



ISSUE BRIEF

COVID-19 and Reproductive Healthcare: “How Businesses Can Protect the Wellbeing of Their Workforce”

Updated 6.29.20

As companies bring to scale expanded leave policies and remote work arrangements to meet the unprecedented demands presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, they can and must also look to the reproductive healthcare needs of their employees. Lack of access to reproductive healthcare is a hidden driver of employee absences and resignations. Reproductive healthcare is essential for the health and wellbeing of workers, their partners, and their families.

COVID-19 Profoundly Impacts Reproductive Healthcare and Fertility

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on reproductive and maternal healthcare needs have been profound. Prenatal, maternal, contraception and abortion services have been more difficult to obtain in parts of the country where healthcare systems are stretched beyond normal capacity.

A survey of 2,000 women of reproductive age in May 2020 by the Guttmacher Institute found that 34% want to delay pregnancy or have fewer children because of the pandemic.¹ The same proportion reported having to delay or cancel visiting a provider for sexual/reproductive healthcare, or have had trouble obtaining contraception. Barriers to care are more pronounced for Black, Latinx, low-income and LGBTQ women.² These findings are supported by another, concurrent survey of 2,200 adults

¹ “Early Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings from the 2020 Guttmacher Survey of Reproductive Health Experiences,” Guttmacher Institute, June 2020.

² See “State Action to Limit Abortion Access During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Kaiser Family Foundation, May 1, 2020, and “Maternal Health and Abortion Restrictions: How Lack of Access to Quality Care Is Harming Black Women,” National Partnership for Women & Families.

undertaken by the National Family Planning & Reproductive Health Association, which found that 65% of adults think it is now a bad time to get pregnant, and that 57% of women think it is “more essential” for individuals to have access to birth control measures.³

Contributing factors to these trends include:

- Economic hardship can make it difficult for workers to cover out-of-pocket costs for reproductive services, even when insured.
- The Centers for Disease Control has added pregnant women to the list of populations who might be at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.
- Some evidence has emerged⁴ that domestic violence and rape are on the rise as families are isolated at home, increasing the need and urgency for reproductive healthcare.
- The global economic lockdown has produced disruptions in the manufacture and distribution of some forms of contraception.⁵ While the impact has yet to be felt in the U.S., the long-term outlook is uncertain.⁶ The International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics is warning of the need “to anticipate and address likely supply chain needs and challenges.”⁷
- Similarly, the global supply chain for medication abortion pills has been disrupted due to the pandemic.⁸
- In many states, women cannot count on being able to access abortion services. At this date, eleven states have tried to shut down abortion care as “nonessential” healthcare; while these attempts were enjoined by the courts⁹, untold numbers of women have been turned away from abortion providers. This is in addition to the hundreds of incremental restrictions on abortion that have been passed by the states in the last three decades.¹⁰

“[C]hanging fertility preferences, combined with barriers to obtaining contraceptives, suggest that the number of women who will need to access abortion care may increase,” writes the Guttmacher Institute.

What Companies Can Do

Employers can help employees weather the pandemic’s impact on reproductive health by leaning into their ability to provide medical coverage, define workplace culture, and influence public policy.

³ “Key Findings: Family Planning in the Age of Coronavirus,” National Family Planning & Reproductive Health Association, May 2020.

⁴ “COVID-19 and Violence Against Women: What the Health Sector/System Can Do,” World Health Organization, March 26, 2020.

⁵ “Opinion: How Will COVID-19 Affect Global Access to Contraceptives — and What Can We Do About It?” Chris Purdy, Devex.com, March 11, 2020.

⁶ “How Coronavirus is Crippling the Contraceptive Industry,” Ali Pattillo, *Inverse*, March 27, 2020.

⁷ “COVID-19 Contraception and Family Planning,” International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics.

⁸ “Self-Managed Abortions May Be More Difficult to Access Right Now,” Rewire, April 14, 2020.

⁹ “Early Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings from the 2020 Guttmacher Survey of Reproductive Health Experiences,” Guttmacher Institute, June 2020.

¹⁰ See “What If Roe Fell?”, Center for Reproductive Rights.

We offer these suggestions for how companies can help employees get the time-sensitive reproductive healthcare that they need:

1. Ensure that employees are insured for contraception coverage that not only meets, but exceeds, the requirements of the Affordable Care Act, by:
 - Covering all FDA-approved birth control drugs, devices, products, services, and vasectomies, without cost sharing;
 - Covering a 12-month supply of birth control dispensed at one time, without cost-sharing, and covering over-the-counter emergency contraception without requiring a prescription.

Comprehensive reproductive health insurance requires minimal investment from companies.¹¹ Recent polling reveals that 83% of women of reproductive age say they would want their employers' insurance to cover the full range of reproductive healthcare, including abortion.¹²

2. Ensure that employees' insurance covers abortion without restriction, and that their healthcare provider network can provide these services.¹³ Subsidize or fully reimburse employees who may need to travel unreasonable distances to obtain reproductive healthcare.¹⁴
3. In addition to expanding paid sick leave, companies should provide generous parental leave that extends to both birthing and non-birthing parents and join ranks with companies who support a federal paid family and medical leave policy.¹⁵
4. Companies should monitor efforts to shutter abortion clinics and ban medical abortions facilitated by telemedicine, and communicate to policy makers that restricting access to reproductive healthcare is a net negative to the business environment, from the national economy to the local level.¹⁶

¹¹ This recommendation is inexpensive and cost-effective. For a discussion of the costs and benefits of providing comprehensive insurance of reproductive healthcare, see *Hidden Value: The Business Case for Reproductive Health*, pp. 22-23.

¹² See *Hidden Value: The Business Case for Reproductive Health*, p. 16.

¹³ This may require adding additional plan types or carriers. See *Hidden Value: The Business Case for Reproductive Health*.

¹⁴ A recent analysis shows that in the six states where policymakers have attempted to shut down abortion clinics because of COVID-19, if those lawmakers are successful, the one-way driving distance to obtain care will increase at the least by 58% (in Kentucky) to nearly 2,000% in Texas. See "COVID-19 Abortion Bans Would Greatly Increase Driving Distances for Those Seeking Care," Guttmacher Institute, April 2, 2020.

¹⁵ See *PL+US Employer Trends Report*, 2019.

¹⁶ See our report *Hidden Value: The Business Case for Reproductive Health* for a fuller discussion of the importance of reproductive healthcare to talent recruitment and retention, and meeting diversity, equity and inclusion goals.

In states with strong abortion protections and coverage, women have higher levels of education, lower levels of poverty, and experience a higher ratio of female-to-male earnings.¹⁷ Women in states with better access to contraception have higher rates of labor force participation, more frequently pursue full-time positions, more frequently take roles in traditionally male-dominated industries, and have higher median wages.¹⁸

Companies should communicate to lawmakers that reproductive healthcare care is both essential and time-sensitive – now, and at all times.

Companies have the power to provide medical coverage, define workplace culture, and influence public policy. As a result, they exercise enormous influence on the reproductive health of their employees.

Access to reproductive health care is essential for the health and wellbeing of workers, their partners, and their families. The companies that support reproductive health will see strong and continuous dividends through improved participation, productivity, and advancement for women and their partners in the workplace. Conversely, the consequences of inaction are far-reaching and hold significant risks, both for individual companies and for the American economy as a whole.

Companies can no longer afford to stand on the sidelines of this important issue. **Reproductive health is a business issue.**

¹⁷ Jean Reith Schroedel, *Is the Fetus a Person? A Comparison of Policies Across the Fifty States*, Cornell University Press, 2000.

¹⁸ Kate Bahn et al., "[Linking Reproductive Health Care Access to Labor Market Opportunities for Women](#)," Center for American Progress, November 21, 2017.