Case Study
Workplace Wellbeing Hub

A Data-Driven Mental Health and Wellness Program in the City of Houston

Organization snapshot

Sector: Municipal Government
Location: City of Houston, Texas
Workforce: ~22,000 employees across 25 departments; ~60,000 covered lives including eligible family members and retirees
Interviewee / Lead Function: EAP & Wellness Manager, City of Houston Human Resources
Primary Focus: Building a data-informed, integrated wellbeing and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that supports mental health, safety-sensitive decision-making and organizational risk reduction across a large public-sector workforce

What's the need?

Mental health challenges affect safety, productivity and retention across all sectors, and city governments are no exception. The City of Houston, the fourth-largest city in the United States, employs nearly 22,000 people across 25 departments, from public works and solid waste to police, fire, airports, public health and the mayor's office. This diverse workforce spans frontline crews and shift workers to clinicians, lawyers and finance professionals.

Recognizing that employee mental health directly affects the city's ability to deliver essential services, Houston has invested in a broad, evolving approach to wellness and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services. The goal: make mental health support easy to access, fully integrated into HR and safety processes, and increasingly measurable through utilization, claims analysis and emerging risk-reduction metrics over time.

Organization & program overview

The Wellness and EAP team sits under Human Resources and supports:
- Roughly 22,000 employees across 25 departments
- First responders (police and fire departments)
- Two airport systems in the greater Houston area

Mental health support began years ago with a focus on first responders and has since expanded to a citywide, whole-person model. Through eligibility for family members and retirees, the program ultimately touches roughly 60,000 covered lives. Today, the City of Houston offers their employees:

- **Internal EAP services**
  - One-to-one counseling primarily for work-related concerns
  - Clinical oversight of substance-use-related cases
  - Mediation and conflict support when workplace issues arise

- **External EAP/work-life services**
  - Additional counseling resources
  - Work-life supports such as locating childcare, legal help (e.g., wills), financial counseling and more
  - Emphasis on stress management and everyday life pressures that affect mental health

- **Behavioral health tools and apps**
  - Behavioral health tools such as Happify and other digital supports designed to help employees manage stress, anxiety, and mood before reaching a crisis

- **Integrated wellness program**
  - A wellness team that works together with the EAP
  - "Whole person" programming where every initiative has both a physical and mental health component
    - Example: a breast cancer summit that included both a medical doctor and a mental health clinician to address the emotional impact of diagnosis and treatment

Champions and culture

The program is supported at multiple levels:

- Human Resources leadership
- City council members and department directors
- Frontline and mid-level employees who have used EAP services
- A network of wellness ambassadors trained to promote EAP and wellness resources
- Employee engagement committees in nearly every department

This multi-layered champion network helps normalize mental health conversations and keep EAP resources visible in a large, complex organization.

Mental health benefits and supports

Rather than treating mental health as a standalone initiative, Houston embeds EAP and wellness across key processes and safety-sensitive workflows:

1. Onboarding and corrective action
- EAP information is included in new employee orientation
- When supervisors issue corrective action, they are expected to provide EAP information alongside policy requirements

2. Return-to-work and leave management
- Employees returning from workers' compensation, FMLA or other leaves are routinely connected to the EAP as part of their reintegration process

3. Substance use and safety-sensitive roles
- EAP leads the clinical side of "last chance" agreements for employees with substance use issues, including:
  - Assessment and case management
  - Coordination of hospitalization, recovery services and follow-up care, when needed
- When EAP identifies risks (e.g., substance use, medication side effects), they work with supervisors and employee relations to provide recommendation for continuity of a safe working environment.

4. Whole-person wellness programming
- All wellness initiatives are designed to include a mental health "arm" (e.g., stress, coping, adjustment) alongside physical health content
  - This reduces stigma and reinforces the message that mental health is an everyday part of wellbeing, not a separate or "special" issue

5. Alignment with first responder supports
- Police and fire departments have their own in-house clinical teams
- The citywide EAP collaborates with these teams when appropriate, while respecting department-specific needs and existing support systems.

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Integrating mental health into safety programs

Rather than treating mental health as a standalone topic, Memphis weaves it directly into the safety program. By normalizing mental health and embedding it into standard safety education, the city positions psychological wellbeing as an expected part of a safe work environment with:

- **Quarterly Safety Roundtables**
  Mental health is a standard agenda item, not an add-on. Roundtables address traditional safety topics alongside stress, emotional wellbeing, and psychological risks.

- **Annual Safety Fair**
  The city's annual safety fair highlights EAP resources and brings in specialized speakers, including a vicarious trauma therapist to address workers who repeatedly re-enter traumatic situations (e.g., police officers, firefighters, public works, solid waste workers)

- **Workplace Safety Conference**
  The annual workplace safety conference includes mental health as a core safety topic—treated with the same seriousness as other hazards.

- **Language and Framing to Reduce Stigma**
  Recognizing that the phrase "mental health" can feel intimidating or stigmatizing for some workers, the city intentionally uses alternative framings:
  - Emotional intelligence
  - "How do I feel in the workplace?"
  - Courses such as "It's Okay Not to Be Okay"

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Measuring mental health impact: metrics, methods and dashboards

The City of Houston relies on both clinical and claims-based data to understand program impact and guide continuous improvement.

Core EAP Metrics:
- **Utilization rates**
  - Approximately 12% utilization for the external EAP
  - Approximately 14–15% utilization for the internal EAP
  - These rates are substantially higher than the commonly cited 3–4% EAP utilization benchmark, indicating strong engagement

- **Reasons for contact**
  The EAP tracks why employees are seeking help, including:
  - Substance use
  - Work-related and performance issues
  - Depression and anxiety
  - Family and relationship concerns
  - Other stressors and life events

- **Department-level trends**
  Data is broken down by department to identify patterns. For example:
  - When the Health Department is activated to respond to a citywide emergency, the team sees a spike in anxiety and stress-related contacts.
  - Around fiscal year-end, there is an observable increase in contacts for mental health services from employees involved in budget reconciliation processes.

Outcomes and case closures

Beyond utilization rates, the team tracks:
- How cases are resolved (e.g., internal counseling only, or referral to longer-term treatment)
- Whether employees are connected to appropriate levels of care, including recovery services and specialty behavioral health services
- The volume of cases requiring higher-intensity interventions

Claims and absenteeism
Working with the city's medical and behavioral health claims provider, the team is:

- Monitoring behavioral health and pharmacy claims, especially medications for depression and anxiety
- Connecting claims data with FMLA and other leave types to understand the relationship between mental health diagnoses, pharmacy data, FMLA, and absenteeism
- Building greater capability to identify trends and target interventions where risk is highest

Benchmarking and reporting

Data from the internal patient management system and the external EAP provider are combined into comprehensive reports, shared monthly or quarterly. High-level statistics are occasionally shared with all employees via email (e.g., "Did you know X% of employees contacted EAP in the last six months?"). The City of Houston also:

- Benchmarks mental health and behavioral health claims and utilization against similar municipalities and large employers
- Establishes quarterly internal targets based on prior utilization and outcomes
- Shares reports with two key leadership groups:
  - The Health Benefits Advisory Committee (department directors and designees)
  - The Employee Wellness Advisory Committee

Moving toward ROI and risk reduction

Like many organizations, the City of Houston acknowledges that calculating a strict "dollar-for-dollar" ROI on mental health programs is difficult. Instead, the team is working toward a risk-reduction model**:**

- Use claims and clinical data to quantify risk reduction following specific interventions
- Tie that risk reduction to estimated cost savings on diagnoses, medications or conditions
- Apply this methodology first to wellness programs, then expand to EAP and mental health initiatives

The goal is to show leadership how changes in risk profiles can translate into meaningful cost savings, while still emphasizing

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that investment in people is the primary value.

A success story: supporting the people who support Houston

One of the team's proudest moments came during an unexpected crisis: a severe winter storm and rare snow event in January 2025.The city opened warming centers through the Health Department to serve unhoused and low-income residents. Staff at these centers were suddenly responsible for supporting residents with complex mental health needs, many without access to medication and all impacted by the stress of the storm. Roads were impassable, and employees and residents were snowed in together for up to 36 hours. The Wellness and EAP team found a way to reach the site and:

- Provided on-the-spot mental health support to staff working around the clock
- Helped staff cope with extreme stress and emotionally difficult conditions while citizens were being housed onsite
- Offered guidance and reassurance during a situation for which staff had not been formally trained

There was no media coverage or award for this work, but Assistant Directors and leaders from the Health Department made it clear: without that support, they might not have made it through the event as effectively. For the EAP and wellness team, this was a powerful example of fulfilling their mission of supporting the people who support Houston.

Challenges & gaps

Despite strong infrastructure and robust data, the City of Houston still faces challenges:

Communication and awareness
- With a team of five, led by the EAP and Wellness Manager, serving roughly 60,000 covered lives, reaching everyone is difficult
- Leaders still occasionally hear, "I didn't know we had these services," despite multiple channels: flyers, mailers, emails, posters, orientation and committee outreach
- Increasing familiarity so employees know exactly who to call and feel comfortable doing so is a major area of focus moving forward

Leadership data comprehension
- Delivering data in a way that encourages partnership, not defensiveness, is an ongoing task

Formal qualitative feedback
- The city receives testimonials and benefits from a broad HR survey that includes EAP questions, primarily collected through the city's Organization Training and Development surveys

Lessons learned & recommendations

From Houston's experience, several key lessons emerge for other employers to consider:

- Know your culture, not just your numbers. Utilization data only becomes actionable when you understand each department's context, work patterns, and stigma levels. At the City of Houston, every department's culture and work type is considered when providing support.
- Integrate mental health into everything. Embedding EAP into orientation, corrective action, return-to-work, last-chance agreements and wellness initiatives normalizes help-seeking and reduces stigma.

- Use data to get ahead of risk. Department-level trends allow the team to anticipate spikes (e.g., health department activations, fiscal year-end) and proactively deploy resources rather than reacting after the fact.
- Link mental health to safety. Proactively removing employees from safety-sensitive roles when mental health or substance use concerns are present is a critical strategy for preventing serious incidents.
- Treat mental health as an investment, not a cost. As the program leader put it, *"Investment in people is always the right investment."* Mental health, EAP and wellness services strengthen the organization because people still run the systems that keep cities functioning.

By combining a whole-person approach, strong partnerships, thoughtful integration with safety and HR processes, and a growing data and evaluation infrastructure, the City of Houston is building a mental health and wellness program that can serve as a model for other large, complex employers.