



# Building relationships one person at a time to improve access to healthcare, improve health equity

By **Heath Sampson**, President and CEO of Modivcare

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Participating in the healthcare system can be a daunting task for anyone. But especially for those in underserved populations.

Because healthcare is a necessity, becoming a part of the system is a necessity, as well. Nevertheless, utilizing healthcare services can be problematic and difficult. Even those of us who work as part of the healthcare system and purportedly have an inside track on knowledge and information often have a difficult time navigating the labyrinth.

For underrepresented, underserved populations, working through the maze of health insurance plans, co-pays, deductibles, in-network or out-of-network providers and the often prohibitive cost of treatment may thwart the regular use of services that, when there's easy access, can help lower exacerbation of chronic conditions and lower costs.

Unfortunately, our healthcare system doesn't always do a great job serving its customers. Americans, [according to a 2022 survey](#), give the healthcare system a D- and D+ for the cost of care and equitable care, respectively.

"Nearly half of adults report healthcare in the U.S. is poor or failing," according to the [2022 Healthcare in American Report](#). "Out of four specific aspects of the healthcare system, cost of care fared the worst by far: Three in four Americans grade affordability a D or an F, a sentiment shared across nearly all demographic groups."

These issues impact many people who already don't receive a high level of support from the healthcare system and, therefore, may go years without receiving any medical treatments at all. Naturally, this negatively impacts health equity, exacerbates chronic conditions and causes medical costs to increase as people use the emergency department, for example, for primary care only when an illness rises to such a level that the individual must enter the healthcare system.

## Rebuilding trust in healthcare

The demographic groups who are often most impacted by a lack of regular, affordable access to healthcare range from disenfranchised to older adults, from marginalized ethnic groups to LGBTQIA+. Mistrust of the healthcare system is a long-standing issue among these groups and others. "Generations of racism and mistreatment at the hands of medical professionals have left many Black Americans distrustful of the health care system," according

to [The Commonwealth Fund](#). “(R)esearchers have found that medical mistrust is not just related to past legacies of mistreatment, but also stems from people’s contemporary experiences of discrimination in health care — from inequities in access to health insurance, health care facilities, and treatments to institutional practices that make it more difficult for Black Americans to obtain care.”

COVID vaccinations are a recent example of medical mistrust: “Black Americans continue to stand out as less inclined to get vaccinated than other racial and ethnic groups: 42% would do so, compared with 63% of Hispanic and 61% of White adults,” according to a [Pew Research Center study](#).

These groups may be effectively “hidden” from the healthcare system due to a reluctance to deal with or participate in the healthcare system. Therefore, they may not receive a high level of support from healthcare providers and not use the healthcare services that can help maintain or improve health and wellness.

Distrust of the healthcare system exists, and it’s up to that same system to make the changes necessary to improve and earn the trust that can make a difference to an individual’s health.

“Conceptually, mistrust of the medical care system contributes to delay in care seeking, which complicates the care process and often worsens patient outcomes,” according to research published in an article in [Health Services Research](#). “Delays in seeking care can lead patients to initiate care at later stages of disease progression, increasing the costs of treatment. Moreover, as racial/ethnic minorities report more mistrust of health care, mistrust may be an explanation for disparities in health care utilization and adherence. And there may be race differences in the magnitude of the effect of medical mistrust on health services use.”

As recently as 2003, physicians were using race as a surrogate to make medical treatment decisions: “The result is ongoing conflict between the latest insights from population genetics and the clinical implementation of race. For example, despite mounting evidence that race is not a reliable proxy for genetic difference, the belief that it is has become embedded, sometimes insidiously, within medical practice,” according to [Hidden in Plain Sight — Reconsidering the Use of Race Correction in Clinical Algorithms](#) published in The New England Journal of Medicine.

As more and more data pours into the healthcare system, the use of algorithms to inform decision-making will undoubtedly increase. Today, many algorithms are, in fact, biased. Keeping these algorithms in check, however, and ensuring that they are unbiased is crucial to the future of healthcare and those who receive it.

A lack of trust in the healthcare system—and sometimes all it takes is one bad experience—is a contributing factor to poor health.

## **Building relationships**

To help improve this nationwide issue the healthcare system—providers, health plans, community organizations and others—must come together to build relationships with these disenfranchised groups.

While there are myriad reasons that people are wary of the healthcare system from personal experience or those of friends or loved ones, it’s up to that same system to combat that skepticism through transparency and open communication. Starting the conversation is the first step.

When people don’t trust the healthcare system, their costs and risk may increase. Going years without regular, preventive healthcare treatments can cause chronic conditions to worsen over time. There are fewer opportunities to intervene and provide necessary care.

Connecting the healthcare system and patients in a positive, empathetic, respectful way may help lessen the fatigue many groups have with the healthcare system at-large and individual healthcare providers, while improving health equity.

**Heath Sampson is President and CEO of Modivcare.**