

# Trustee Insights

HEALTH EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION



## Board Supporting Women's Health

Prioritizing women's health for the health care workforce

BY PRIYA BATHIJA

There are many hospitals and health systems making investments in women's health for their patients and communities. However, hospitals also have an opportunity to offer benefits and design policies to support the health of women in their own workforce. These efforts can address inequities and foster an inclusive environment where all employees, regardless of gender, feel valued, supported and empowered.

The opportunity is large — given the percentage of women in the health care workforce. According to the [U.S. Department of Labor](#),

approximately 8 in 10 health care workers are women. This is much higher than for overall employment, where women only make up [46.8 percent](#) of the workforce. And this support is critical. [Hologic and Gallup](#) recently confirmed that a majority of U.S. women struggle to make their own health a priority.

When women in the workplace thrive, so do businesses. More importantly, supporting women's health does not just benefit women; it has the potential to benefit everyone. That includes men who want to be more involved with their families and younger generations that may be seeking remote work or

flexible schedules.

Trustees can play an important and powerful role in helping hospital leaders evaluate benefits and design policies that make sense for the organization's workforce.

*Note: in this article, the terms woman, women and women's health encompass the full spectrum of health needs experienced by cisgender women and all individuals with similar health needs.*

### Supporting Women's Health for the Workforce

Hospitals can support women's health in the workforce by offering benefits packages and implementing policies that support women and families. Below are some ways hospitals can address family building, mental health and menopause. These examples and conditions are not exhaustive and only scratch the surface of potential options.

#### ■ Family Building

Solutions related to family building include a wide range of benefits and policies that support all employees, not just women.

Reproductive health benefits are the most widely offered benefits in this category. A study from [Mercer](#) shows 48 percent of organizations with 5,000 or more employees provide at least one specialized benefit or resource to support reproductive health. These benefits include support for high-risk

pregnancies, lactation, pre-conception family planning, or pregnancy loss. Other insurance benefits may include genetic screening, prescription medications during pregnancy and childbirth hospitalization.

Organizations are also offering fertility benefits, such as coverage for in vitro fertilization or egg freezing. These types of family building benefits can be provided in partnership with organizations like Maven Clinic, a virtual women's health clinic that provides families with access to fertility, pregnancy, adoption, parenting and pediatric care support.

In addition, hospitals can offer support to parents that must balance work and family health care responsibilities. One example is paid parental leave. The U.S. is currently the only high-income country

without national paid parental leave; yet, research shows it increases performance and productivity, decreases turnover and can lead to better maternal and infant outcomes. There are resources available to help organizations expand paid parental leave policies. For example, [Moms F1rst](#), a grassroots community of moms and supporters, have created sample policy language and a calculator to help employers determine the cost and benefit of expanding paid parental leave policies.

Employers can also offer leave policies or flexible work schedules that allow employees to care for sick children, parents and other family members. Or to counter increasing costs of childcare, employers may consider subsidizing childcare services or offering benefits

that allow for childcare referrals or access to backup childcare services.

### ■ Mental Health

Kaiser Family Foundation's [2022 Women's Health Survey](#) showed that approximately half of all women believe they need mental health services. That number jumped to over 66 % for young women ages 18-25.

This need has been tied to specific challenges faced by women. Women are more prone to certain diagnoses and conditions such as infertility, menopause and postpartum depression. Women are twice as likely as men to experience depression, generalized anxiety disorder and PTSD. They also face risk factors such as pay inequity, caregiving responsibilities and gender-based violence.

When it comes to mental health benefits, organizations can offer coverage of mental health services, access to virtual services, enhanced Employee Assistance Programs and online resources like apps, articles and classes. Organizations can also name mental health explicitly in policies and resources, build a culture of connection, allow for paid time off, flexible hours and healthy communication norms.

### ■ Menopause

Every woman — except for those who have had their ovaries removed before puberty, will go through menopause. Approximately 1.3 million women in the U.S. will enter this life stage each year and [20 percent](#) of the workforce is in some phase of the menopause transition.

In the months or years leading up to menopause (perimenopause),

## Parents in the Health Care Workforce

There are [24 million](#) working moms in the U.S. and they often face challenges when they return to work after maternity leave. Their spouses and partners do, too.

In an [AHA Advancing Health Beyond Birth podcast](#), Michelle Yu, co-founder and CEO of Josie and Dr. Yara Mikhaeil-Demo, a physician well-being coach and assistant professor of neurology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, describe these challenges. They also share steps organizations can take, outside of those already mentioned in this article, to support working parents after they return to work. Here are some examples:

- Creating community by bringing together parents to share experiences, struggles and how they are approaching them.
- Developing policies to support parents such as guidelines to account for sick days and school closures or ensuring productivity requirements are not negatively impacted by maternity leave or time women spend pumping.
- Keeping parents in mind when making decisions (e.g., meeting times and offering virtual attendance options) and bringing parents' voices into conversations.
- Training managers and supervisors on the challenges new parents face, how they can be more empathetic and ways they can provide support.
- Learning from organizations outside of health care.

women experience a range of mild to debilitating symptoms that can include hot flashes, fatigue, difficulty sleeping, poor concentration and poor memory. This can impact well-being, quality of life and result in adverse work outcomes.

Women have reported that menopause symptoms interfere with their work performance and productivity. Many have considered quitting because of their symptoms. Research from [Mayo Clinic](#) found that American companies face menopause-related losses of \$26 billion annually, including \$1.8 billion work of lost work time alone.

Nearly [two-thirds](#) of women want menopause-specific support at work and there are many options available, including:

- Menopause policies to ensure employees feel supported and valued.
- Insurance coverage for a range of treatment options, including hormone replacement therapy.
- Access to certified menopause specialists, live or virtually in partnership with organizations like [Midi](#), which offers a personalized, evidence-based path to symptom relief from perimenopause and menopause specialists.
- Menopause education and awareness sessions for the entire workforce.
- A Lifestyle Spending Account with approved use for menopause-related services.
- Paid time off for symptoms associated with menopause.

## Why Supporting Women's Health in the Workforce is Critical

Many organizations view supporting

## TRUSTEE TAKEAWAYS

Boards can ask the following questions to enhance their discussions on this topic:

- How can this work be incorporated into our strategic plan?
- What efforts — including policies and benefits — currently exist at our hospital to improve the health of women in the workforce?
- Are the existing efforts being utilized?
- What opportunities and barriers exist related to policies and benefits that support women's health?
- How can the organization gather feedback from employees?
- Are managers and leaders within our organization aware of available benefits and policies? Do they know how to raise suggestions/concerns they receive from their teams?
- How can we assess progress as an organization on improving the health of women in the workforce?
- How can executive leadership grow and scale efforts?

women in the workforce as a business imperative. It allows them to meet the needs of their diverse workforce, bridge the gender health gap and create a more inclusive and supportive workplace. It can also be a valuable recruitment and retention tool. At the global level it is paying off — organizations with high levels of productivity offer benefits such as paid leave, health care, retirement plans, flexible working hours and wellness programs.

More importantly, not addressing women's health in the workplace can have significant business implications. A survey from [Parsley Health](#), a virtual primary care company that serves employers, showed that 71 percent of women said they would leave their jobs for a better benefit package.

And those exits come with a hefty price tag. Research from [Harvard Business School](#) shows that if suffi-

cient caregiver support prevented five employees from quitting, it could save a company \$200,000, assuming employees earned an average salary of \$80,000 and carry a replacement cost of 50 percent.

## Trustees' Role in Improving Health of Women in the Workforce

There are many steps trustees and boards can take to improve the health of women in the workforce.

The first step is elevating this issue in the boardroom and as a strategic priority for their organizations. This will involve understanding the full scope of [women's health](#) — including those medical conditions that only exist in women or exist mostly in women, and that present differently in women — and why investment in women's health is critical. It may also require trustees to

explain that these benefits and policies supporting women's health in the workplace benefit all employees.

Trustees must then evaluate what is happening in their hospital, including the composition of the workforce, what benefits and policies currently exist to support women's health, employee engagement with those benefits and policies and gaps that may be addressed in the future. They must also consider what factors may be leading to recruitment and retention challenges of women in the workforce.

A key step in this evaluation is listening to employees. Trustees can review employee surveys that include questions about well-being, health and offer insights into the workforce's needs. They can fund and seek feedback from employee resource groups (ERGs) that support women's health. Trustees can also

encourage human resource departments to work with ERGs to spark conversation, create cultures that support women's health and influence the development of workplace well-being programs.

Trustees can also help raise awareness of the benefits and policies available to support women's health. This can include encouraging hospital leaders to regularly communicate this information in hospital-wide emails or by listing them prominently on the hospital's intranet. There is often stigma associated with women's health conditions, so sharing personal experiences or encouraging hospital leaders to share theirs can help normalize conversation and ensure women feel comfortable accessing benefits and policies.

Last, trustees can be champions for women's health. Trustees

can educate, eliminate stigma and taboos and normalize conversations around all aspects of women's health. Creating opportunities for dialogue will help ensure women feel comfortable sharing their needs and ultimately accessing available benefits and policies that can improve their health.

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