

Protecting the health of *Our Communities*





Jim Reed  
President and CEO

**We are honored** to be the health insurer for 1.5 million upstate New Yorkers, providing them access to high-quality, affordable health care. It's a responsibility we don't take lightly, or for granted.

Our leadership team and more than 4,500 employees live in communities across our service area stretching from Buffalo in the west to Utica in the east, and from Binghamton in the Southern Tier up to Watertown and the North Country.

Because we're local, we not only know our members, but also, we are accountable to them because they are our family, neighbors, and friends.

I encourage you to take a few moments to review the enclosed report, our 2023-2024 Health Plan Overview. It contains recent highlights of our work to improve the health of the communities we serve, so that **everybody benefits**.

**Thank you!**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Reed". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

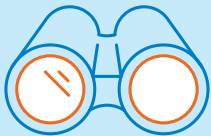
# Our Company

Excellus BlueCross BlueShield is a regional, nonprofit health plan serving the communities of upstate New York since 1934.



## OUR MISSION

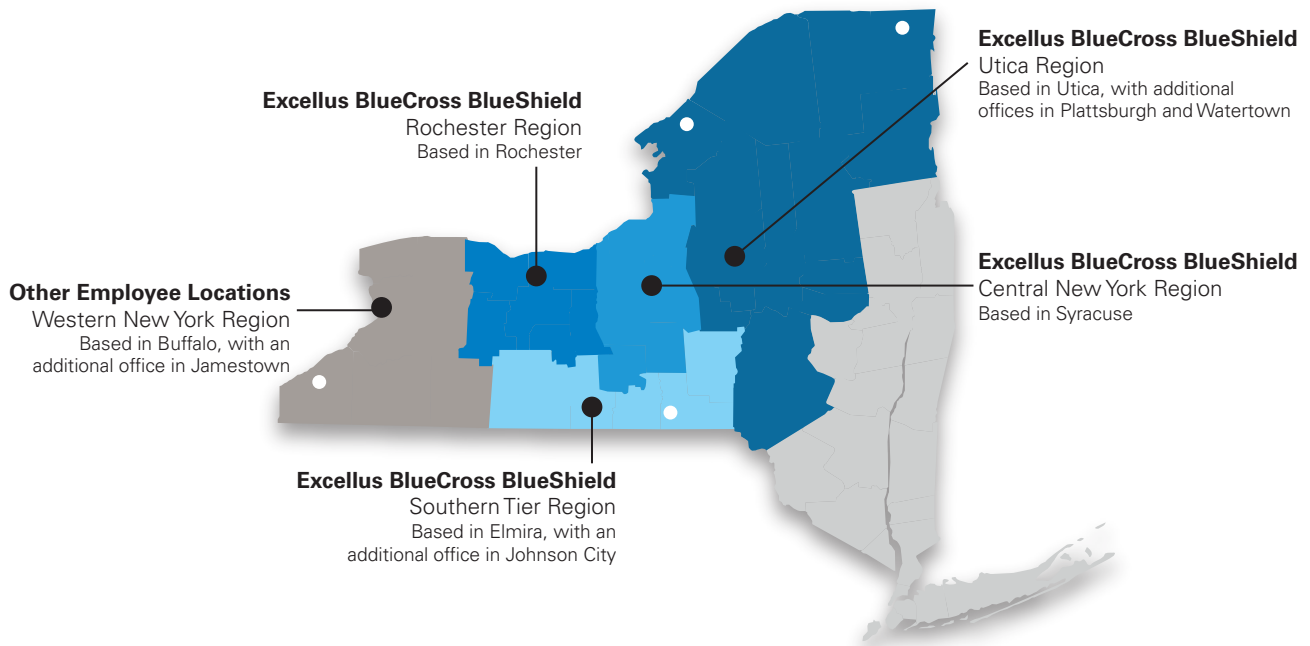
To help people in our communities live healthier and more secure lives through access to high-quality, affordable health care.



## OUR VISION

To be recognized and valued as THE community and business resource for health care security through financial strength, effective cost control, ease of use, and commitment to health improvement.

## OUR SERVICE AREA



# 2023 Financial Overview

**\$6.6 billion** REVENUE

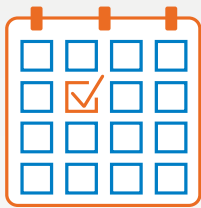
**\$6.2 billion** MEDICAL BENEFITS PAID

**\$3.8 billion** ASSETS

**\$1.68 billion** RESERVES

**-0.4%** NET MARGIN

**1.7%** AVERAGE NET MARGIN (20-YEAR HISTORY)



RESERVES EQUAL TO

**91**

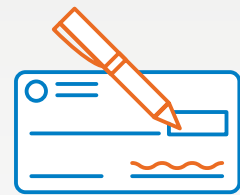
DAYS OF CLAIMS & OPERATING EXPENSES



RESERVES EQUAL TO

**\$1,122**

PER MEMBER

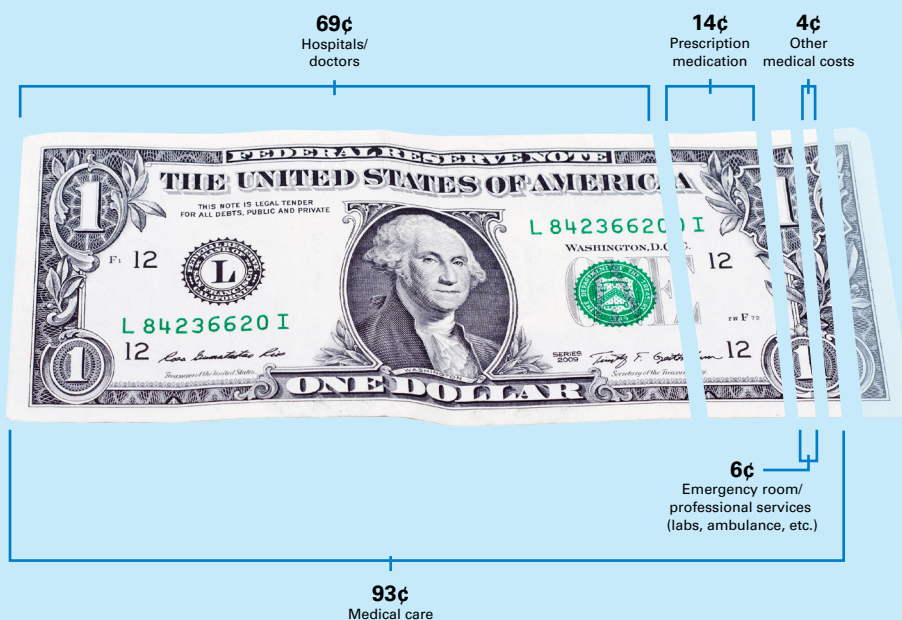


**\$441.4 million**

PAID IN FEDERAL AND STATE TAXES AND ASSESSMENTS



Overall, the company in 2023 spent **93 cents out of every premium dollar** collected on direct patient care including medical and pharmacy claims, and activities that improve the quality of care.

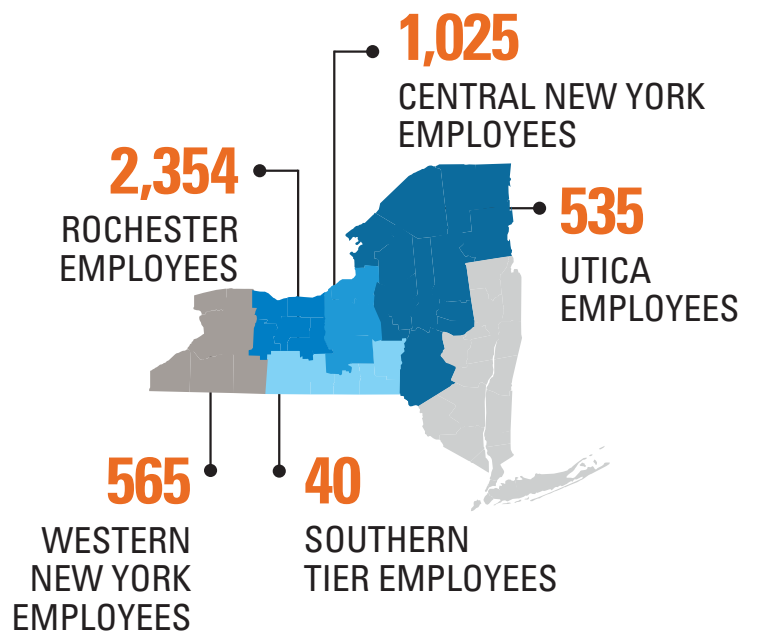




# Our Workforce\*

# 4,519

Health plan employees



\* As of December 31, 2023

# Together, we commit to employee diversity

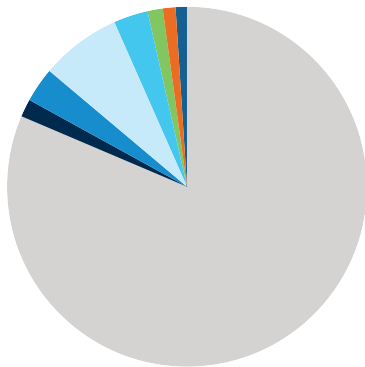
As part of our commitment to inclusion, diversity, equity and access, we work to ensure our workforce is reflective of the members and communities we serve. We continue to make progress and recognize opportunities for growth in the areas of recruitment, development, and internal mobility. There is always more to be done.



# 73.15%

OF EMPLOYEES ARE FEMALE

## EMPLOYEE RACIAL / ETHNIC BREAKDOWN



0.54%

AMERICAN INDIAN / ALASKAN NATIVE

3.53%

ASIAN

7.43%

BLACK / AFRICAN AMERICAN

3.33%

HISPANIC / LATINO

1.54%

MULTIRACIAL / MORE THAN ONE RACE

0.04%

NATIVE HAWAIIAN / PACIFIC ISLANDER

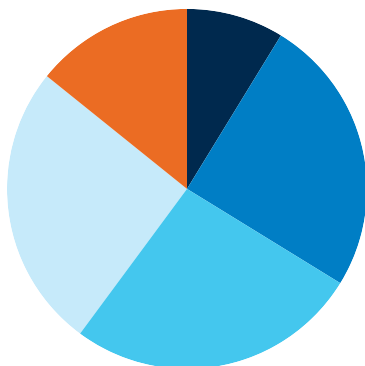
83.46%

WHITE

0.13%

NOT SPECIFIED

## EMPLOYEE AGE BREAKDOWN



34.02%

UNDER 40

■ 18-29 8.79%

■ 30-39 25.22%

65.71%

40 AND OVER

■ 40-49 25.87%

■ 50-59 25.78%

■ 60+ 14.06%



## Excellus BCBS recognized by Forbes as one of the nation's best employers for diversity

Excellus BlueCross BlueShield has been recognized by Forbes as one of the best employers in the United States for diversity.

The health plan was honored among 500 organizations, with 1,000 or more employees, on the list of Forbes Best Employers for Diversity 2024.

This is the second consecutive year Excellus BCBS made the list. The nonprofit health insurer ranked No. 25 among all employers nationally and No. 5 among employers in the insurance industry.

The Best Employers for Diversity 2024 were identified through an independent survey of 170,000 U.S.-based employees.

The following criteria were used in the evaluation:

- Employees were asked to give their opinions on a series of statements regarding age, gender, ethnicity, disability, LGBTQIA+ and overall diversity in their current workplace.
- Participants were also given the chance to evaluate other employers in their respective industries that stand out either positively or negatively regarding diversity.

Research was carried out to evaluate how companies fared across a range of diversity-related best-practices including representation, accountability, communication, internal and external initiatives.

The Best Employers for Diversity 2024 award is presented by Forbes and Statista Inc., a global data and business intelligence platform established in Germany in 2007.



## Forbes names Excellus BCBS #8 on list of best midsize employers in America

Excellus BlueCross BlueShield was ranked No. 8 on the Forbes 2024 list of America's Best Midsize Employers.

This is the second consecutive year that Excellus BCBS has been named to the list.

This prestigious award is presented by Forbes and Statista Inc., a global data and business intelligence platform established in Germany in 2007.

America's best employers are identified using an independent survey from a vast sample of more than 170,000 U.S. employees working for companies employing at least 1,000 people within the U.S.

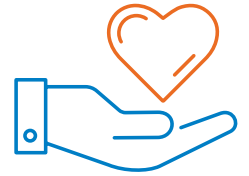
The final ranking is based on two types of evaluations:

- **Personal** – Given by employees, also known as direct evaluations.
- **Public** – Given by friends and family members of employees, or members of the public who work in the same industry, also known as indirect evaluations, with a much higher weighting for personal evaluations.





## Recognized for workforce wellbeing by the American Heart Association



The American Heart Association has awarded Excellus BlueCross BlueShield national silver level recognition for its commitments to employee health and wellbeing as measured in the Association's 2022 Workforce Well-being Scorecard™. The Association announced the recognition in May 2023.

The Scorecard evaluates factors such as mental health policies, organizational well-being strategies to address burnout, health equity measures, employee financial resources and more to provide a comprehensive assessment of an organization's culture of health. A total of 381 organizations completed the Scorecard in 2022, and all organizations were recognized with an achievement level of platinum (9%), gold (45%), silver (32%), bronze (9%) or completer (5%).

Excellus BCBS's employee wellbeing program, be WELL for LIFE, focuses on five areas: emotional support, mindfulness, nourishment, movement, and connection. To meet personal health goals, employees are offered challenges, weekly and monthly classes, webinars, the Wellbeing Incentive Program, and a variety of resources. The program is run by two full-time employees and facilitated through an Employee Wellness Committee.

The American Heart Association, a global force for healthier lives for all, developed the Workforce Well-being Scorecard in collaboration with top scientists and industry experts to reflect the latest evidence-based science on workforce health and well-being.

Research has shown that supporting the mental and physical wellbeing of employees is vital to driving productivity, engagement and successful business outcomes. By investing in a culture of health in the workplace, organizations can improve employee retention and bolster their organizational reputation.

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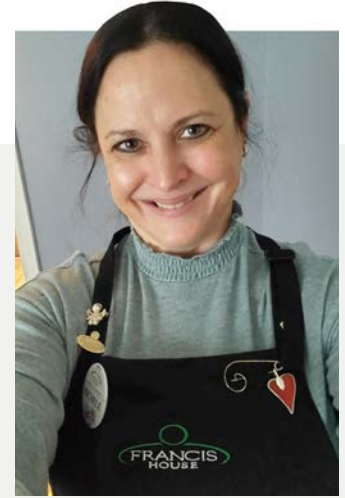
## Earned high score on Human Rights Campaign Foundation's 2023-24 Corporate Equality Index

Excellus BlueCross BlueShield has received a score of 85 percent out of 100 on the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's 2023-2024 Corporate Equality Index, the nation's foremost benchmarking survey and report measuring corporate policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ workplace equality. Excellus BCBS joins the ranks of 1384 major U.S. businesses that were also ranked in the 2023-2024 CEI.

"We're proud to be recognized for our inclusive policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ inclusion, while recognizing we have more to do," said Sady Alvarado-Fischer (she/her), vice president, diversity, equity and inclusion officer for Excellus BCBS. "As a Queer woman, I am especially proud to work for an organization committed to creating an environment where our employees and members can choose to be out, and have their identities affirmed and celebrated. The Corporate Equality Index allows us to learn and identify new opportunities for positive change to create more inclusive, affirming and equitable experiences for all our employees."

The CEI rates companies on detailed criteria falling under four central pillars:

- Non-discrimination policies across business entities;
- Equitable benefits for LGBTQ+ workers and their families;
- Supporting an inclusive culture; and,
- Corporate social responsibility.



## My LifeTime Story: Finding beauty and compassion volunteering at Francis House

BY MICHELE LUYSTERBORGH, COMPLIANCE PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR

Our partnerships with community-based organizations are vital to our mission as a health plan. We have been proud to support the Francis House through event sponsorship and volunteerism since 2017 as they fill a local need for end-of-life care for the Central New York community. Many of our employees have volunteered with Francis House on their own and through our Central New York United Way Day of Caring.

The Francis House mission is to “provide a home and extended family to persons with terminal illnesses so they can die with dignity surrounded by the unconditional love of God.” Its volunteers help to create an atmosphere where people in need can feel like part of a family. There is “no place like home,” but when that isn’t an option, there is Francis House.

### GETTING INVOLVED

I became involved with Francis House through my cousin, when I shadowed her for a shift in one of its kitchens. I left that four-hour shift with my heart overflowing, knowing I got back much more than I gave. After that, I was determined to help more. I know each and every time that I volunteer, I make a difference in the people whom I am lucky to serve that day.

By being a volunteer at Francis House, I am proud knowing I am helping its founder, the late Sister Kathleen Osbelt, to keep her vision from more than 30 years ago alive: to provide a place of unconditional love and acceptance for individuals who may not have another place to go, or do have another place to go but chose Francis House to make it easier on their loved ones.

### HELPING PATIENTS – AND THEIR FAMILIES

As its mission states, Francis House is not only for end-of-life-care patients in need of help, but also for the patients’ families and friends who love and support them. Francis House is an invaluable and caring place for all people because it provides a caring and warm environment for people who are experiencing already difficult situations. Now, after volunteering for several years, I have witnessed Francis House’s beauty firsthand on many occasions.

## GIVING BACK

When my father-in-law was at the end of his life, he entered hospice on a Friday and left us less than two days later. While he was there, I remember the pure grace and compassion the volunteers and staff showed to him and our family. I remember the comfort I felt. It never left me. I am happy to be able to give back to our community in this way. My heart is always so full after I volunteer a shift at this beautiful and amazing place. Francis House has given me some memories and moments of friendship that I will hold in my heart forever.

## WE VALUE VOLUNTEERISM

The value of volunteerism to our organization runs deep. It is connected to our mission, localism and our value of caring about wellbeing. As an employee, I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to use my volunteer time off serving the people in need at Francis House. I am proud to work for a company that allows us to give back to our communities in this way.



Every January, each eligible Excellus BCBS employee is provided with **eight hours of volunteer time off** to use throughout the year to support their communities.



# Our Provider Network



**8,997** PRIMARY CARE PROVIDERS



**24,417** SPECIALISTS AND ANCILLARY PROVIDERS



**71** HOSPITALS



# Quality

Excellus BlueCross BlueShield's Medicaid and Medicare products are accredited by The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA)\*.

## CENTERS FOR MEDICARE & MEDICAID SERVICES (CMS)

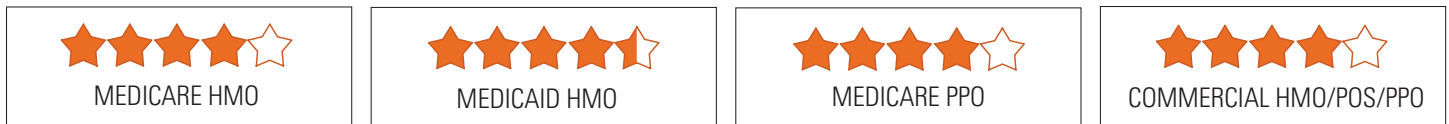
Recognition from CMS comes in the form of Medicare Stars using a 5-star scale.



Medicare Stars reflect member satisfaction with a health plan and its providers. They also recognize a health plan's success in caring for its members by meeting specific health care benchmarks, including how a Medicare member's chronic conditions are being managed; if Medicare members are receiving their preventive screenings and vaccines; and how the health plan is helping members to take their medications as prescribed.

## NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE (NCQA)

Our products earned ratings of 4 stars and above on NCQA's 5-star quality scale.



NCQA is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to improving health care quality. NCQA accredits and certifies a wide range of health care organizations and recognizes clinicians in key clinical areas. NCQA's HEDIS® is the most widely used performance measurement tool in health care. NCQA's website ([www.ncqa.org](http://www.ncqa.org)) contains information to help consumers, employers and others make more informed health care choices.



**NCQA'S ANNUAL HEALTH INSURANCE PLAN RATINGS EVALUATE ACCREDITED AND NON-ACCREDITED HEALTH PLANS BY QUALITY AND PERFORMANCE METRICS.**

\* National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to improving health care quality. NCQA accredits and certifies a wide range of health care organizations and recognizes clinicians in key clinical areas. NCQA's HEDIS® is the most widely used performance measurement tool in health care. NCQA's website ([www.ncqa.org](http://www.ncqa.org)) contains information to help consumers, employers and others make more informed health care choices.

# Building value for our members through provider partnerships

To help improve quality of care and control rising health care costs, we developed a value-based care model that reimburses providers based on the quality, not quantity, of care they provide.

Value-based care agreements are a strategic arrangement with a network of doctors and hospitals agreeing to share the responsibility for providing coordinated care to patients. We work together to improve quality and slow rising health care costs by identifying opportunities for efficiency, closing gaps in care, and better controlling chronic conditions among members.



## OUR VALUE-BASED CARE MODEL FOCUSES ON:

Increased member engagement to prevent medical errors and to promote positive patient behavior, such as obtaining preventive care or exercising regularly

Increased physician-patient engagement to coordinate care and improve the health care experience and outcomes, thereby improving the quality of care

Aligning payment with quality, patient outcomes and value

In 2023, we collaborated on **19 value-based care agreements across our enterprise, which included almost 750,000 patients and 3,340 providers.** Each and every agreement has an assigned hub team, which includes an account manager, a clinical consultant, and a pharmacist, as well as care management resources. This team evaluates provider agreement performance, often having difficult conversations with provider partners, requiring a level of trust that has been developed over time. Because we are a regional health plan, these solid relationships with our providers differentiate us in the marketplace. We all work together to achieve our aligned goals.



## THE RESULTS

Our value-based care providers consistently outperform other providers. We've seen:

**60%** REDUCTION IN  
INPATIENT READMISSIONS

**9.3%** FEWER EMERGENCY  
DEPARTMENT VISITS

**20%** INCREASE IN ANNUAL  
PHYSICIAN SATISFACTION  
SINCE THE BEGINNING OF OUR VALUE-  
BASED CARE MODEL IN 2016 (VS ONLY 10%  
IN 6 YEARS PRIOR)

**Greater** COMPLIANCE  
WITH PREVENTIVE SCREENINGS

**Higher** MEMBER SATISFACTION  
WITH THE QUALITY, TIMELINESS OF GETTING AN  
APPOINTMENT AND WAIT TIMES WITH THEIR PROVIDERS

OVER **\$116 million**  
IN CLINICAL SAVINGS INITIATIVES THAT WERE ESTABLISHED  
WITH VALUE-BASED CARE PROVIDERS FROM 2019-2022

# CNY Family Care & Cayuga Health Partners receive Excellus BCBS Circle of Excellence Awards

In fall 2023, Excellus BlueCross BlueShield honored two Central New York health care providers with its first-ever Circle of Excellence awards, recognizing **CNY Family Care, LLP**, and **Cayuga Health Partners ACO** for their high-quality and innovative health care delivery and patient care.

## CNY FAMILY CARE

received the Health Plan's first-ever Circle of Excellence Innovation Award, recognizing the health care organization for its meaningful impact in the quality of patients' lives through clinical leadership and vision to promote continuous improvement in the health care system.

CNY Family Care, a family-oriented medical practice

located in East Syracuse, NY, was recognized for its efforts to enhance quality, efficiency and patient experience, including process improvements to their CNY Family Care Retina Vue Program (eye exam program for patients with diabetes). After seeing low patient compliance in the program, the practice developed an innovative solution, bringing together multiple departments and introducing a new integrated workflow, resulting in significant increases in the number of diabetic patients receiving eye exams.

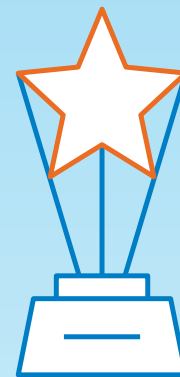






**CAYUGA HEALTH PARTNERS** received the first ever Circle of Excellence Health Equity Award for its significant impact on the lives of underserved populations through health care and social services interventions and through outstanding examples of the Excellus BCBS mission to promote health equity among all patients.

Ithaca-based Cayuga Health Partners is a clinically integrated network of primary care physicians and specialty physicians working in conjunction with Cayuga Health System. The organization was recognized for its creation of a closed loop referral process that, in partnership with Human Services Coalition community health advocates, integrates social needs screening, connects patients directly to local resources in the community, and provides direct feedback back to providers. By addressing unmet social needs, CHP is taking steps to address major barriers to health and wellbeing for vulnerable populations in the community.



The **Circle of Excellence award** is a peer-nominated award initiative intended to showcase visionary, quality, and health equity thought leaders in our provider network who have significantly impacted the lives of our members.

# Excellus BCBS Awards Hospitals \$28 Million for Quality Improvements



Thirty-one upstate New York hospitals and health centers earned a combined **\$28 million** in quality improvement payments from Excellus BlueCross BlueShield last year as part of our Hospital Performance Incentive Program

Since 2005, we have invested more than more than **\$400 million** in quality improvement incentives.

## ✓ ROCHESTER REGION

Nine hospitals in the Rochester Region participated in this program in 2022, sharing \$16.6 million in quality improvement incentive payments. Participating hospitals included Clifton Springs Hospital & Clinic, Highland Hospital, Newark-Wayne Community Hospital, Noyes Memorial Hospital, Rochester General Hospital, Strong Memorial Hospital, Thompson Health, United Memorial Medical Center and Unity Hospital.

## ✓ CENTRAL NEW YORK REGION

Six hospitals in Central New York participated in this program in 2022, sharing \$6.4 million in quality improvement incentive payments. Participating hospitals included Auburn Community Hospital, Crouse Hospital, Guthrie Cortland Medical Center, Oswego Hospital, St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center and Upstate University Health System.

## ✓ UTICA, ROME, NORTH COUNTRY REGION

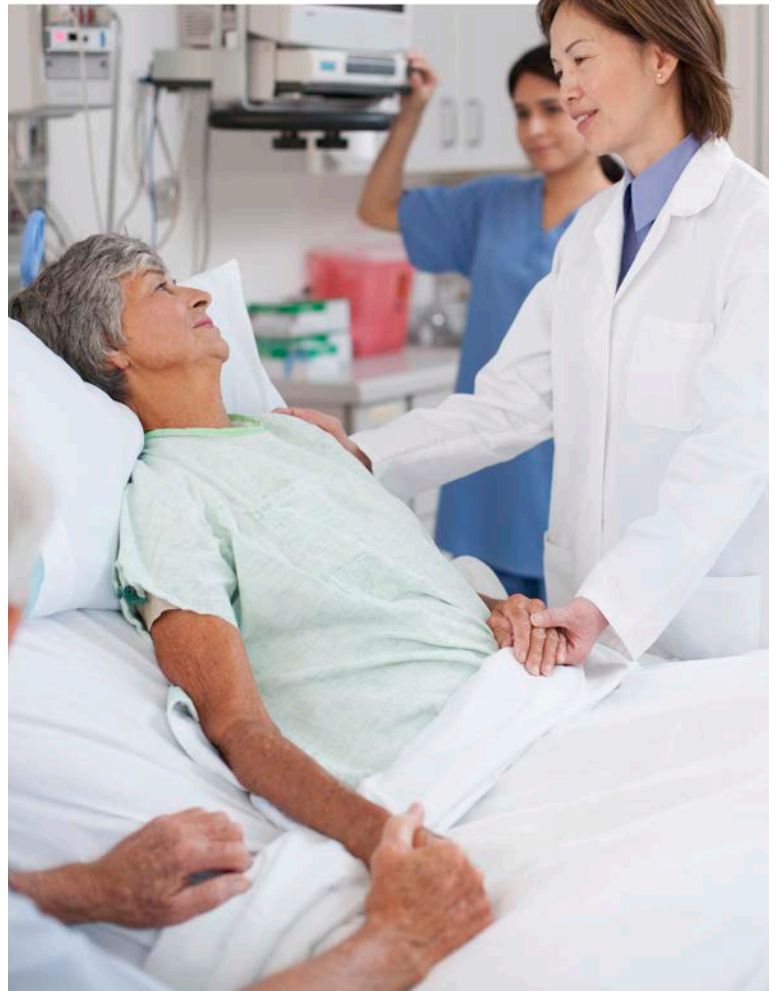
Eight hospitals in the Utica/Rome/North Country region participated in this program in 2022, sharing \$818,254 in quality improvement incentive payments. Participating hospitals included Adirondack Medical Center – Saranac Lake, Champlain Valley Physicians Hospital, Faxton St. Luke's Healthcare, Mary Imogene Bassett Hospital, Oneida Health Hospital, Rome Memorial Hospital, Samaritan Medical Center and St. Elizabeth Medical Center.

## ✓ SOUTHERN TIER REGION

Four hospitals in the Southern Tier participated in this program in 2022, sharing \$3.5 million in quality improvement incentive payments. Participating hospitals included Arnot Ogden Medical Center, Guthrie Corning Hospital, Our Lady of Lourdes Memorial Hospital and United Health Services.

## ✓ WESTERN NEW YORK REGION

Four hospitals and health systems in the Western New York region participated in this program in 2022, sharing \$556,537 in quality improvement incentive payments. Participating hospitals included Erie County Medical Center, Kaleida Health, Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center, and UPMC Chautauqua.



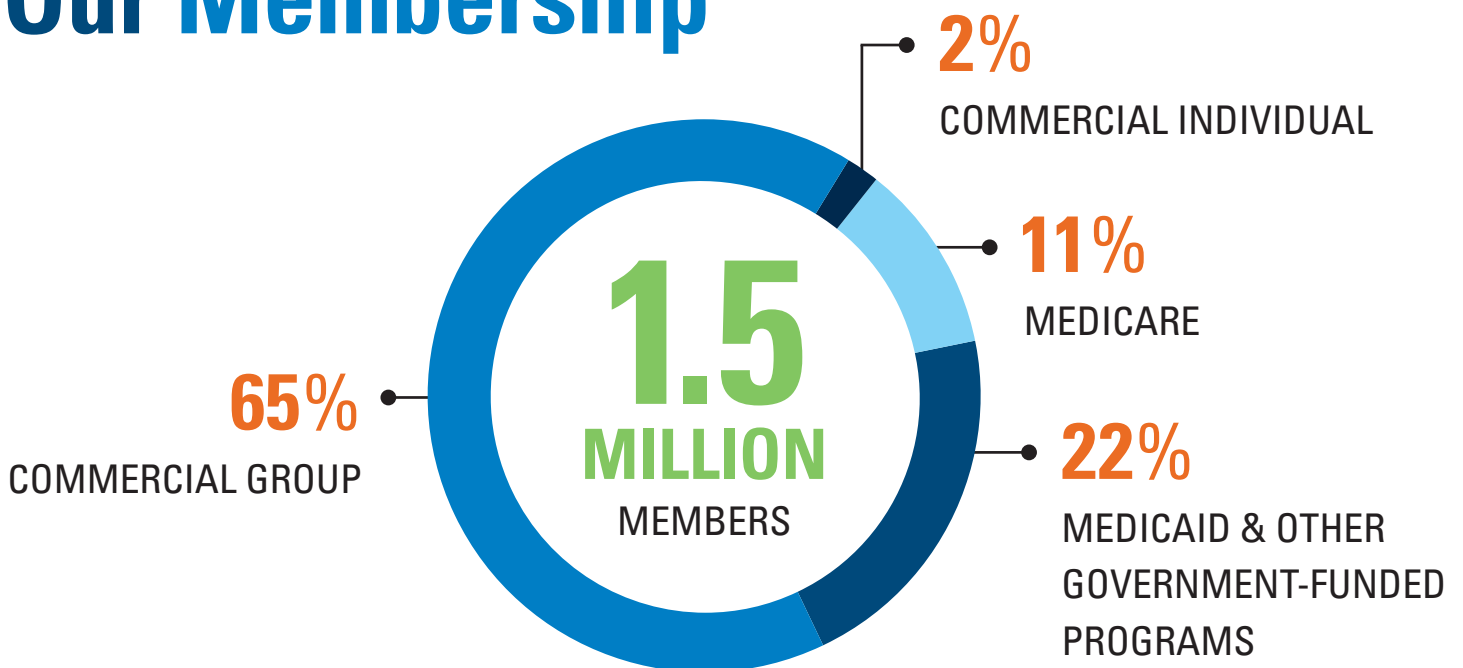
## PARTICIPATING HOSPITALS AND HEALTH CENTERS MET GOALS IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:

- **Clinical Processes of Care** – Focused on improvements in follow up after hospitalization; quality measures related to diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and surgical care; and other quality improvement measures unique to each participating hospital,
- **Patient Safety** – Centered on reductions in hospital-acquired infections, readmissions, and other adverse events or errors that affect patient care,
- **Patient Satisfaction** – Used the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems survey, which is a national, standardized, publicly reported survey of patients' perspectives of hospital care.

In addition to meeting required clinical and patient safety measures in 2022, other nationally endorsed measures and target outcomes were jointly agreed upon by each hospital and our health plan using benchmarks established by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, and others.



## Our Membership\*



\* As of December 31, 2023

# Supporting our members through Safety Net Recertification

In June of 2023, New York State began a process to ensure that residents enrolled in Safety Net health insurance (Medicaid Managed Care, Child Health Plus, & Essential Plan) remained eligible for coverage. The **Safety Net Recertification Process** was put in place in response to the end of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE). During the PHE, Safety Net members were not required to confirm their enrollment eligibility, as a result members were able to maintain continuous coverage during the pandemic.

“Continuous coverage for safety net members was an important part of the Public Health Emergency,” says Bj Adigun, Director of Safety Net Market Engagement & Community Partnerships. “For over three years, members were automatically re-enrolled in coverage to ensure they would have access to health care.”

The end of the PHE meant a return to the annual renewal process for Safety Net enrollees. For Excellus BCBS, over 329,000 Safety Net members would need to review their coverage to confirm eligibility or find alternative coverage options. “This was a significant undertaking for our organization,” says Adigun. “We had to develop a plan that could effectively support our entire Safety Net population through the 12-month recertification process.”

Over a dozen departments across Excellus BCBS worked to coordinate a rolling monthly renewal campaign. Representatives from Enrollment, Customer Care, IT/Data Solutions, and Marketing & Communications (to name a few) were all part of a workgroup that developed a comprehensive plan to support members through the process. “We really wanted to get input from across the



Our #1 priority was to ensure that every Safety Net member would have continued access to high-quality and affordable health care.



**Bj Adigun**

Director of Safety Net Market Engagement & Community Partnerships

enterprise to develop the strongest plan possible,” said Adigun. “The team has been great. We had a strong launch and made some adjustments to the plan based on the insight we gained after the first few cycles of the campaign.”

Part of the workplan included a member engagement campaign that generated over 125,000 direct outbound calls to members (as of 12/31/23). In addition, members were also engaged through direct mail, e-mail, and text messaging communications. As the recertification process heads toward completion, **over 70%** of Safety Net members have either been able to re-enroll in their existing coverage, or transition to alternative coverage. This has resulted in approximately 106,000 members that have re-enrolled in coverage (as of 12/31/23). “70% renewal is pretty impressive, especially if you consider all the coordination that needed to take place for the campaign,” says Adigun. “But even more importantly, our #1 priority was to ensure that every Safety Net member would have continued access to high-quality and affordable health care.”

# Excellus BlueCross BlueShield Pharmacy Concierge program saves \$19 million



An Excellus BlueCross BlueShield program is focusing on medication safety while saving millions of dollars in prescription drug costs. Pharmacy Concierge is available to most midsize and large employers through the health plan. In 2023, it identified and eliminated \$19 million in unnecessary or inappropriate pharmacy spending.

“Improving care is the primary goal of Pharmacy Concierge,” says Mona Chitre, PharmD, chief pharmacy officer and president of pharmacy solutions at Excellus BCBS. “Slowing the growth in drug spending without compromising care is an added benefit.”

With Pharmacy Concierge, a team of clinical pharmacists from Excellus BCBS reviews an employer group’s pharmacy claims for opportunities to improve patient care and/or reduce pharmacy spending. This includes finding unnecessary or inappropriate medications, incorrect dosing, safety concerns, and savings opportunities with approved generics or biosimilars. Generics and biosimilars are as safe and effective as their brand name counterparts but can cost less.

Last year, more than 13 million claims were reviewed for potential clinical safety and/or savings opportunities. Of those that were flagged for possible savings or clinical issues, about 7,300 were ultimately changed (converted) by the prescribing physician because of the health plan’s inquiry. The average cost savings for each converted prescription was nearly \$3,000.

## HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES:

- **Pharmacy Concierge identified a member who had been prescribed two different medications to treat their diabetes.** When used at the same time, the medications have no added benefit according to American Diabetes Association guidelines. In addition, one of the medications is associated with potential safety concerns. Outreach was made to the prescribing physician, who worked with the member to adjust the prescription therapy.
- **The program identified a member prescribed the incorrect dosage of an anti-depressant.** The physician was notified of the dosing issue. A lower cost generic alternative was also suggested. The member is now taking the correct and safer dosage, with an annual out-of-pocket savings of \$3,500.
- **A consortium of upstate New York school districts reduced pharmacy spending by more than \$1 million after participating in the program.**

“Pharmacy Concierge has saved our organization thousands of dollars in prescription management,” says Dan Ross, vice president of corporate compliance and risk management at Heritage Christian Services in Rochester, New York. “It is a great asset with minimal risk. Our employees get a knowledgeable resource that can answer their questions, and our organization sees significant savings with reduced pharmacy costs.”

According to Chitre, all medication decisions are made by the member’s provider in consultation with their patient.



## MISSION MOMENT:

### Going the extra mile to meet a members’ needs

After unsuccessfully trying to reach a 90-year-old Medicare member, **Case Manager Brooke Venuti, RN**, knew she needed to reach out for help.

The Rochester-area member was referred to Case Management after being discharged from the hospital for a heart issue.

“We call to check in and make sure the member has everything she needs. It’s hard when you can’t reach a member. I tried every avenue I could. I collaborated with our Community Connections team who successfully reached the member at her home,” says Brooke.

During the visit, the member said she was having trouble with her eyesight and difficulty managing her daily medications. She was excited to learn about Case Management and the team waited at the door until they got Brooke on the phone.

She assessed the woman’s situation and started a referral for Community Connections to drop off a pill organizer. She also referred the woman to Mom’s Meals, connected her with a behavioral health specialist and assisted the member in locating a new primary care physician.

“If it wasn’t for Community Connections going to her house and making contact with her, none of this would have happened,” says Brooke.

“It’s about going the extra mile and letting our members know we care about them. It’s rewarding to know how well we all worked together to help this member get the care and help she needed.”

## Excellus BlueCross BlueShield funding supports overdose awareness and families facing substance use disorder



Excellus BlueCross BlueShield awarded grant funding to two Central New York organizations dedicated to assisting our local communities in the fight against overdose deaths and to healing family relationships wounded by the scourge of substance use disorder.

We gave **ACR Health** a Health & Wellness Award to support the organization's Overdose Awareness and Prevention programming, and also awarded a Health & Wellness Award to the **Consortium for Children's Services** for its Nurturing Parenting Families in Substance Abuse Treatment & Recovery program.

This Health & Wellness Award funding supports ACR Health's year-round community overdose awareness education and training. Serving Onondaga, Cayuga, Herkimer, Jefferson, Lewis, Madison, Oneida, Oswego, and St. Lawrence counties, ACR Health utilizes peer educators to perform targeted outreach and equip community members with education, training, and tools, such as sterile syringe supplies and free overdose prevention kits (Naloxone), to minimize overdose risk, address barriers to access, and reduce stigma. ACR Health also performs weekly overdose prevention outreach in "hot spot" zones in both Onondaga and Oneida counties.

In addition, ACR Health's regional Overdose Awareness Day events help to educate the general public on the impact overdoses have on our communities and ways to reduce and prevent overdoses. This includes Narcan use training, education on recognizing the signs of an overdose, and partnering with organizations to provide access to local resources and services.

### THE CONSORTIUM FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES: SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT & RECOVERY

Families torn apart by substance use disorder may have the joy of witnessing a loved one's treatment and recovery tempered by enduring and unaddressed psychological damage that the past has wrought on these relationships.



Our award funding supports The Consortium for Children's Services' Nurturing Parenting Families in Substance Abuse Treatment & Recovery programming, which encompasses its Circle of Security and Active Parenting programs and focuses on the effects of substance abuse on families, parenting, and parent-child relationships. Combining experiential and didactic exercises, this programming enhances parents' self-awareness and assists them in re-establishing and strengthening their connections with their children.

As parents and children work through the 8- to 10-week program (offered in five separate sessions throughout the year), their relationship should improve as certain essential factors, specifically mutuality, authenticity, and empathy, become more vital and pervasive in the relationship. In-person and virtual options are offered to families in Onondaga, Cayuga, Cortland, Madison, Oneida and Oswego counties.



## MISSION MOMENT: How our localism makes a difference

As an active member of the Spencerport community in the Rochester area, and local senior center volunteer, Excellus BlueCross BlueShield member Richard Cotten doesn't like to sit still. However, sciatic nerve pain can slow him down.

**Helen Pleszewicz, Medicare consultant,** met Richard for the first time in their apartment complex parking lot.

"I would be out walking my dog and see Richard outside and we would just start talking. We were neighbors and we got to know each other," says Helen. "We talked about health insurance coverage, what he liked, what he didn't like, and I mentioned when it comes time to review, let's see what the plans are, and we can sit down and compare."

So that's what they did. Richard was particularly interested in his dental coverage, having paid extra for it on his previous plan. He quickly learned it was part of Excellus BCBS's Medicare benefits.

"There was no pressure. I felt so relaxed and informed. Medicare can be complicated, but Helen took the time and explained everything to me, so I was aware of my coverage, and I decided to make the change. I'm so glad I did," says Richard.

"It's personal to me. I'm working with people who are part of my community, they are like family and it's important to show people we are local.



You never know the impact you could have on someone just by having a conversation," says Helen.

Now, there's no slowing Richard down. He's joined a senior exercise class and says eating right and being around family and friends is what keeps him motivated, happy, and as healthy as he can be.

"I wish I had changed health plans earlier. I am saving money on doctor visit copays and two prescriptions that I take," says Richard. "I have much better coverage, the service I receive is awesome, and I have a friend in Helen."

## Madison County Rural Health Council receives Excellus BCBS 2023 Health Equity Innovation Award

Utica region-based **Madison County Rural Health Council (MCRHC)** received a Health Equity Innovation Award (HEIA) to support their doula program. The HEIA program provides financial support to community programs that address racial and ethnic health disparities across Excellus BCBS's upstate New York service area.

The program promotes and provides doula services to community members who qualify as low-income and may have challenges accessing prenatal, birth, and postnatal support. Funding will also be used to expand doula services into Oneida County and to have individuals trained as end-of-life doulas.

"Madison County Rural Health Council is thankful for the strong community partnerships and

opportunities provided to strengthen our Birthing Doula Program. We are fortunate the Excellus BCBS Health Equity Innovation Award has also provided an opportunity to have individuals trained as end-of-life doulas," says Madison County Rural Health Council Executive Director Christine Paul.

Doulas are non-medical professionals who are trained to provide emotional support to assist and advocate for patients and their families. In the pregnancy setting, doulas provide emotional and physical support and advice before, during, and after pregnancy and childbirth. End of Life doulas assist both the dying person and their loved ones before, during and after death. In addition to emotional and physical support, an end-of-life doula provides education about the dying process, what to expect and guidance through the grieving process.

MCRHC is one of 20 nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organizations from across Excellus BCBS's upstate New York service area including the Rochester, Central New York, Utica/North Country, and Southern Tier regions who received HEIA funding in 2023.

Organizations were invited to apply for HEIA grants to receive up to \$30,000 to help fund initiatives, programs, and research that specifically target the root causes of health inequities, with a focus on addressing structural racism. Applicants were assessed based on clear, defined goals and measurable results for reducing health disparities and improving health equity, and 20 grant recipients were selected following a comprehensive review process that included input from individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences.





## Health Equity Funding Provides the Gift of Language

In recognition of the need for Speech and Language Pathology (SLP) services in the Southern Tier community, Excellus BlueCross BlueShield awarded health equity funding to the **Binghamton University's Speech Language Hearing Clinic** to increase clinical access for high-need members of the community.

In 2020, when Rodney Gabel, a Binghamton University Speech and Language Pathologist who specializes in stuttering arrived at Binghamton University he learned that there weren't enough speech and language pathologists to meet the needs of the Southern Tier community. In order to address this need, Gabel joined the Decker College of Nursing and Health Sciences and has worked to create a division of speech and language pathology (he is founding director and a professor in the division) and is developing a master's-level program in the discipline.

To help fill the gaps in care in the community, the SLP program and clinic began to provide services to the area on a contract basis. The demand for clinic services has already been high and community collaborations with student involvement allows organizations to provide services that they couldn't provide with their existing staff.

The health equity funding that was provided by Excellus BCBS has allowed the Binghamton University Speech, Language and Hearing Clinic to expand their clinic hours and resources (located at the Health Sciences Building in Johnson City, NY). The clinic significantly increases access to speech and language therapy services in the area, while also serving as a clinical training site for undergraduate students. Future graduate students will complete some of their clinical training at the location, as well.



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