



WHITE PAPER

Closing the maternal health gap

Creating
cultural
connections
for a
healthier,
more
equitable
world.

Health plans can empower members and address health inequities.

Health plans play a vital role in addressing health disparities and improving outcomes, especially when it comes to women’s health as a whole, and more specifically, in improving maternal health. This role requires increased effort and a strategy for understanding current health inequities and improving maternal health outcomes. By taking the opportunity to align stakeholders, we can do more than shine a spotlight — we can make meaningful progress in engaging members in their health.

Understanding health inequities

As a society and as an industry, we have seen progress with how we identify and acknowledge health inequities. We know that there are disparities and that we need to make our healthcare system work better for everyone.

There is, however, more to do. Historically, we have struggled as a country to know which actions to take and to have the will and tenacity to make real progress. For instance, we continue to see higher proportions of social determinants of health (SDOH) challenges such as food scarcity, transportation issues, and housing insecurity within communities of lower socioeconomic status.

The combination of the COVID-19 pandemic, new technologies, and a new presidential administration has created a critical moment for all healthcare stakeholders to align. For the first time in our nation’s history, we are able to put metrics around disparities by collecting data on healthcare consumers, patients, and plan members. Leading organizations are increasing support for collecting additional member data including language, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. There is also a new willingness to collect data on SDOH and understand their impact.

Health plans are key players in this effort.¹ Empowering people to engage in their own healthcare journey is full of nuances and considerations. Nowhere is this clearer than with maternal health, where data exposes great disparities due to a variety of factors.



Understanding maternal health inequities

Maternal health disparities are well documented. Black women have much higher rates of maternal mortality than white women. The US maternal mortality rate for Black women is just over 55 per 100,000 live births — nearly three times the rate for white women.² New international data shows the maternal mortality rate in the US continues to exceed the rate in other high-income countries. In 2020, the maternal mortality rate in the US was almost 24 deaths per 100,000 live births — more than three times the rate in most other high-income countries.²

In developed nations, most maternal deaths are preventable. Their causes include severe bleeding, high blood pressure, complications from unsafe or inaccessible abortions, and other underlying conditions.³ The World Health Organization reports that more than 1 million additional maternal deaths will occur by 2030 if current trends continue.³

Health plan leaders are in a position to make a positive, important, and necessary impact, so they should prioritize gaining a better understanding of these disparities. We have a responsibility to ensure pregnant members are getting the message to seek care early, find a trusted provider, and attend important appointments.

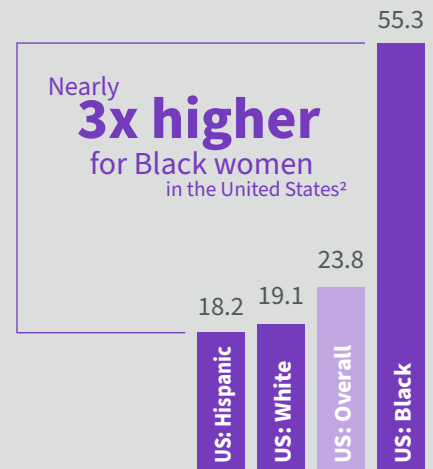
Understanding maternal health engagement challenges

Often, individuals are hesitant to seek care or discuss specific problems because they don't feel empowered in the exam room. They may have fears or stigmas, and they feel like they are being dismissed. While health plans don't necessarily have power to influence all of these perceptions, it's important to appreciate their context.

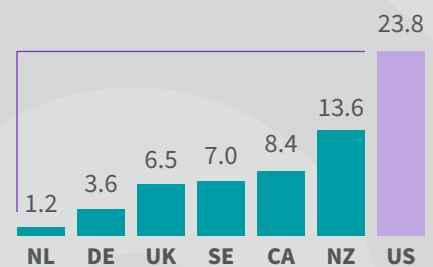
It can be challenging to understand the composition of communities and the disparities that exist in them. One well-documented example is cervical cancer screenings. There are huge racial disparities with cervical cancer deaths within the US. Black women die at a disproportionately high rate and are more frequently diagnosed at later stages, which suggests that they're not getting their initial screenings. Barriers can include the economic impact of taking time off to get screened, as well as not having a trusted provider. The same can apply to other preventive maternal health measures, including HPV vaccinations, mammograms, and colon cancer screenings.

Comparisons of maternal mortality rates²

Deaths per 100,000 live births



The US has nearly **3x the rate** as most other high-income countries²





How health plans can engage members in their health

The path forward for healthcare organizations is to understand how their efforts are improving maternal health and reducing inequities.

Successful health plans are using the following guiding principles in their efforts:

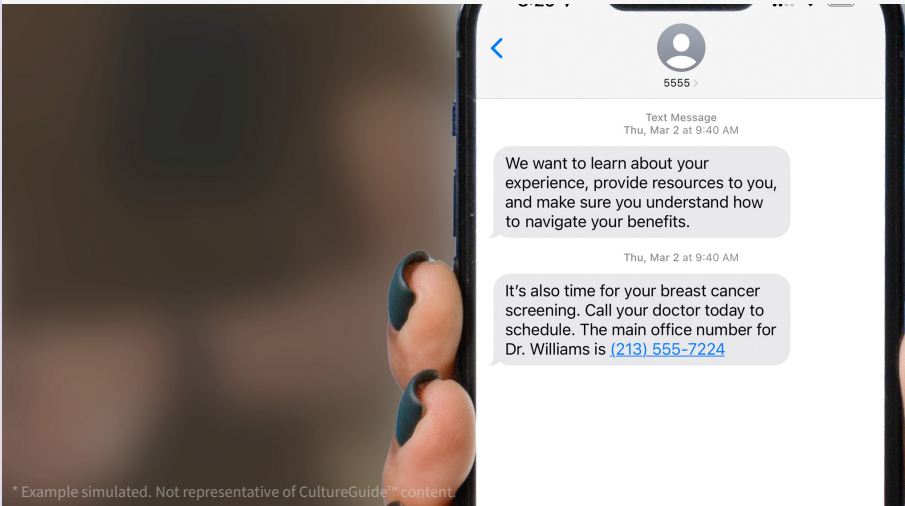
- Connecting with members in ways in which they feel empowered to engage with the healthcare system.
- Appreciating people’s lived experiences and cultural backgrounds.
- Shifting away from one-size-fits-all offerings. Each person experiences healthcare differently, so programs should be personalized, not generalized. Learn what is important to members and use this information to craft messages about screening and other engagement efforts that resonate on an individual basis.
- Focusing on an annual journey to build trust with members. Engage with them throughout the year, not just when it’s time for screenings.
- Using a multipronged approach to understand what’s preventing engagement: discrimination, lack of access to providers, other barriers, etc.
- Identifying the social components and the business components of addressing inequities.

Health plans should not just close gaps, they should prevent them. This involves building trust, learning about the member, asking the right questions, and providing useful information so that people feel empowered to go to appointments.

Messages sent to members should use language that feels comfortable and familiar to them, as in the example* below.

How health plans are addressing maternal health

- A group of 27 payers committed to update provider directories to include the CMS’ birthing-friendly hospital designations.⁴
- The Blue Cross Blue Shield Association said it will add health equity criteria to its maternal care ratings.⁴
- Western Sky Community Care, a Centene subsidiary, launched a virtual doula network for Medicaid members in New Mexico.⁴
- The Blue Cross Blue Shield Association issued a report detailing 10 steps the association of insurers can take to reduce the rates of maternal morbidity. These include crafting a holistic maternal health network, adding more nurse-midwives and birthing centers to provider networks, and implementing value-based maternal health contracts.⁴
- Elevance Health (formerly known as Anthem) launched a telehealth platform in March 2022 to offer digital care to women for pregnancy, menopause, and other women’s health issues through a partnership with New York City-based Happify Health.⁴
- Independence Blue Cross partnered with Philadelphia-based Cocolife.black and Cayaba Care to address racial disparities in maternal health.⁴
- Blue Shield of California launched a new health equity initiative targeting mothers, the Maternal Child Health Equity initiative.⁴



* Example simulated. Not representative of CultureGuide™ content.

Bringing it all together

Incorporating these principles can take many shapes. Here are some recommended tactics for health plans to help make progress:

- **Self-advocacy guidance**
Empower women to find the right doctor so they feel comfortable seeking care and discussing their issues. Destigmatize and address the fear of the unknown.
- **Member education**
Personalize each member's experience to give them a holistic approach to improve health literacy. Help them understand what preventive screenings they need.
- **Texting as a tool of choice**
Some members still prefer other modalities, but a large majority prefer texting. It allows members to reply at their convenience and to ask questions they wouldn't want to ask in-person. It's also cost effective and scalable for the plan.
- **Telehealth options**
New research shows that telehealth can improve postpartum visit attendance rates among Black patients.⁵

Health plans play a vital role in engaging members in their health. By treating people like who they are as individuals matters, collecting disparities data, and fostering better engagement to address barriers, we can drastically improve healthcare outcomes and create a better, healthier society.

We invite you, and your plan, to play a leading role.

Visit the SameSky Health website to learn how we are partnering with health plans across the country to advance health equity and reduce disparities in care.

www.sameskyhealth.com



Cited resources

The following resources were referenced in the preparation of this white paper:

1. Representative Sylvia Ortiz-Velez. Improving Health Equity Is Critical And Medicare Advantage Is Part Of The Solution. Milwaukee Courier. Jan. 21, 2023. Retrieved March 3, 2023, from: <https://milwaukeecourieronline.com/index.php/2023/01/21/improving-health-equity-is-critical-and-medicare-advantage-is-part-of-the-solution/>
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5. Anuja Vaidya. Telehealth Boosts Postpartum Visit Attendance Among Black Patients. mHealth Intelligence. Feb. 13, 2023. Retrieved March 7, 2023, from: <https://mhealthintelligence.com/news/telehealth-boosts-postpartum-visit-attendance-among-black-patients>



SameSky Health is a cultural experience company that removes barriers to care and forms meaningful relationships to bring people to health. We guide health plan members on their annual wellness journeys by building trusted relationships that encourage dignity, autonomy, and companionship as they navigate disparate life experiences within a complex healthcare system.

Launched in 2017, SameSky Health engages 2.3 million+ members across 15 states, in 25+ different languages. The company's cultural expertise and technology-based solutions enable health plans to grow member engagement, improve quality measures and increase overall health outcomes. We are on a mission to create cultural connections for a healthier, more equitable world. SameSky Health is based in North Hollywood, CA. To learn more, visit www.sameskyhealth.com.