

Lori Schoonmaker:

Hi, I'm Lori Schoonmaker, market president of national markets here at Highmark. Welcome back to Hitting a Higher Mark. This podcast explores topics that are transforming how healthcare is delivered, used and paid for. In this episode, we're going to be discussing something called social determinants of health or SDOH for short. Our expert here today will cover how to identify and address unforeseen social factors impacting both health and wellbeing. I'd like to welcome Nebeyou Abebe, senior vice president of social determinants of health at Highmark, Inc. Thank you for joining us, and let's dive into today's topic. Nebeyou can you explain to the audience what social determinants of health are?

Nebeyou Abebe:

Sure. Lori. First of all, happy to be here and thank you for the opportunity. Social determinants of health really are the conditions in which people live, work, play, socialize that affect a wide range of health risks and outcomes. I have to say, people living just a few blocks away from each other can have vastly different health outcomes, and it's because of the environment in which they live and socialize in. And so, what we're trying to do is improve those conditions so that they can thrive.

Nebeyou Abebe:

We know that affordable high quality health care is essential. No one's disputing that, but I think the focus moving forward is addressing those underlying root factors that are impacting one's health and wellbeing. So, for example, ensuring someone has access to healthy food is critically important. Good schools, affordable housing and jobs that provide them with the resources necessary to thrive and to live a long productive life is critically important. So, in essence, the types of conditions that help people from getting sick in the first place. And the seven key SDOH domains that we're focused on as an organization is financial resource strain, social connections, safety, transportation needs, health literacy, food insecurity and housing stability.

Lori Schoonmaker:

It's just a fascinating topic, Nebeyou. I'm very interested in more about SDOH and why it becomes so important to an employer or to a community strategy.

Nebeyou Abebe:

Yeah. So addressing SDOH really helps to improve the overall health and wellbeing of our members, our patients, our employees and the communities in which we operate in. And many people don't know this Lori, but 80% of a person's health outcomes can be impacted by the social determinants of health. And these are all situations where the health system may not be in a position to intervene.

Nebeyou Abebe:

For example, an employer might notice an employee's productivity starts to drop after developing frequent headaches and blurred vision. Though the reality we don't see is, they haven't had an eye exam in years because they can't afford vision coverage. Additionally, an employee might be overweight or obese and one may think that they need to get on medication. But the reality, when you peel back the onion and effectively engage this employee, you may realize that the underlying factor is the fact that they're highly stressed due to their current financial situation. And so, the right course of action could be a financial program or a food as medicine program that can help educate them on different types of foods with good amounts of nutrition that can help them cope and deal with their stress. So, those are

the types of ideas and initiatives that we're focused on. And so, as you can see, SDOH factors can keep individuals from getting the care they need and living the healthy lives that they truly deserve.

Lori Schoonmaker:

It certainly sounds like many of the social needs can be addressed with proactive and preventive care. How do you identify SDOH?

Nebeyou Abebe:

That's a good question. The first step is to identify the need as you asked. And so, our approach is, we have a universal SDOH assessment that's comprised of 13 questions where we leverage that tool to identify the social needs of members and patients based on the seven key domains that I referenced earlier. One example is a question on the assessment that asks in the past 12 months, were you worried about whether food would run out before having money to buy more? A lot of people are struggling out there, especially now during COVID, and we use that information to help connect them to local care and resources. And to date, we've assessed over 100,000 members and found the highest social needs are social connections, financial strain, housing and food insecurity.

Lori Schoonmaker:

Thank you, Nebeyou. I appreciate hearing more about each one of those things. As you know, my team and I work really closely with large employers in the marketplace to support them in their strategy development. You and I have talked a lot about how employers play a special role in advancing the analytics and opportunities around SDOH. How does supporting employee health help employers actually carry out the strategies of their own?

Nebeyou Abebe:

Very good question. And so, I would say social and economic challenges can have a tremendous impact on an employee's health and wellbeing. Social needs can often impact their lifestyle and prevent employees from being their best at work and impacting business performance, absenteeism culture, et cetera. And by identifying and addressing SDOH can also help employers lower healthcare costs by getting upstream of the root causes to what impacts their health.

Lori Schoonmaker:

It makes total sense. And we look forward to continued work with you around this. Why is it so important for insurance companies and healthcare providers to support SDOH efforts?

Nebeyou Abebe:

It's very important for healthcare and insurance providers to support SDOH because that's the way to control rising healthcare costs, to improve wellbeing and to enhance the overall patient experience. It's critically important to address both the medical, behavioral and the social health risk factors that impact one's health and wellbeing. And at Highmark, we are committed to addressing SDOH because it's who we are. It's part of our mission. And by improving the health and wellbeing of our members, our employees, our patients and the communities in which we operate in, we can help create a remarkable experience for all those that we serve.

Lori Schoonmaker:

Thank you, Nebeyou, for joining me. And thank you to our audience for joining us. To learn more about why social determinants of health are key drivers of health. To listen to an extended video version of this interview, visit us at [youtube.com/highmark,inc](https://youtube.com/highmark,inc). The link will be in the description of the show. I'm Lori Schoonmaker, And thanks for listening to Hitting a Higher Mark.