



**bcw**

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# MOVING PEOPLE TO MOVE POLICY

A Quarterly Look at Health Policy from BCW

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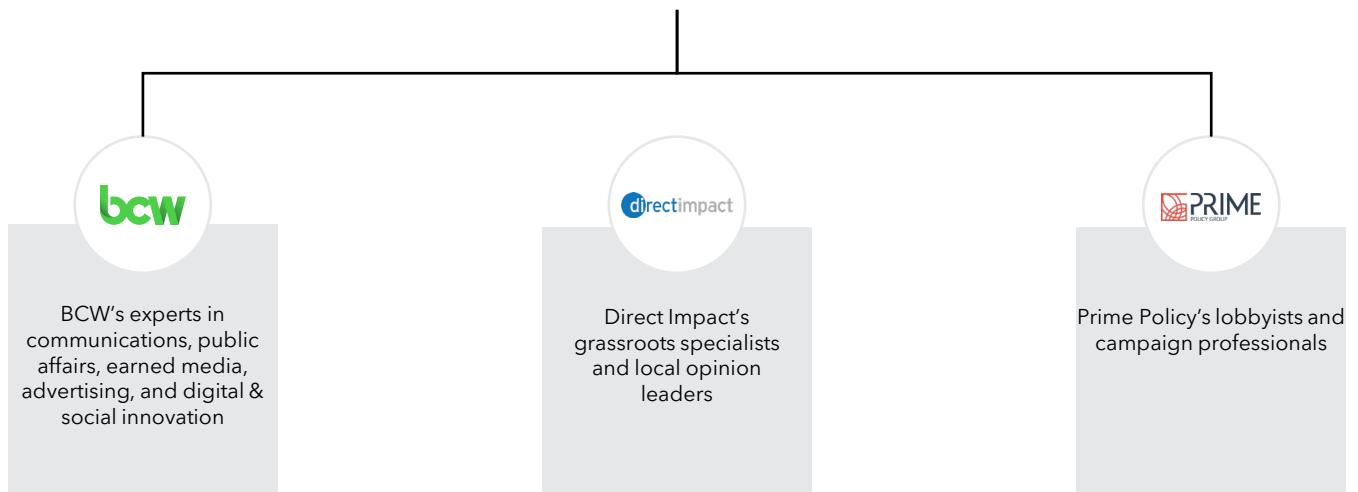
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## A Quarterly Look at Health Policy from BCW

When BCW Global launched Moving People to Move Policy in October 2021, we described the health policy environment as “unsettled,” and that trying to make sense of it meant “jumping into the deepest, murkiest water with both feet.” Three months later, not much has changed – the environment is still unsettled and the drivers causing disruption remain dynamic. That is why BCW’s health policy experts regularly meet to share insights and discuss changing policy and what it means for the organizations we support. Joining the group are:

### bcw group



## SECTION 01

# The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

In the last edition of *Moving People to Move Policy*, we identified COVID-19 and budget reconciliation and its associated changes to Medicare, drug pricing, Obamacare access, childcare, family leave and climate change as the key drivers in health policy. At the time, COVID infections were starting to fall, and daily deaths were hovering around 1,800 per day.

As of January 24, 2022, driven by the Omicron variant, holiday travel and gatherings, the U.S. is now averaging nearly 668,000 new COVID cases per day – which is a 10 percent decrease over the past 14 days. Fortunately, Omicron appears to be less virulent than previous variants, but as of January 24<sup>th</sup> approximately 2,000 people are dying each day, a 25 percent increase over the last two weeks—an unacceptable number given the availability of vaccines that will reduce the severity of illness.

In October, we identified budget reconciliation as the prime driver of policy in D.C. Now known as the Build Back Better Act (BBB), this \$2.2 trillion package (down from \$3.5 trillion) passed the House of Representatives in mid-November but ran into a roadblock from Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

While everyone waited for signs of a breakthrough in negotiations, by the third week of the month it became clear a deal could not be reached. In a White House press conference on January 20<sup>th</sup>, President Biden acknowledged BBB was not going to pass in its current form and would need to be broken up and altered.

In his press conference President Biden pointed to the possibility that Democrats could focus on separate bills for climate change, universal pre-kindergarten and prescription drug prices. In a sign of potential agreement, the Washington Post notes Sen. Manchin separately identifying the need to, “take care of the pharmaceuticals – you’re gouging the people with high prices. We can fix that.”

With Congressional elections and 36 gubernatorial elections later this year, elected officials are feeling the pressure to deliver on previous election promises before they face voters. What are the healthcare issues rising to the top of the national agenda, appearing in media, and being discussed in state legislatures? On the next several pages we offer insights to help frame how the national health policy conversation is being influenced.

## Top 25 Most Read Newspapers in the U.S.

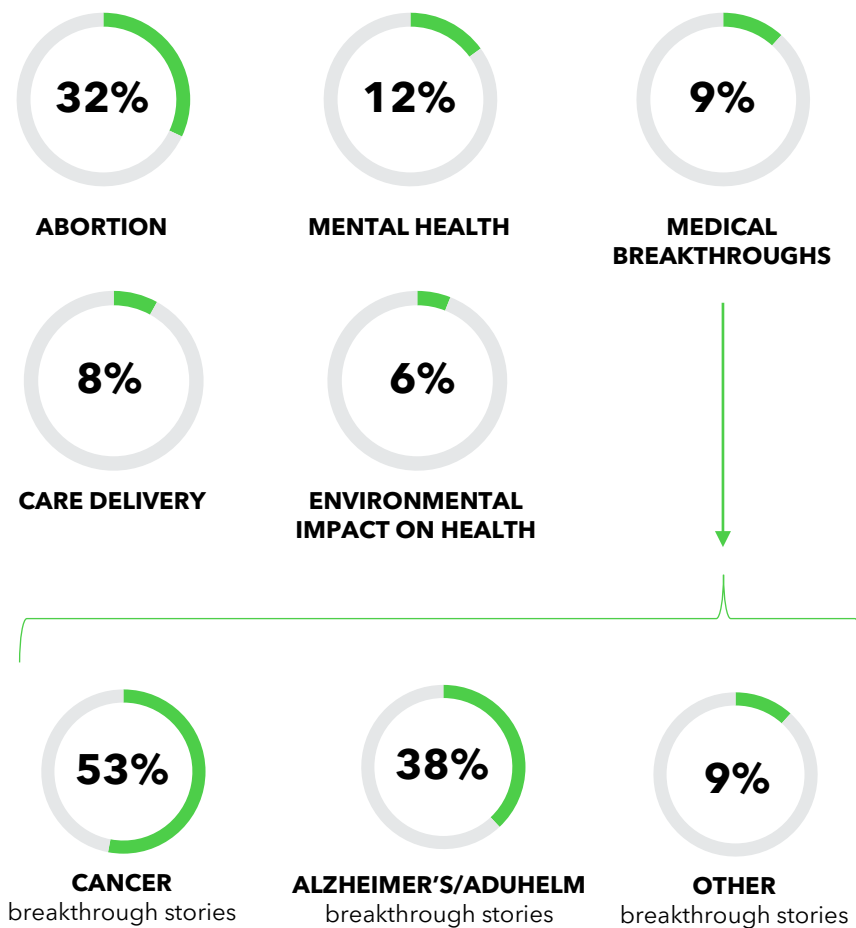
- The Wall Street Journal
- The New York Times
- USA Today
- The Washington Post
- Los Angeles Times
- New York Post
- Tampa Bay Times
- Chicago Tribune
- Newsday (Long Island)
- Star Tribune (Minneapolis)
- The Seattle Times
- Honolulu Star-Advertiser
- Arizona Republic
- Houston Chronicle
- The Boston Globe
- The Philadelphia Inquirer
- The Dallas Morning News
- San Francisco Chronicle
- Daily News (New York)
- The Buffalo News
- The Denver Post
- Chicago Sun-Times
- Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
- St Louis Post-Dispatch
- The Star-Ledger (New Jersey)

<https://pressgazette.co.uk/biggest-us-newspapers-by-circulation/>

# Media Review

In a repeat from 2020, COVID-19 was also 2021’s most widely reported health story. More specifically a review of stories using the Factiva as the source database finds vaccines, boosters and the rise of variants as the single most dominant category of health stories. But if we go beyond COVID-19 and do a deeper dive on the healthcare topics that made front-page stories in the nation’s 25 most widely read newspapers, we see the topics that continue to engage reporters and how they intersect with policy priorities.

After eliminating COVID-19 related stories from our search terms, we found 390 front-page stories about healthcare in the nation’s leading 25 newspapers. In 2021, the topics most covered by health reporters at these outlets based on percentage of all front-page stories were:



## Why is this Important?

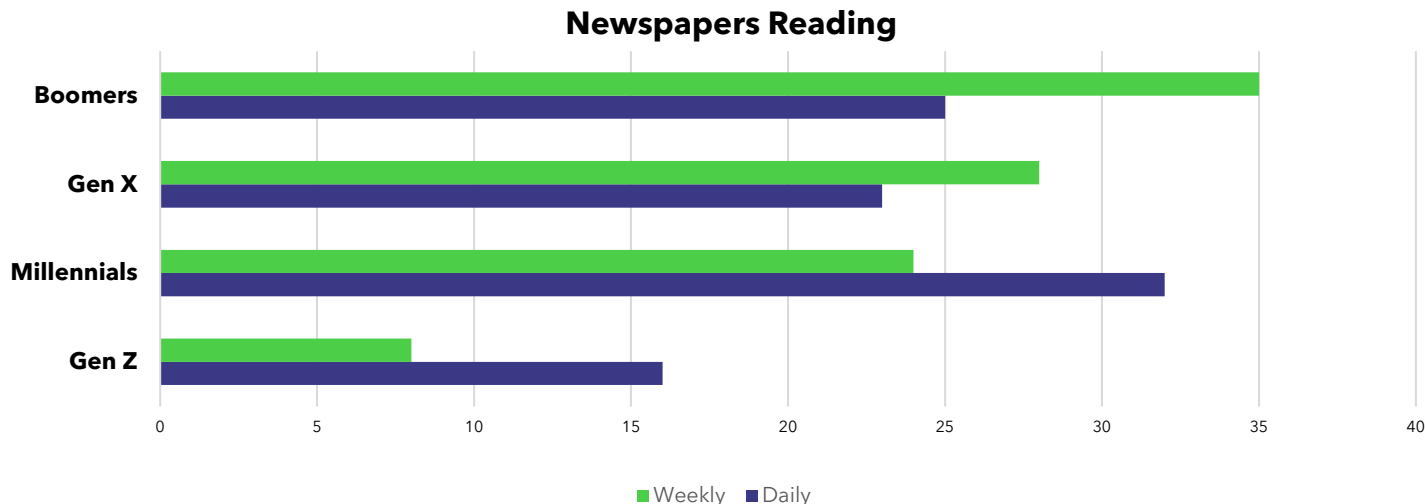
Many of these stories, such as those on abortion are in response to new legislative/judicial actions, like the Texas abortion law and subsequent judicial reviews. However, the stories on topics like mental illness, care delivery and the environment’s impact health point to larger societal health issues being reported in different regions – suggesting an echo chamber effect that reflects growing interest in state or national action.

The challenge for stakeholders concerned about these issues is connecting the different experiences into a unified national effort to enact policy change. That is where an effective advocacy strategy can help consolidate wide-ranging issues within a cohesive, yet diverse, message conveyed by stakeholders within their respective communities. Ultimately, this contributes to the groundswell of support for policy change and motivates elected leaders to take action.

# Do Newspaper Stories Matter?

In our previous edition of Moving People to Move Policy, we provided an overview of how media consumption is changing and why BCW's Earned-Plus approach of combining earned media plus social engagement is important. Given that, it's fair to ask, do front-page stories matter anymore?

It's clear the importance of daily newspapers as gatekeepers of news has diminished, but between newspapers and newspapers' websites, consumption remains strong considering the number of information sources available. According to a report published in late September 2021 by [Attest](#), consumption of newspapers in physical form and their websites/apps remains strong:



In case you need a refresher on the age ranges:

**Gen Z**  
18-24

**Millennial:**  
25-40

**Gen X**  
41-56

**Boomers:**  
57-65

In today's fractured media environment, the overall number of people who consume information from traditional sources like papers and their websites is strong and validates the importance of this medium.

However, there is a worrying subtext to the percentage of people accessing news. The same report finds more than two-thirds (67%) of consumers say they do not have any paid content subscriptions for news media. Of those who do subscribe, digital subscriptions (20%) are slightly more popular than print (18%) subscriptions. Because most outlets only allow readers to view a small number of articles per month before a paywall limits access, the lack of paid content subscriptions will limit readership of earned media successes.

## Key Takeaways:

- Newspaper stories still drive follow-on media stories in broadcast outlets as well as engagement on social platforms, blogs and community forums.
- Elected officials monitor local media and stories that include their names or an issue in their district/state that requires a federal policy solution.
  - Coverage in a local outlet, especially front-page stories, will get a policymaker's attention and provide a better base to build an engagement strategy.
- Working around paywalls to make sure readers get the information contained within the article, if not the article itself, is an increasingly critical component of any public affairs effort.

## SECTION 02

# Government Relations

It's a new year and the start of the second session of the 117th Congress, but not much has changed on Capitol Hill. The Democrats still haven't resolved long-lasting disagreements from last year over the Build Back Better Act (BBB). The longstanding conflicts between moderates and progressives remain. With a 50-50 split in the Senate, support from Senators Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) is key for passage.

To change the narrative, the Senate has turned to voting rights and election reform legislation, which dominated the debate in Washington during mid-January. While the underlying voting rights legislation received a majority of support in the Senate, the effort to change the Senate rules to pass the voting rights bill on a simple majority vote failed with Senators Manchin and Sinema voting alongside the Republicans to stop the rule change.

This comes in the face of the strong winds of this election year. Historically, the party that holds the White House faces blowback during midterm elections; the GOP believes this trend, combined with economic conditions, redistricting and strong fundraising will give it the advantage in the coming elections.

Contention surrounding BBB Act continues, as President Biden stated at a press conference his interest in breaking up the legislation and passing it in "chunks," meaning some portions now and some later in the year. Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) told reporters after President Biden's press conference that she hopes the legislation would be "one major bill going forward, maybe more limited, but still significant." A version of the bill passed the House, but the legislation stalled in the Senate after Sen. Manchin announced his opposition in late December. It is expected there will be a push for Congress to find common ground on some elements of the BBB before the President delivers his State of the Union address on March 1st.

The surge in COVID cases resulting from the Omicron variant led to a 90-day extension of the Public Health Emergency Declaration on January 14, 2022. The public health emergency was originally issued in January 2020 by Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Xavier Becerra. The extension allowed the so called "Telehealth Cliff" to be temporarily reprieved, giving healthcare providers another 90 days of telehealth expansion. While welcomed by providers, the short-term extension does not provide the long-term certainty the industry was hoping for. The telehealth community has set its sights on the February 18 omnibus spending package as a vehicle to obtain longer term relief. Specifically, the groups are working with Congress for a one- or two-year extension of the current waivers.

According to industry sources, the score for permanent relief is \$75 billion over 10 years, making temporary extensions more palatable for Congress. The CONNECT Act remains the main telehealth bill likely to move should permanent relief gain traction. The CONNECT Act gives the HHS Secretary the authority to waive all telehealth restrictions and includes guard rails on fraud, waste and abuse. This is a safe approach favored by Congress.



## Government Relations

There is also the possibility an additional relief package for COVID will be approved by Congress. Senators Roger Wicker (R-MS) and Ben Cardin (D-MD) are working on a relief package for restaurant owners that could grow into a much broader package that includes healthcare workers. The expectation is that this relief package will be added to the omnibus appropriations act that is currently being worked on. The existing continuing resolution expires on February 18th.

As noted above, driven by the front-page stories on mental health in top outlets, there is an increased attention to mental health and wellness in America. Senate Finance Committee Chairman, Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Ranking Member, Senator Mike Crapo (R-ID), issued a request for information at the end of December on addressing the mental healthcare crisis facing the country. The two senators are seeking input on ways to address the barriers to mental healthcare in our country. It is not yet clear how quickly the two can develop bipartisan legislation on mental healthcare that can move through the Senate as stand-alone legislation.

If you are interested in receiving health policy insights in your inbox each Friday, sign up [HERE](#) for Prime Policy Group's weekly Healthcare Today newsletter.



# State Insights

In the October 2021 edition of *Moving People to Move Policy*, we cited COVID-19 as the primary driver behind health policy initiatives across the states, particularly in relation to mask and vaccine mandates. According to the **National Conference of State Legislatures**, there were **more than 400 vaccine-related bills introduced by legislators in 2021**, most of them pertaining to COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

As of this writing, the Supreme Court just announced its decision to block the federal vaccine mandate on private employers while upholding the vaccine mandate imposed on workers at federally funded healthcare facilities. Look for further action to be taken by state legislatures this year on this issue following the Court's decision.

Until the Court reached its decision, 25 states had enacted different vaccine and testing mandates for employers of various categories covering at least 12 million people, according to **The New York Times**, including:

- CA, CO, CT, DC, DE, HI, IL, KY, MA, MD, ME, MN, MS, NC, NM, NJ, NV, NY, OR, PA, RI, VA, VT, WA, and WI.
- Additionally, states such as California, Massachusetts, New Mexico and New York recently announced COVID-19 booster shot mandates for healthcare workers.
- **Axios** predicts the issue of COVID-19 vaccine mandates for schools will also dominate state legislative agendas this year (California, Louisiana, Illinois and the District of Columbia have all imposed K-12 student vaccine mandates thus far). (See more on this below under "Other Topics We're Watching").

Meanwhile, 13 states have implemented different bans *against* vaccine mandates, including:

- AZ, AR, FL, GA, ID, IN, KS, MT, NH, ND, TN, TX and UT.
- *Note: Some bans were specific only to state entities, others specific to private AND public employers.*



# State Insights

Another top priority for legislators and governors in the remaining months of this session cycle is addressing the nationwide labor shortage among healthcare workers that has reached “crisis levels.”

In late 2021, U.S. News & World Report [hosted a webinar](#) with healthcare leaders who sounded the alarm over the serious threat that burnout poses to the resiliency of hospitals and other healthcare systems. According to Dr. Victor Dzau, president of the National Academy of Medicine, four out of five healthcare workers who remain on staff indicated the staffing shortages have “affected their ability to work safely and to satisfy patient needs.”

Dr. Ernest Grant, president of the American Nurses Association, has asked U.S. Health & Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra to declare the current nursing shortage a “national crisis,” citing that the U.S. will need an additional 1.2 million nurses by next year to meet demand and replace those planning to leave the profession (e.g., retirement).

Legislatures could address the labor shortage in healthcare through incentives and reforms within their respective state budgets or as part of broader healthcare reform proposals.

As noted by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), state budgets are in the “best shape” they’ve been in in decades. This is primarily attributed to the \$5.2 trillion in federal stimulus passed by Congress over the duration of the pandemic.

With a surplus of at least \$45 billion, California Governor Gavin Newsom recently unveiled his [proposed budget](#) that includes expansion of healthcare access to all Californians. The governor’s spending plan also calls for earmarking \$2.7 billion over the next 18 months to increase testing, vaccination campaigns and strengthen support for hospitals and healthcare workers.

- At the same time, a group of Democratic lawmakers in the legislature are working to [completely restructure the state’s healthcare system](#) to create a single-payer system.

Connecticut recently appropriated \$7 million to its Department of Public Health for loan repayment for community health workers while Vermont expanded the Practical Nurse Program throughout its State Colleges System.

Illinois directed over \$200 million toward the Children’s Hospital of Chicago, safety net hospitals, general hospitals and specialized mental health rehabilitation facilities.



## SECTION 03

# Other Topics We're Watching

Each issue of *Moving People to Move Policy* includes a brief description of other topics our team is watching. When appropriate, we will include updates on the issues we included in the prior quarter.

**VACCINE MANDATES:** We are closely watching to see if anti-COVID vaccine sentiment expands to a larger anti-vax movement that targets the long-standing mandates requiring children to receive vaccinations in order to attend public school. The unlikely bedfellows in this are traditional ultra-liberals who questioned the safety of childhood vaccinations and the new right-of-center anti-vaxxers emerging in response to COVID-19 vaccines. For some states, this could influence legislation and ignite a broader debate or discussion around childhood vaccinations series students are expected to receive to attend school - adding COVID-19 to a list that has traditionally included measles, polio and chicken pox.

**MENTAL HEALTH:** As noted above, Sen. Ron Wyden, Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and Sen. Mike Crapo, Ranking Member, previously notified other committee members of their intent to begin policymaking efforts to address barriers to mental healthcare.

**LONG TERM CARE:** Senator Wyden, joined by the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Aging, Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) and four other Democratic senators introduced legislation in August to address nursing home staffing and care quality. We anticipate LTC will be an area of intense scrutiny as we emerge from the pandemic. For more, please see [this](#) recent piece from BCW.

**FALL 2021 TOPICS:** Several of the topics we noted in our Fall update continue to be well positioned for action:

**DRUG PRICING:** Given supportive statements from President Biden and Sen. Manchin on needing to address pharmaceutical costs, we still see this as an area where policymakers will want to declare victory before the mid-term elections. In addition, insulin was included in BBB with specific caps on co-pays of \$35 per month. Because 19 Republican senators previously supported legislation designed to help patients with diabetes, we still anticipate movement on this if the larger drug pricing effort fails.

**MEDICARE SEQUESTRATION:** Congress addressed Medicare cuts temporarily, but providers are still seeking a permanent fix.

**SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH/HEALTH EQUITY:** We're watching to see if SDOH/health equity - topics of interests driven in part by COVID-19's disproportionate impact in traditionally underserved communities get addressed in state legislatures and/or if the new approach to health policy after BBB provides opportunities to address SDOH and health equity. Admittedly, a harder lift, but these are topics of importance and interest to key Democratic voters.



## Conclusion

Thank you for reading *Moving People to Move Policy's* 2022 First Quarter Snapshot. Our next issue will be released early in Q2. If you'd like to learn more about our healthcare public affairs expertise, please contact:



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