COVID-19 Wellness Program Considerations

The past few months have found many employers focused on transitioning to remote work, digesting new legislation, and making difficult employment decisions. During this time, HORAN’s Health Management Directors have been working to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the health of our clients’ members and their health management strategy.

A top concern employers have is how best to navigate their existing wellness program during this time. This piece describes the current top three challenges, best practice recommendations for adjusting strategy, and the compliance considerations that accompany these adjustments.

**Challenge #1: Some employees are unable to complete the wellness activities to earn a reward due to COVID-19 (e.g. scheduling PCP visit or completing a biometric screening).**

Employers should consider adding additional ways to satisfy a reward that employees can do from home OR extend the deadline to complete the activity. With an extended deadline, the plan has three options:

1) Charge everyone who hasn’t yet satisfied the condition for this year the higher premium until such time as they are able to satisfy the requirement.

2) Charge everyone the higher premium and then refund the difference between the wellness and non-wellness premium once the employee satisfies the requirement.

3) Charge everyone the reduced wellness rate until the extended deadline and then charge the higher premium going forward to those that don’t satisfy the requirement.

**Reasonable Alternative Standards:** This scenario and related accommodations may also apply to meeting the Reasonable Alternative Standard (RAS) in health-contingent wellness programs. Employers may need to adjust their RAS. For example, many employers allow for a PCP visit to qualify as a RAS. This may not be readily available; therefore, alternative considerations should be made such as:

- Promoting telehealth physicals
- Allowing employees to utilize retail clinics
- Extending the wellness campaign period

Many employers may want to carry over the employee’s wellness or non-wellness premium from the prior year. This is **NOT** recommended as it could be seen as violating the HIPAA nondiscrimination requirement that participants be given the chance to earn the reward at least once per year.
Challenge #2: Engaging employees remotely while traditional onsite wellness programming is suspended (e.g. health coaching or lunch-n-learns).

In addition to distributing information, employers can use their wellness dollars creatively by providing virtual education, workshops, and coaching services. Popular topics trending right now include:

- Resiliency (HORAN will be releasing a new podcast episode in May)
- Mental health and EAP services
- Navigation benefits and digital health (Nurse line and Telemedicine)
- Immune Health and Self-care

Challenge #3: Preserving employee health and continuing wellness program momentum for the remainder of 2020.

- Communication plan - Outline a communication plan that addresses the safety precautions underway and what new wellness activities employees can engage in to help them stay well.

- Scheduling events - Wellness vendors are scheduling 2-3 months in advance for health fairs, flu shots, and biometric screenings. We recommend reserving dates early to avoid any delays.

- Space - Due to social distancing, it will be important to provide more space for onsite wellness events. Consult your wellness vendor for their protocol and plan accordingly.

- Safety supplies - Many carriers are allowing wellness dollars to go towards the purchase of masks, hand sanitizers, disinfecting wipes, gloves, and thermometers. Reach out to your insurance carrier for a complete list.

Our team recognizes that there are longer term health impacts of COVID-19. We are currently working with our partners, including attorneys, wellness vendors and health experts, to provide employers with best practices for a healthy return to work. We will continue to monitor the latest developments and share the most up to date health and wellness recommendations.

The information contained in this document is informational only and is not intended as, nor should it be construed as, legal advice. Neither HORAN nor its consultants provide legal, tax nor accounting advice of any kind. We make no legal representation nor do we take legal responsibility of any kind regarding regulatory compliance. Please consult your counsel for a definitive interpretation of current statutes and regulations and their impact on you and your organization. Thank you.