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“Heroes Health” Mental Wellness App Launched by UNC School of Medicine & UNC Health

- Helps first responders and healthcare workers anywhere in US keep track of their mental health and connect to resources
- Helps healthcare and first responder organizations better support their workers
- Developed in cooperation with Google Cloud and volunteers from across Alphabet, with support from mental health nonprofit One Mind
- Funding support from The Rockefeller Foundation and Bank of America

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. – July 14, 2020 – The UNC School of Medicine (SOM) and UNC Health have launched the [Heroes Health Initiative](#) to help support the mental health of first responders and healthcare workers during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The app is available through the App Store/Google Play Store in the United States, free of charge to first responders, healthcare workers and their organizations.

For individual healthcare workers, the Heroes Health app delivers short mental health self-assessments each week, and displays symptom summary reports to help them better understand the state of their own mental health—and changes over time. The app also provides links to immediate support and mental health resources, emphasizing free and low-cost services.

For healthcare organizations that partner with the Heroes Health Initiative, the app provides a way to perform proactive worker outreach and the aggregate data necessary to identify times when/areas where more worker support is needed. Developed by the **UNC Institute for Trauma Recovery**, Google Cloud and volunteers across Alphabet, the university’s Heroes Health app and its launch was made possible by generous support from donors including **One Mind, The Rockefeller Foundation, Bank of America, Lauder Foundation**, and individuals.

How it works

For individual first responders and healthcare workers

Individual healthcare workers who choose to participate in the initiative download the free Heroes Health app to their iOS (Apple) or Android-compatible smartphone. Each week, the app notifies workers that a brief mental health symptom assessment is available, and evaluates symptoms in key domains such as sleep, stress, anxiety/worry, and sadness/depression.

Immediately after completing the survey, workers can view a summary report of their symptoms, and trends in their symptoms over time. The app also provides links to get immediate crisis support and other mental health resources, e.g. to improve sleep and stress. This resource list focuses on apps and services that are either free or offered at reduced costs to healthcare workers. The UNC website also lists [mental health resources](#) and [discounts](#) for healthcare workers on goods and services. Heroes Health receives no financial benefit or support from the goods or services listed.

For first responder and healthcare worker organizations

For organizations who partner with Heroes Health, the initiative helps the organization support their workers in several other ways. First, anonymous group-level summaries and trends in the mental health of workers in the organization, for different types of workers and units, are shared with unit and organizational leaders each week, to help them identify times/organizational areas that would benefit from additional support.

In addition, worker feedback on organizational communication and support to workers are provided to leadership each week, providing a valuable opportunity for workers to be heard during very stressful times. Finally, workers have the option to confidentially share their individual mental health summaries with an organizational mental health worker. This provides the organizational mental health worker with the opportunity to contact workers having symptoms to offer thanks and support, a conversation, or help setting up an appointment with a mental health professional. For workers in organizations partnering with Heroes Health, the contact number for this mental health support worker is also listed in the app, so that they can contact them for confidential support and resources.

How it started

Dr. McLean and UNC School of Medicine

The Heroes Health Initiative was founded by UNC School of Medicine physician **Dr. Samuel McLean**, Research Vice-Chair in the Department of Anesthesiology and an attending physician in the Department of Emergency Medicine. As a practicing emergency physician and COVID-19 unit worker, and COVID-19 survivor who contracted COVID-19 and infected two of his family members, Dr. McLean understands firsthand the great challenges COVID workers face.

“First responders and healthcare workers are facing a lot of challenges right now,” Dr. McLean said. “There is the personal risk of severe illness or death. Much worse, there is the anxiety and fear of infecting loved

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ones. This an even greater challenge for first responders and healthcare workers who live with someone particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. It's important to give first responders and healthcare workers a simple, quick way to regularly check in on their mental health and immediately find resources. It is also important to provide organizations with tools that help empower them to care for each other."

Academic collaborators

From his work as an NIH-funded researcher, Dr. McLean had experience performing smartphone-based mental health assessments from thousands of trauma survivors. He contacted a close collaborator, **Ron Kessler**, PhD, McNeil Family Professor at Harvard Medical School, and the two of them designed a brief smartphone-based assessment, using well-validated questionnaires, to assess key domains affecting COVID-19 workers, including sleep, stress, anxiety/worry, and sadness and depressive symptoms. McLean also enlisted a team of other collaborators who worked to develop the project, including:

- **Kerry Ressler**, MD, PhD, James and Patricia Poitras Chair in Psychiatry at Harvard University
- **Christopher Jones**, MD, a frontline emergency physician and head of clinical research at Cooper University Health
- **Francesca Beaudoin**, MD, PhD, Associate Professor of Emergency Medicine at Brown University
- **Karestan Koenen**, PhD, Professor of Psychiatric Epidemiology at the Harvard University School of Public Health
- **Samantha Meltzer-Brody**, MD, Meymandi Distinguished Professor and Chair of Psychiatry at the University of North Carolina.

Support from Google, One Mind, The Rockefeller Foundation, and Bank of America

Dr. McLean needed a technology partner to help build the app for the initiative. Alphabet was a natural choice since Dr. McLean's lab was already using **Google Cloud**. Volunteers from Google and **X** (Alphabet's "moonshot factory") donated their time to develop the app, and Google Cloud is providing free credits from their academic research program. The Heroes Health app is built on Google Cloud's implementation of the FDA's open-source **MyStudies** platform, allowing it to scale based on demand.

Technical support was also provided by the **Boston Technology Corporation**. The app, which is operated by UNC School of Medicine, is HIPAA compliant and takes advantage of Google Cloud's robust security and privacy protections to protect user data.

"Heroes Health is the first initiative to focus on the mental health of COVID-19 healthcare workers, who are under extreme pressure in this pandemic. Our volunteers were honored to be able to support such a worthwhile and important initiative," says **Obi Felten**, head of getting moonshots ready for contacts with the real world at **X**.

National mental health and brain health research nonprofit **One Mind** has supported Dr. McLean's ongoing trauma research work, including the AURORA study. One Mind has been helping to raise financial support

for the Heroes Health Initiative. “Healthcare workers are working long hours in highly contagious environments, often without adequate safety equipment, and are expected to make life-saving decisions while deprioritizing their own health and the health of their families,” said One Mind President **Brandon Staglin**. “These demands place an enormous amount of stress on the physical and mental health of COVID-19 healthcare workers. Heroes Health will provide mental health support for our front-line caregivers and is an important demonstration of how private sector innovation is essential in our response to the pandemic.”

The **Rockefeller Foundation** has also been a key supporter. “Healthcare workers show up every day to battle COVID-19 and keep us all safe. It’s grueling work,” said **Zia Khan** Senior Vice President, Innovation, The Rockefeller Foundation. “The Rockefeller Foundation, having supported public health innovations for over 100 years, is proud to join with Google and One Mind to support the UNC School of Medicine as they launch Heroes Health to extend mental health support to these frontline workers.”

“As a community and country it is important to come together to support those on the frontline taking care of our citizens with coronavirus”, said **Bank of America** North Carolina Market President **Charles Bowman**. “It was an easy decision to partner with The Rockefeller Foundation to fund an application of this type that will be valuable now and in the future to ensure healthcare workers can self-monitor and have access to the support and services they need and deserve.”

Public support for Heroes Health App

The public can contribute to the ongoing support and national availability for *Heroes Health* by donating via this [fundraising page](#).

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