

## Compliance Today – June 2024



Venson Wallin ([vwallin@bdo.com](mailto:vwallin@bdo.com)) is the Managing Director, National Healthcare Compliance and Regulatory Leader at BDO USA in McLean, VA.



Gregg Mills ([gmills@bdo.com](mailto:gmills@bdo.com)) is a Senior Manager, Insurance Advisory at BDO USA in Philadelphia, PA.

### Why mental health parity should top healthcare organizations' to-do lists

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by Venson Wallin and Gregg Mills

Clinicians, first responders, and other healthcare staff work in highly stressful environments that can create or exacerbate mental health and substance abuse issues. Clinician work environments were worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic when high volumes of extremely acute patients overwhelmed healthcare systems. These conditions contributed to talent leakage industry-wide, with many clinicians and nurses leaving their current roles or the industry altogether. Furthermore, student enrollment in medical school, nursing programs, and medical assistant programs is lagging, meaning the talent pipeline is less robust than before, presenting a challenge to filling residual staffing gaps.

These conditions put healthcare at the forefront of industries facing labor challenges. Provider organizations, in particular, are contending with issues like low clinician morale, burnout, and understaffing. In our *2023 BDO Clinician Experience Survey*, 61% of industry leaders reported compassion fatigue and burnout as one of their top three challenges in the past 12 months.<sup>[1]</sup> Clinician burnout is compounding ongoing talent shortages and staffing challenges and makes clinicians more vulnerable to mental health and substance abuse issues.

These challenges have created a ripple effect across the healthcare industry. Staffing shortages, burnout, and behavioral health issues can lead to poorer quality of care and worse patient outcomes. At the same time, the current patient population requires more care because so many patients delayed seeking care during the pandemic. Family members of healthcare staff—such as children who were isolated from their frontline worker parents during the pandemic—are also facing greater rates of behavioral health issues.

There's also evidence that the pandemic impacted substance use among healthcare workers. A recent National Institutes of Health study found that 32% of nurses surveyed reported an increase in substance use during the pandemic; 26% percent of those surveyed reported an increase in drinking.<sup>[2]</sup> Doctors and other providers with prescription authority have unique addiction risks because of their access to highly addictive drugs and their chronically stressful work conditions. A 2020 *Health Science Reports* research review found substance use disorders (SUDs) affect about 8% to 15% or about 1.3–2.3 million American healthcare professionals.<sup>[3]</sup> The same study found doctors and other providers use opioids at a rate five to eight times higher than the general public.

Because there is a stigma around mental health and SUDs in the industry, it is increasingly important for healthcare facilities—especially hospitals, due to the high-stress environment—to recognize and address behavioral health issues. One way in which hospitals can support better mental health in their workforce is to

provide greater benefits under their health plans for mental health and substance use treatment.

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