



2011 IBI/NBCH Health and Productivity Forum

Integrated Benefits Institute &
National Business Coalition on Health

Case Studies Featuring 2011 Presentations

Building the Business Case for Prevention

***Synopsis:** UnitedHealth Group (UHG) makes a compelling case that employer-based health plans have a strong, unavoidable link with community health—and UHG backed that up by funding seven collaborative health projects of the NBCH Community Coalitions Health Institute. One such project in Rockville, IL, demonstrated the high feasibility of using employer investments to catalyze community health promotion and disease prevention aimed at reducing childhood obesity. These projects helped attract new federal health investment in communities through Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act Community Prevention (total federal funding of \$298 million in 2011 alone)*

Background

In a powerful 2011 IBI/NBCH Forum session, Reed Tuckson, MD, of UnitedHealth Group and Paul Brand of Employers' Coalition on Health advanced the business case for employer investment in community health partnerships.

That's a tough sell, with many leading corporations reducing charitable giving in a slow economic recovery. Nonetheless, this session generated more enthusiastic comments from Forum attendees than any other.

The case is compelling. Dr. Tuckson, Executive Vice President and Chief of Medical Affairs for UnitedHealth Group (UHG), described the impact of two unsustainable and interrelated trend lines: galloping medical cost increases and rising chronic disease indicators such as obesity rates.

Tuckson also noted that employers should be attentive to new opportunities to fund preventive community health programs through the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA). In 2011 alone, PPACA provides \$298 million for Community Prevention, funding opportunities for employers to collaborate on community health projects.

Brand, Executive Director of Employers' Coalition on Health (ECOH) in Rockford, IL, presented the inspiring experience of a pilot program for employer investment in a community health program to prevent obesity in grade-school children.

Broken Health Status Quo

Some employers, already committed to employee health and wellness, quickly see the value of community health partnerships. Others struggle with the concept.

Andrew Webber, CEO, National Business Coalition on Health (NBCH), opened the session with the observation, “If your workforce enters unhealthy communities with food deserts, where the only food they can get is unhealthy fast food, and there’s violence in the streets, your investment is very much compromised.”

Tuckson re-focused this theme on future employees of companies who present with pre-existing health risks and challenges that arise from unhealthy communities. “If you're in your bunker thinking that your new, young employees are going to be healthy without your engagement, you're wrong,” he said. He delivered a string of statistics, facts and analysis with some decidedly down-home language, drawing chuckles from the audience and earning the title “Reverend Tuckson” from Brand.

Passage of PPACA is only the beginning of a long process to fix American health and health care, and a very uncertain process, given attempts to reduce or repeal PPACA, Tuckson said. “What is *not* uncertain is that the escalation in medical care delivery cannot be sustained,” he added.

Health care costs are rising three times faster than real wages. Federal spending for Medicare and Medicaid was 4% of gross domestic product in 2007, projected to reach 7% in 2025.

Tuckson cited several negative population health trends making it hard for employers to find and recruit healthy, productive employees:

—17.9% of Americans still smoke, trending down but far too high for the 12% goal in 2020;

—59% of adults are sedentary;

—26.9% of adults are obese, projected to reach 43% by 2018;

—people treated for diabetes are now 8.5% of the population, up from 4.6% in 1995;

—chronic illness accounts for 84% of U.S. health expenditures.

Several sessions at the 2011 Forum raised the issue of “food deserts,” lower socio-economic neighborhoods where reasonably-priced, healthy whole foods aren’t available, and many people haven’t learned how to prepare a healthy meal. “We put out a message to ‘do right and eat right,’” said Tuckson, “but I don’t know how to wag my finger at people who are poor when you can get a dollar cheeseburger but not a dollar salad.”

Local Levers of Change

“Personalization is the key to improving health decisions,” said Tuckson, “and to be maximally effective in reaching the individual, prevention and wellness strategies also need to address family and community life.”

To be a community catalyst, “We must get involved with churches and faith-based organizations, civic associations, fraternities, sororities, social clubs, fraternal

organizations,” he said. “We have to engage in a data-driven conversation about what’s killing people and define local priorities for health.” Among other things, this involves reviewing major decisions affecting a community, such as decisions to build roads, hiking trails and bike paths.

Communities are often eager for this health conversation, but most lack resources to fully realize key priority-oriented initiatives. For example, when UHG’s United Health Foundation recently reached out to work with school systems, to support child health, they discovered the serious financial challenges faced by schools to employ adequate numbers of school nurses. Therefore, Tuckson emphasized the importance of the private sector being a more consistent and focused community health promotion partner.

Going to School

In 2011, United Health Foundation and two other organizations awarded a grant to NBCH’s Community Coalitions Health Institute to develop community health and prevention projects. Seven regional NBCH employer coalitions were selected for projects, including ECOH’s project to reduce childhood obesity in Rockford, IL.

ECOH’s project was designed to prevent childhood obesity among children enrolled in Beyer Elementary School. The surrounding area of Winnebago County had many difficult health factors: excessive mental health days, low birthweight, high rates of adult smoking, teen birth, adult obesity, violent crime, unemployment and children in poverty.

A “Youth Fit for Life” program developed in the community YMCA was extended to Beyer Elementary. Collaborating in the project were a preferred provider organization (PPO) health plan formed for this purpose and a large cast of community organizations. ECOH employers provided volunteers to help staff program activities with the children.

It was the first-ever biometric screening for the 68 children who participated in the program (30% of Beyer Elementary enrollees). They were measured at baseline and 12-week intervals during 2010 for: body mass index, blood pressure, strength, cardiovascular capacity and flexibility. “The nurses had too much fun with the kids and forgot they were working sometimes,” said Brand.

In this community, kindergarten and first-graders typically come to school not knowing colors, shapes, numbers or letters. Most children get the majority of their nutrition through the school, so nutrition and healthy snacks were a core element of the effort. The program used fun physical activities like “flash-card relay races” and “team math problem scavenger hunts” to engage the children with particular learning goals and their regular homework assignments.

Final findings weren’t complete in time for the 2011 Forum, but Brand offered observations from their experience.

First and perhaps most important, this project confirmed the feasibility of a program like this. “We had no idea the organizations could work together this well this fast,” said Brand. Unfortunately, program resources were difficult to maintain. The grant was not renewed, and a school district budget crisis ended access to free buses for returning

children home following their late-afternoon activities. Children started down the road to a healthier future, but would have to find another path to complete their journey.

Brand concluded, “This is both an unqualified success, and a tragedy in the making.”