
Social Determinants of Health Part 1: Can the Workplace Stand in the Gap? Podcast Transcript

Crystal Brandow: Hi, everyone. This is Crystal Brandow, senior project associate at Policy Research Associates. This is the first in a four-part series that we are doing with the Wellness Council of America, or WELCOA, which is one of the nation's most respected resources for building high performing healthy workplaces. We have this new series lined up discussing mental health and health in the workplace, as well as different principles related to wellbeing and resiliency. On today's podcast, we're delighted to be joined by Ryan Picarella, who is the president of WELCOA. Ryan brings an immense knowledge and insight from his career that spans over a decade in the health and wellness industry to this conversation. He's a national speaker, healthcare consultant and has designed and executed award-winning wellness programs. So again, we are delighted to have Ryan here with us today on this first podcast to talk about social determinants of health. Ryan, thank you so much for being here.

Ryan Picarella: Thanks, Crystal. Glad to be here. I appreciate it.

Crystal Brandow: So, like I said, this is the first in a four-part series that we're doing with WELCOA, and this is also a part one of this topic of social determinants of health. The subtopic for today is can the workplace stand in the gap? Before we really dive into what that means, let's back up a little bit and talk about social determinants in general. Ryan, can you talk about what research says about social determinants of health and how that can relate to creating healthy organizations?

Ryan Picarella: Yeah, absolutely. I think this is a really important thing because what we're talking about now, and I think what the research has been very conclusive, is that where we live, where we eat, where we play has a huge impact on our health. From an organizational context, we can't just impact people's behaviors and their health just through the workplace, that we need to understand that ZIP codes matter, that we can have a huge sort of change in life expectancy from within miles apart. There's a lot of things that I look forward to unpacking with you, but I think the important thing here is that where you live, where you wake up every single day has a huge impact on your health and your children's health and those around you's health.

Crystal Brandow: Wonderful. Thank you so much. The conversation on the social determinants of health and the ways that where you live impacts your health is really important to the mental health part of that conversation as well. We often talk about it in

the context of physical health and to think of how where you live impacting different mental health outcomes and wellbeing outcomes is really important. Within that, like you mentioned, there's this piece that involves organizations. Where do you see organizations, workplaces and this conversation on social determinants?

Ryan Picarella: The thing is that companies really can't pick their employees by ZIP codes, but what they can do is they can help sort of fill the gaps a little bit for maybe some of those inequities that exist with some of their employees. Things like recognizing if you're a large employer, chances are you're going to have a handful of your employees that might live in food deserts or might not have the same to care that other employees might have. So, what employers and organizations can really do it is start thinking about what are some of the resources and support that they can provide to their employees that they might not have access to otherwise. There's some of the obvious stuff that, providing healthy food and the ability to move around whether that's standing workstations or at least walking trails or at least an office environment that's conducive for some type of physical activity. Larger organizations might even have the benefit of offering different types of access to foods, such as farmer's markets.

Ryan Picarella: There's this kind of two sides of this coin here a little bit. I think part of it is, is what can companies do to help employees? And again, some of the things that I can mention, how can they provide some of those service and benefits to the work site that they might not otherwise have. The other part of that too is what can they do within those particular communities? I think that organizations really have kind of two responsibilities. One, is to take care of their employees and ensure that their employees have all the things that they need to achieve their wellness goals and to live a healthy, happy life. Then the other piece is that I think it's their sort of obligation as well to be thinking about the communities. How can they help ensure that the communities that their employees live in have the things that they need as well?

Ryan Picarella: So, even simple things like playgrounds. Are there ways that employers can help get access to playgrounds and schools and things like that. These sound like really simple things, but I can tell you, a lot of the communities I've worked with over the years, there can be some major barriers that organizations can really kind of stand in and help do that. It's really about creating equitable environments, both in the workplace and in the communities.

Crystal Brandow: Thank you so much for that and I was delighted to hear a few of the things that you mentioned are things that we do here at Policy Research Associates. Staff have the option to get food from a local farm deliver during the workday. We have a walking trail behind the building for the employees that are here at headquarters. We make sure that they're aware of that and promote taking walking meetings even and getting outside and getting on that trail or even using it before or after work. Do you mind sharing some of the things that WELCOA does? In your discussion of how organizations have a role here, what are some things that your organization offers employees?

Ryan Picarella: Yeah, great question. I'll give you some of the things that we do. I think that there's opportunities for small organizations. We're a fairly small company so we don't have some of the resources that a large company that might be able to put a pharmacy or a clinic on site or things like that. I'll speak a little bit about WELCOA through the lens of a small business and then maybe give you some examples kind of on of different types of organizations and what I see them doing. Like you mentioned, we do kind of a co-op. Farmer's market didn't season so we kind of pool together and we have a local co-op that we work with that delivers fresh fruits and vegetables and meat if you choose and recipes to do that. We will bring people in to sort of talk about those things. We've done cooking classes, other types of opportunities to help employees or to take advantage of maybe some fruits and vegetables that they might not be as familiar with or comfortable cooking with within their own kitchen.

Ryan Picarella: Something that we do too that's a little bit unique is we give paid time off for employees to give back to the community. If you have a particular charity that you're interested in, if you work at a local food bank or humane society or really anything, we encourage our employees to take paid time off to go to give back in those particular communities, which I think has been a pretty impactful thing and really fulfilling thing for not only our employees, but for those that get back to you. There's this kind of idea that when you give, when you're philanthropic with your time that there are health benefits, not just what you're actually giving that go to you and the organization. So that's something that we've been doing too.

Ryan Picarella: Something that I think is important for us that we encourage in work life balance is nothing new, but if you have kids that are doing something and really making sure that there is kind of strength in the community, so how can we take time and how can you adjust work schedules around these types of things to support families and communities, all of that, we'll do seasonal activities as well, whether that's during the holidays time, adopting families that might be in underserved areas, donating food, things like that is something that we, at WELCOA, have done in the past. Those are some simple things that really don't cost a lot of money but can really be a huge help. Things in past lives that I've done is helping with establishing community gardens. So maybe taking a city block that was otherwise just kind of sitting there dormant and seeing if there is an opportunity to sort of build these gardens.

Ryan Picarella: What's so cool that I've seen is gardens are amazing and when kids in the community kind of go in and they can build these things and put their sweat into it, they're more likely to eat these things. So, I've seen kids that would never eat cucumbers or tomatoes before because they thought they were gross, but when they grew them themselves really had a lot of pride in that, which is pretty awesome. The other thing that's kind of interesting when you do these types of things, it really teaches not just kids, but adults too. I've seen even at farmer's markets and larger organizations that if the only place you have access to is a local department grocery store, you really

don't have a connection as to what might grow in your area. Pineapples don't grow in Omaha, Nebraska, but if you shop at places where they always sell pineapple...

Ryan Picarella: So, there's really kind of another sort of benefit that even surprised me at the beginning is it's helping people really sort of connect to the food system, understand what they might be able to grow even on their porches and things like that. I think there's a lot of educational components that organizations can give back. Then as you work your way up to large companies, things like bringing flu shots on site or biometric screenings or primary care, I've seen organizations that will bring dental services out to maybe remote areas where people otherwise don't have access to that care, mental behavioral health, a really important topic that I think we're going to get into in other episodes here, but how can you bring those services on site? The idea is that if it's not convenient for people, we know that a lot of times they're not going to seek it out or it just might not be reasonable for them to do.

Ryan Picarella: We all have very busy lives. If you've got to commute back and forth on buses, automobiles, trains or whatever, you have all of these things that are not within your sort of perimeter of your life, it's difficult. So, organizations, it's really simple to ask people what they need, right? A lot of times, that's all organizations need to do and then begin to understand what are the top priorities, what do people really need, and then figure out a strategy for bringing some of those things onsite. A lot of times and even for small companies, they can be pretty cheap. I've seen communities that have, for instance, mammogram vans that don't charge anything to the organization, but could come up there and help employees get the screenings they need to make sure that they stay healthy as well. All kinds of things that I think regardless of what size organization that you are, that you can begin to help sort of create more equity where your employees live through the workplace.

Crystal Brandow: That's excellent. I love, with WELCOA being a smaller organization, I love that you started with what small businesses can do. At Policy Research Associates, we're also a small business and we do quite a few of the activities and offer quite a few of the programs and services that you discussed that you all give to your employees as well. It really is something that all organizations of any size can go ahead and try to make change in how they do their day to day work and really control the impact of that work environment on health and These different offerings that you've described are ways that, like you said, we can't control where the employees are living, but what can the workplace offer that can help health and wellness outcomes for their employees? So that's wonderful.

Ryan Picarella: Yeah, the idea that...No, that's well said. The idea is to understand what barriers the employees have to either achieving their wellness goals or living a healthy life and then the organization really kind of stepping in and helping do what they can within reason to knock those barriers down to give people a better chance at living a healthy, happy life.

Crystal Brandow: Great. Thank you. There's one last question for this episode. When we think about all the different things that organizations can do, that may vary. Again, we can't control where the employees live, but where the organization is located may have an impact on what they're able to do. There may be opportunities for organizations in underserved areas specifically that they may have different challenges to improving employee health in the workplace or they may need to take different approaches to this. What are some things that organizations can do to improve health in those underserved areas?

Ryan Picarella: Yeah, great question. There's a couple things that I think is really important and I really believe that as I alluded to a little bit earlier, that organizations really need to take some responsibility for the community that they live in. It's really about economic viability at this point. What I'm seeing, especially in smaller rural areas, this is incredibly important because they're losing young people and talent and families to a lot of times go into the bigger urban centers. Communities, especially the smaller ones and organizations that exist within those areas need to really be thinking about how they can bolster their community. Part of that is ensuring that everybody in that community is healthy. So, I've seen organizations go as far as helping with urban planning, whether it's looking at complete streets, active transportation, helping establishing farmer's markets, even shuttling employees to some of these areas.

Ryan Picarella: It's helping maybe with the school systems. what are the right types of food that we should be serving the children in these communities so that they start young and they begin to have this education? Community education centers; I think a lot of times that organizations might not realize is that there's a lot of great organizations, a lot of not-for-profits that might be right there in your community that's willing to offer assistance and help, whether it's a local fitness center type thing we can go in and you can begin to help your employees begin to read labels and go to the grocery store and have various access. Delivery, food delivery, telemedicine is an important thing that is kind of growing and offering and you can talk to your doctor over the phone or through video and begin to understand what types of resources they can begin to offer to their employees in those capacities.

Ryan Picarella: A big challenge that a lot of underserved areas too, and I briefly touched on this earlier, is making sure that children have access to play. Sometimes you might have a playground that after school hours gets locked up because of risk or liability issues and I think that that's ridiculous, that organizations can maybe help, again, knock down some of those barriers that children even have the ability to sort of play and be an active participant in the community as well. So, I think organizations certainly have more power than they realize sometimes. It's being kind of active with that, whether you get involved with the local chamber. I've seen things with the chamber and outside of the chamber that business leaders, CEOs coming together to really be thoughtful about how can we improve our community, not just the health and wellness of our employees, but to really create a vibrant community for generations to come.

Ryan Picarella: So, I think that depending on what part of the country you're in and what types of businesses we're talking about, there's certainly a lot of things. To me, I guess being at WELCOA, a bit biased, but I firmly believe that businesses are going to be the key to our success in the future. So the more that they can connect and really rally around this, and this is the one thing that especially in the day and age like today, that's nonpartisan regardless of what side you sit on or what religion you are, that coming together to take care of our employees and our communities should be a priority for everybody. I think it's just an important... The first piece is to start having the conversation, then begin to understand what are the right steps that you can do to help everybody in the community and even the aging community is also important as well.

Crystal Brandow: Excellent. Thank you so much for that, Ryan. That wraps up today's podcast. So again, this is part one of two on social determinants of health specifically and part one of four that PRA is working on with WELCOA. We talked a little bit today about whether or not the workplace can stand in the gap when talking about social determinants of health. I think Ryan offered some very clear examples of how organizations and workplaces can indeed fill that gap and help to support their employees regardless of where they live. Regardless of what opportunities are available in the community, there are ways to bring resources into the organization and be a place that promotes health and wellness for employees. So, Ryan, thank you so much for everything you shared today, and we look forward to connecting with you on the next podcast.

Ryan Picarella: Awesome. Thank you, Crystal. It's great to be here.