way it works. And our approach has been to allow for that anonymous searching situation so that people can find that services. And then go ahead and connect.

Jeff Bernhard:

So Barb, we all know you and I work at the Highmark, how much analytics drives, what we do at Highmark. Can you talk about how analytics drives the decisions and measurements of outcomes in the social determinants of health work that you do?

Barb Gray:

I'd be happy to. The analytics here are really important for us to be able to make data useful. Because number one, we want to focus efforts on supporting those CBOs that provide really highly needed services for our patients and families and individuals in the community across our footprint. But also number two, identifying any gaps in social services in particular communities. And then developing or contributing to solutions as appropriate based upon those gaps.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks, Barb. That's helpful. So, Erine, given the past four to six months has been an unprecedented time for the country. Can you give us some insights that you've gained over the past four to six months during the COVID-19 pandemic and how it's impacted Aunt Bertha and quite frankly, people that live in our society here?

Erine Gray:

Yes, absolutely. As Barb mentioned, our platform regularly tracks where the search activity is, where the connection activity is, which nonprofits are open or closed, which have capacity, which don't. And have

always done that. Normally was around probably 20% of search activity in the food category jumped up to nearly 65 to 70% of search activity nationwide. So what you found is people, maybe they were not mobile and didn't have a chance to ... Or were afraid to drive to the grocery store to get food. So we saw a lot of search activity for food delivery. And what's interesting is we were able to see for every zip code in the United States, not only were they searching for food delivery programs, but we were able to see where supply wasn't meeting demand. And that was pretty fascinating.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks Erine. Barb, so let's talk about application. Can you give examples of other initiatives that Highmark has started in addressing social needs that are barriers to good health?

Barb Gray:

Happy to do so, Jeff. As you know, Highmark has had a long history of community partnerships, but a couple of recent partnerships come to mind relative to SDOH programs and truly community partnerships are absolutely key when it comes to successful programs. One that comes to mind is our North Side project. This is where we are partnering with numerous community organizations in the North Side, which for those of you who are not familiar with Pittsburgh, it's a socially vulnerable community, just outside Pittsburgh. As part of that project, we utilize outreach and community health workers to engage with residents, identify any social drivers or needs that they may have, and then connecting those residents with needed social services. So that's been very, very successful and we're finding really, really high rates of engagement. And I think it's a testament to the importance of having folks who know the community, live in the community and connect in a very trusted way with their fellow residents.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks. What would you recommend that people that are listening go for more information about community support? Barb, let's go with you first.

Barb Gray:

There are a couple websites, Jeff. One would be Highmark.auntbertha.com or Highmarkanswers.com.

Jeff Bernhard:

Okay, and Erine how about you?

Erine Gray:

If you're out there or if you know somebody that's out there and are looking for help, just go to www.findhelp.org, and you can find programs for any zip code in the United States.

Jeff Bernhard:

All right. So Erine, I have to ask you, where does the name Aunt Bertha come from? I think everybody listening to this podcast has an Aunt Bertha, but where did it come from?

Erine Gray:

I knew I couldn't get away without answering that question. So thanks for asking. So two things that affected my life. I actually grew up in a small town in Western New York and my mom raised seven kids.

I was number six of seven and she was always the person sort of helping out in the neighborhoods. On top of having seven kids, we had a couple of other children join our family, nine total over periods of time. And so she was sort of the eccentric aunt that we all had, just so happened to be my mom. So there's that story. And then the other story is after graduate school, I spent six years in government trying to simplify the way people get enrolled in Medicaid, SNAP, TANF and the Children's Health Insurance Program. And so working for Uncle Sam for six years, taking the experience of my mom, wanted to have a personality that was a little bit of play on Uncle Sam, but somebody that you trust in your time of need. And there we are, we landed on Auntbertha.com and the name stuck, and we just stuck with it.

Jeff Bernhard:

Well, very catchy. It's extremely catchy. Well, I want to thank you both for joining me to discuss how a social determinants of health play a big part in overall wellness. This topic is critical because the more we understand how community wellbeing is affected by socioeconomic factors, the better we become at creating programs and forming partnerships focused on connecting individuals and families with needed resources in the regions we serve. I'm Jeff Bernhard, and thanks for listening to Hitting a Higher Mark.