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## Companies look to help employees with mental health needs during pandemic

Plus:

- Exclusive: Amida Care, God's Love We Deliver launch medically tailored meals program
- Queens to expand corps of nurses trained to care for sexual assault survivors
- Tisch family gifts \$4M to Mount Sinai prostate program

[Shuan Sim](#)

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When Covid-19 first started ravaging the city, anxiety set in for Heather Isola.

"I would be on the train, not knowing if going to work was going to do something to me or my family," said Isola, director of physician assistant services at Mount Sinai Health System.

Over time her team felt the strain. The staff used to have a certain energy—many had no qualms staying a few extra hours.

"That's gone now," she said. "Many just don't have it in them to give more than what's required, perhaps from being burnt out."

Early on, companies largely focused on keeping employees physically safe from contracting the virus. Now, almost eight months later, firms across the state are also putting resources into addressing employees' mental health challenges.

"The number of anxieties has exacerbated, and our ability to cope with it as a company must be enhanced," said Sean Woodroffe, chief human resource officer at TIAA, a Midtown-based financial services organization for the academic, research and government fields.

There are generally two groups of workers: those who can handle their tasks remotely and those who have to go in to their workplace. Each faces a unique set of challenges, said Robyn Gershon, clinical professor of epidemiology at NYU School of Global Public Health.

For remote staff, working from home can cause isolation and a lack of delineation between their work and personal life, leading to exhaustion and burnout, she said.

For frontline and essential workers, the fear of contracting Covid-19 is constant. And as the public grows fatigued with mask wearing and social distancing, infection concerns compound, joined by new worries about altercations with customers over compliance, Gershon said.

### **Coming up with solutions**

The city Department of Health has published mental health guides and updated the NYC Well referral service to help businesses navigate their options during the pandemic. Susan Herman, director of the Mayor's Office of ThriveNYC, noted it is critical that the city's employers prioritize mental health in the workplace. The agency offers technical assistance and free online resources to help businesses, she said.

Many organizations have sought to increase employee access to mental health providers.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority realized early that transit workers are subject to a lot of stress because they are on the front lines. It worked with its health plan, Aetna, to expand access to telemedicine, psychiatry and therapy, said Chris Lightbourne, director of member services at Transit Workers Union Local 100, which represents approximately 40,000 bus and subway workers.

Mount Sinai Hospital created the Center for Stress, Resilience and Personal Growth for its employees. It provides up to 14 free sessions of psychotherapy as well as workshops aimed at bolstering resilience.

Firms have embraced tech solutions to boost well-being too. UI Path, a Midtown-based software company, in October began providing staff with free access to a meditation app as well as subscriptions to an audio-based fitness service.

"Studies have shown that staying physically active benefits mental health, and it's great that technology has enabled us to tackle wellness on all fronts," Gershon said.

Mount Sinai created its own app for employees and students in the health system that offers screening tools and workshops.

"This is about the time we expect to see a culmination of issues among staff, including post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression, and we've seen rapid downloads of our app," said Dr. Deborah Marin, director of the Center for Stress, Resilience and Personal Growth.

Supporting workers also means supporting their home environment, noted Woodroffe. TIAA enhanced its child care benefits to \$100 per day from \$65 as well as instituted flexible hours for associates. There is a commonly accepted guideline for staff working remotely not to handle child care during work hours, Woodroffe said.

"But we've learned to adopt a radical flexibility where if an employee has to juggle work and meeting their children's needs, they should be able to take the time to address it and not be apologetic about it," he said.

### **Open communication is key**

A company can offer a raft of benefits, but without communication the impact will be limited.

"We need to remind workers that these services are available and destigmatize the seeking of them," Lightbourne said.

Communication has to come from multiple channels, starting from the top of the leadership chain on down, Gershon said.

"Letting people know they're being cared for makes them more likely to reach out for the services available," Marin said.

TIAA has held multiple forums for employees to voice concerns and stay abreast of developments during the pandemic.

For Isola, Mount Sinai's new center has helped her team. With the corporate resources in place to help them become better equipped to handle their trigger points, the spirit of feeling good about their work is more visible these days, she said.

"That brightness is coming back," Isola said. —Shuan Sim

### **Exclusive: Amida Care, God's Love We Deliver launch medically tailored meals program**

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Amida Care has partnered with God's Love We Deliver to launch a pilot program offering medically tailored meals to the nonprofit health plan's members living with HIV and other complex conditions. The program will start Nov. 1.

The In Lieu of Services initiative—approved by the state Department of Health under Medicaid—is the first of its kind in New York to incorporate medically tailored meals, the organizations said. Eligible members will be able to substitute meals for certain personal care aide services covered by Medicaid. Under the benefit, individuals will have meals tailored to address their medical needs prepared and delivered to their homes by God's Love We Deliver.

The program is designed to better address poor nutrition associated with negative health outcomes as well as costly trends such as longer hospital stays and higher rates of readmissions, Amida Care and God's Love We Deliver told *Crain's* first. The partners said other pilot studies

for medically tailored meals have shown a nearly 30% reduction in average health care costs for certain individuals receiving them.

"Medically tailored meals are vital to our membership," said Kevin Steffens, vice president of clinical services and programs at Amida Care. The health plan specializes in providing comprehensive coverage and coordinated care to New Yorkers with complex conditions, including HIV and behavioral health disorders, transgender individuals and the homeless. It currently serves 8,000 members throughout the city.

Amida Care and God's Love We Deliver began discussing the possibility of partnering on a medically tailored meals program about a year ago, Steffens said. The goal of the pilot phase is to enroll 50 members and track their outcomes, including health care utilization trends, such as inpatient costs, as well as qualitative data about how individuals are feeling and how their eating habits have changed, Steffens said.

"What's really groundbreaking about this is taking a social determinant of health and saying, 'We so value this that we're going to do this as a Medicaid benefit,'" said Karen Pearl, president and CEO of God's Love We Deliver.

The nonprofit, based in SoHo, was founded in 1985 in response to the AIDS epidemic. It cooks and delivers medically tailored meals for people who are too sick to shop or cook for themselves. It now delivers more than 2.2 million meals each year to people living with more than 200 diagnoses.

The hope is that tracking the outcomes of the new program will help other health plans determine they want to follow suit, Pearl said.

"We believe food is medicine," Steffens said. "This is a first step in showing that this is something that could be very beneficial for our Medicaid members." —Jennifer Henderson

## Queens to expand corps of nurses trained to care for sexual assault survivors

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Acting Queens Borough President Sharon Lee on Thursday announced an initiative to expand the number and reach of sexual assault nurse examiners across local hospitals as well as the number of languages they speak.

The goal is to improve the accessibility of critical and sensitive care and the expertise that sexual assault survivors need, Lee's office said. The effort will more than double the current tally of 26 SANE nurses—registered nurses specifically trained to provide comprehensive medical forensic care for survivors of sexual assault or abuse—and increase their ranks from being present at just four of the borough's nine hospitals to seven by next September.

Nurses will be trained at either the New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault or Hofstra University. A total of \$10,500 in funding from the borough president's office is providing for the training of 15 of the 28 additional certified nurses, a spokesman said. Training of the remaining 13 will be supported by a federal Health Services and Resources Administration grant awarded to Northwell Health.

As a result of the expansion, SANE nurses will cover 13 languages aside from English, including Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Hebrew, Hindi and Korean.

SANE nurses will be located at the following hospitals: Northwell's Long Island Jewish Forest Hills and Long Island Jewish Medical Center; Mount Sinai Queens; New York-Presbyterian Queens; New York City Health + Hospitals Elmhurst and Queens; and St. John's Episcopal Hospital South Shore. —J.H.

## Tisch family gifts \$4M to Mount Sinai prostate program

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Mount Sinai on Wednesday announced a \$4 million donation from Lizzie and Jonathan Tisch toward the Department of Urology's new prostate program.

The program will be named the Lizzie and Jonathan Tisch Center for Prostate Health. The money will go toward real estate, manpower and technology, said Dr. Ash Tewari, co-founder of the program and director of urology at Mount Sinai.

Jonathan Tisch, co-board chairman of Loews Corp. and chairman and CEO of Loews Hotels, and his wife have supported the urology department in the past, Tewari said.

The program will be housed at a facility at 625 Madison Ave., he said. The site will serve as the hub for Mount Sinai's 17 locations offering prostate services, he said.

Research and clinical trials for prostate cancer will be conducted at the site. Key research issues include ways to improve sexual function, urinary control and the quality of life of survivors as well as minimally invasive strategies to advance care of patients under active surveillance, Tewari said.

The donation will help hire staff and acquire new technology in imaging, immunotherapy, targeted therapy and genomic risk stratification, he said.

"With 1 in 9 men being diagnosed with prostate cancer in their lifetime, this is a serious disease to focus on, and this gift will help us significantly improve the life of patients," he said.

Mount Sinai's urology department handled 77,000 patient visits and performed 8,000 surgeries in 2019. —S.S.

## AT A GLANCE

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**WHO'S NEWS:** Neuro-oncologist Dr. Ingo Mellinghoff has been appointed Memorial Sloan Kettering's new chair of the Department of Neurology. Mellinghoff is currently the Evnin family chair in neuro-oncology and runs a research lab in the human oncology and pathogenesis program. He is also professor of neurology and of neuroscience in the Brain and Mind Research Institute at Weill Cornell Medical College. Mellinghoff previously served as chief of the MSK Brain Tumor Service and vice chair of research in the Department of Neurology.

**PRICE TRANSPARENCY:** The U.S. departments of Health and Human Services, Labor and the Treasury on Thursday issued a [final rule](#) on price transparency designed to help people know how much care will cost in advance. The rule requires that most health plans and insurers provide information on enrollee cost-sharing and disclose the rates they actually pay health care providers for specific services.

**AIRLINES SAFETY:** Northwell Direct, a Northwell Health company assisting employers on health and productivity, on Thursday announced it has partnered with JetBlue to design a set of Covid-19 services and programs for the airline. Northwell Direct will help devise testing approaches for JetBlue's New York City teams and clinical concierge services for crew members as well as provide consulting services for the airline's leadership. The concierge services will be provided by Northwell Health Solutions, the health system's care-management arm.