

The UNDERSTAND Health Act

Utilizing National Data, Effectively Reforming Standards and Tools to Address Negative Determinants of Health

The Problem:

As the health care sector moves toward value-based care, providers, insurers, and facilities across the health care spectrum are being incentivized to care about the whole patient – not just the singular presenting problem. This holistic approach to health care means considering Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) or environmental factors that affect health outcomes. Examples include transportation, food security, employment, housing.

While there is more awareness about the role SDoH play in health outcomes, there is not currently a standardized approach collecting this data. This lack of standardization causes disagreement around what should be considered SDoH and how to prioritize those issues.

The Solution:

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) is the handbook used by health care professionals in the United States, and much of the world, as the authoritative guide to the diagnosis of mental disorders. The DSM standardized the definitions for PTSD, autism, anxiety disorders, depression and other significant mental health disorder. In the transition from the DSM-4 to the DSM-5, “stress codes” were brought together to create Z-codes. These Z-codes are environmental factors that should be used to clearly define what SDoH are.

The Utilizing National Data, Effectively Reforming Standards and Tools, to Address Negative Determinates of Health Act, or UNDERSTAND Act, requires the federal government to standardize the definition of SDoH using the DSM’s Z-codes. Additionally, this legislation requires Medicaid and CHIP programs to collect this data and report it to the federal government. This in turn will allow the government to know what SDoH needs exist in communities to better target federal funding and interventions. Additionally, the UNDERSTAND Act would:

- Require guidance on how to reduce duplicative screenings of beneficiaries
- Support states by sharing directories of local resources
- Provide educational resources to states on screening for social need in culturally sensitive ways
- Requires a report to Congress on findings and outcomes

