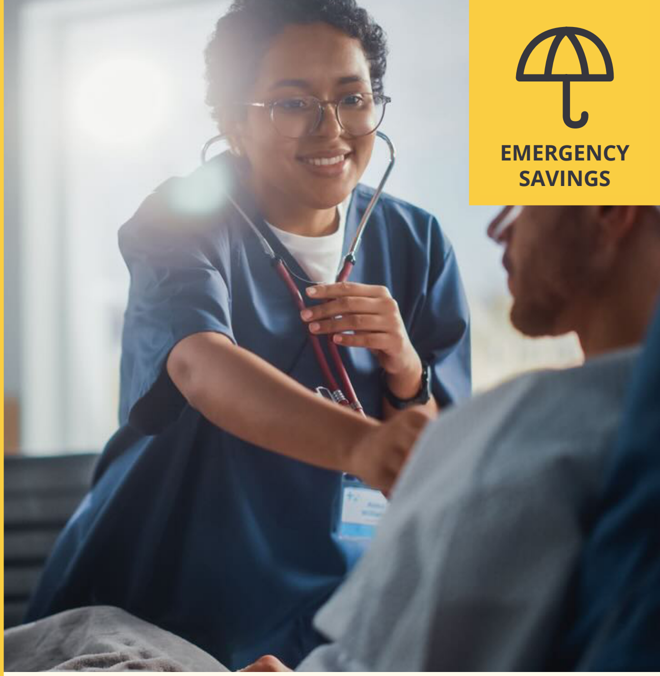
Driving Impact:

How a Large Healthcare Employer Created Emergency Savings and Retirement Outcomes at Scale

NOVEMBER 2025



EMERGENCY SAVINGS

This case study examines how a large healthcare employer, in partnership with Commonwealth as part of BlackRock's Emergency Savings Initiative (ESI), achieved record-setting engagement with a workplace emergency savings program contributing to positive retirement plan engagement.

Executive Summary

In 2023, a large healthcare employer—with research and advisory support from Commonwealth as part of BlackRock's Emergency Savings Initiative (ESI)—launched an ambitious emergency savings program. Within two months, nearly 70% of its over 50,000 employees enrolled, marking a record milestone among large national healthcare employers.

A seamless enrollment process, meaningful incentives, and targeted communications fostered unprecedented engagement, particularly among employees earning low-to-moderate (LMI) incomes. After one year, enrollment remained high, as the program continued to help employees build financial resilience, demonstrating a behavioral difference towards retirement savings for those enrolled from those not enrolled in the program. The partnership's success provides valuable insights for other employers and the broader benefits ecosystem.

Program at a Glance

LAUNCH:
August 2023

PROVIDER:
SecureSave

ELIGIBLE EMPLOYEES:
Over 50,000

INCENTIVE STRUCTURE:
$100 sign-up bonus, $20 per-paycheck employer match

SUPPORT:
Commonwealth and BlackRock's Emergency Savings Initiative

QUICK STAT:
Generated **73% enrollment** after 1 year.

Sustained Engagement:

One Year of Impact and Inclusion

Intentional program design, robust incentives, and targeted communications drove high and sustained engagement across a diverse workforce, while highlighting opportunities for further inclusion.

ENROLLMENT AFTER ONE YEAR
73%
of eligible employees enrolled

LMI EMPLOYEE ENROLLMENT
73%
those enrolled earning $75,000 or less annually

EMPLOYEE CONTRIBUTIONS
$28M
dollars

ACCOUNT RETENTION
98%
account retention rate

NEW HIRE ENROLLMENT
55%
of new hires enrolled within an average of 19 days

The employer partnered with Commonwealth to support the design of an emergency savings program prioritizing accessibility and participation, especially for low-to-moderate income (LMI) earning employees, defined here as those earning $75,000 or less annually. Informed by research-based best practices, the program's structure was designed to ensure robust engagement and equitable access.

This structure included an incentive system carefully calibrated to drive both initial and ongoing engagement for those most likely to experience financial shocks. The program also featured a $100 sign-up bonus and $20 per-paycheck employer match (up to $520 per year), with a focus on maximizing LMI participation. The $20 match was calculated to be less than 2% of the net pay of the lowest starting salary. This strategy successfully incentivized employees to keep saving, with only 0.2% of accounts closed after the first month.

Twelve months after launch, the program boasted a 73% enrollment rate, with equally strong 73% participation among LMI employees. The streamlined, payroll-integrated sign-up process removed barriers and enabled rapid uptake. New hires responded enthusiastically, with 55% enrolling within an average of 19 days from their start date, demonstrating the value of integrating emergency savings into onboarding. Overall participation was strong across gender, race/ethnicity and age demographics. However, younger employees and those earning less than $50,000 were less likely to enroll, highlighting future opportunities for targeted outreach.

You can learn more about the successful launch of the emergency savings benefit and the features contributing to successful engagement in Commonwealth's Catalyzing Financial Resilience case study.

Over the first year, employees contributed $28 million to their emergency savings accounts; including employer incentives, total balances surpassed $51 million. Balances grew steadily over time, reflecting consistent saving behaviors: participants saved $29 per paycheck on average (more than the match amount), and LMI savers' median deposit was $20 (the minimum to receive the match). After the initial sign-up surge, employee contributions made up more than half of monthly deposits, outpacing employer contributions. This trend indicates that employees calibrate recurring contributions to capture the match and steadily build balances, helping them prepare for income shocks and avoid financial shortfalls.

For employees, the program provides a reliable safety net, reducing financial stress and improving their ability to manage emergencies. For the employer, these outcomes translate into a workforce better equipped to handle financial shocks, supporting retention, productivity, and overall well-being.

Synergy: Emergency & Retirement Savings

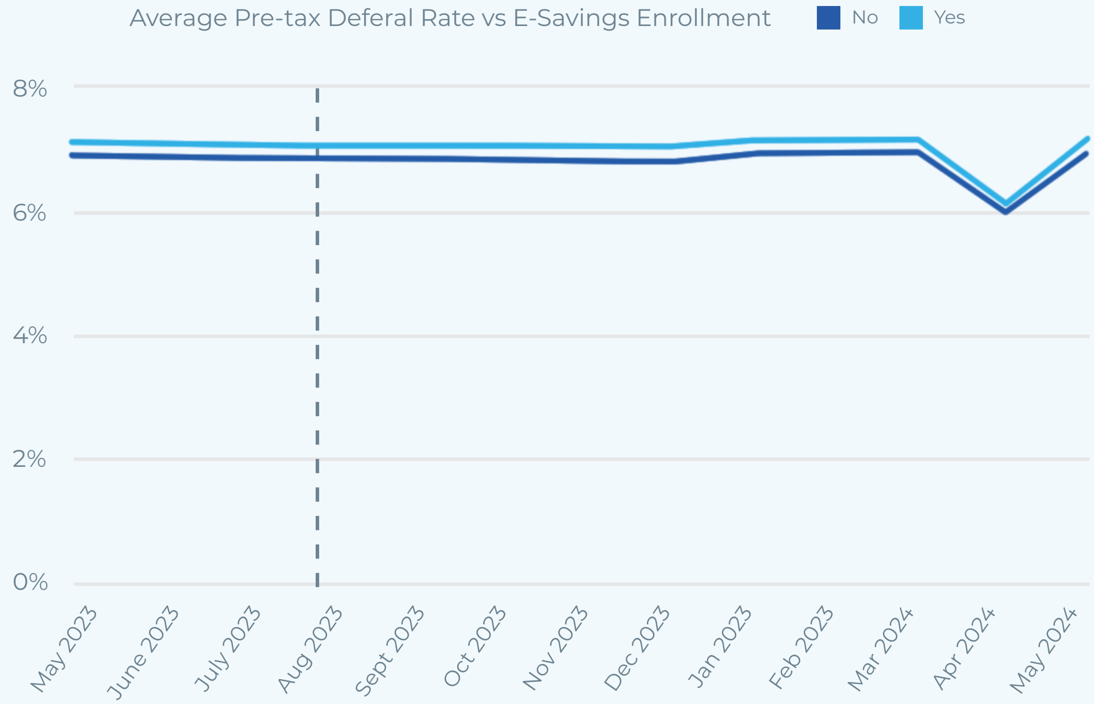
The emergency savings program was introduced in a workplace that implemented retirement plan auto-enrollment, resulting in nearly universal participation in retirement benefits. This context provided a unique opportunity for the ESI to observe how emergency savings and retirement programs interact when both experience high engagement.

Emergency savings users contributed to their retirement accounts at a significantly higher rate—13 percentage points higher—than those who did not participate in the program. They also maintained larger retirement account balances after the launch of the savings program. These positive trends held across income levels and demographic groups, with LMI savers showing particularly robust results. Rather than cannibalizing retirement contributions, the data indicates that participation in emergency savings complemented and reinforced positive retirement savings behaviors.

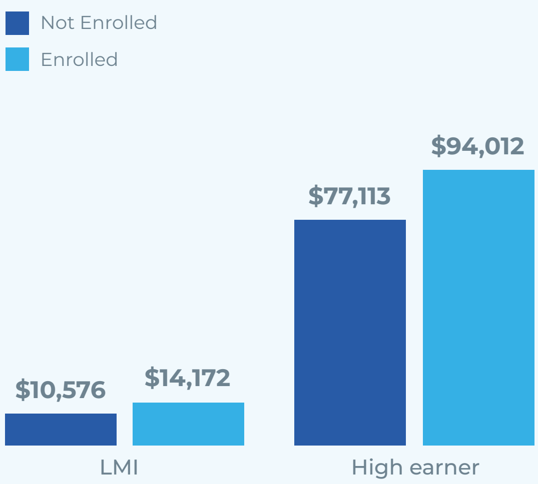
Emergency savers experienced lower rates and amounts of loans and withdrawals from their retirement accounts, suggesting that having a dedicated emergency fund could help preserve long-term retirement savings. This protective effect was especially notable among LMI employees, who are more prone to larger retirement withdrawals than higher-income peers. Overall, these results demonstrate that integrating emergency savings within a majority auto-enrollment environment can help employees build both immediate financial resilience and long-term security.

Emergency Savings Complements Retirement

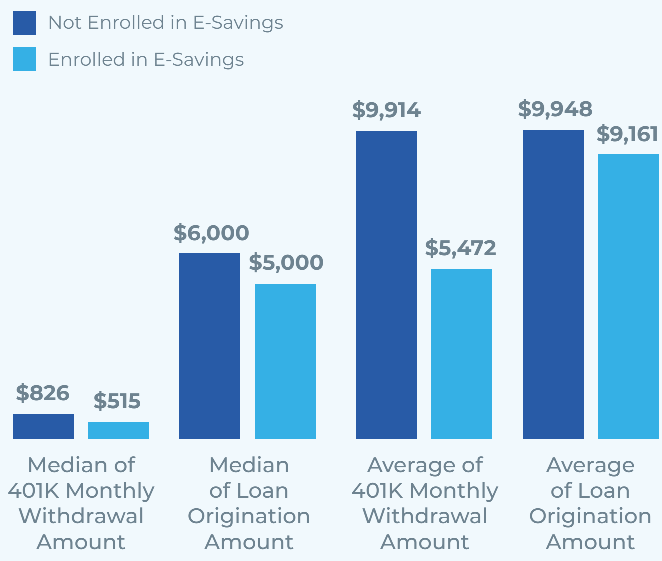
Retirement deferral rates: Emergency savers +0.22 percentage points higher.



Median retirement account balances: Higher among emergency savers.



Retirement leakage: Lower median and average loans and withdrawals among emergency savers.



Emergency savings reinforces retirement—higher deferrals and balances, lower leakage.[1]

1. Found among majority of retirement plans offered by the employer.

Opportunities for Enhancement

Despite high overall engagement, some demographic groups—particularly younger employees (age: 18-29) and those earning less than $50,000—were less likely to participate. Additionally, the absence of high-liquidity withdrawal mechanisms, such as a debit card, may have limited the program's appeal for employees seeking immediate access to funds.

Future enhancements could include targeted outreach to under-enrolled segments, such as younger or lower-income employees and those without regular digital access. Open enrollment periods, when employees are already considering their benefits options, could enhance participation among those who typically rollover their selections from year to year. Introducing more flexible withdrawal options could also accommodate a wider variety of saving behaviors and increase the program's usefulness for employees dealing with various financial challenges.

In addition, integrating new policy opportunities—such as SECURE 2.0's $1,000 emergency withdrawal provision—could further strengthen the program's impact and scalability, close the enrollment gap from 70% to 100%, and put more liquid funds into the hands of employees, particularly those earning LMI.

A Policy Pathway for Scalable Financial Wellness

The program's success highlights the potential for policy innovation, including auto-enrollment, to further expand access and impact for emergency savings benefits.

While this case study demonstrates that a thoughtfully designed, frictionless opt-in emergency savings program can achieve exceptional participation, it also highlights the substantial effort and resources required to reach these results and the need for auto-enrollment parity for out-of-plan emergency savings. Even without auto-enrollment for emergency savings, the program succeeded by combining seamless payroll integration, guaranteed incentives, and multi-channel outreach in a workforce already highly engaged in retirement saving.

Current regulations, however, do not permit auto-enrollment for out-of-plan emergency savings programs, which limits employers to opt-in or active choice models. Over the last 10 years, recent research reveals that plans with voluntary enrollment had 56%-66% participation rates, whereas plans with automatic enrollment had 91%-94% participation rates. Adopting auto-enrollment for emergency savings—similar to retirement plans—could facilitate broader participation more efficiently and equitably while reducing reliance on financial incentives and extensive communications.

Policymakers considering changes to permit out-of-plan auto-enrollment for emergency savings should be aware of these factors:

- While high participation can be achieved with an optimized opt-in system, auto-enrollment can lower barriers to access.
- Auto-enrollment can reach underserved groups and help more employees build financial resilience, while reducing administrative burdens.

Allowing out-of-plan auto-enrollment would make emergency savings the default, scaling equitable access and resilience while reducing employer burden and reliance on incentives.

A Model for the Industry:

Key Takeaways for Employers

This experience offers actionable lessons for employers and industry leaders seeking to enhance workforce financial security through emergency savings programs.

The healthcare company's emergency savings program delivered on its objectives in supporting employee financial wellness, driving high participation among LMI and marginalized groups, and complementing retirement savings.

This program's success offers a scalable model employers can adopt to enhance employee financial security. Key takeaways include:

Quick, low-friction sign-up, meaningful incentives, and persistent communications drive high participation.

The combination of a streamlined, payroll-integrated process, $100 sign-up bonus and $20 per-paycheck match, and multi-channel outreach proved especially effective in this environment.

Simple, attainable incentives sustain engagement.

The incentive structure encouraged both initial enrollment and ongoing contributions, with 98% account retention and only 0.2% of accounts closed after the first month.

Consistent, multi-channel communication is essential.

Employees cited multiple reminders and varied outreach—including onboarding—as important factors in their decision to enroll and stay engaged.

Emergency savings and retirement can reinforce each other.

Employees participating in emergency savings demonstrated higher retirement deferral rates and balances and experienced less plan leakage, indicating these benefits can be complementary.

Targeted outreach may be needed for specific groups.

Participation was lower among younger employees, those earning less than $50,000, and some racial/ethnic minorities, suggesting the value of customized strategies to ensure broad, equitable impact.

In a workplace where employees already actively save for retirement through auto-enrollment, this case study shows that a well-designed, frictionless emergency savings program can encourage broad participation, enhance financial resilience, and provide measurable benefits for employees and employers at scale.

Acknowledgements

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commonwealth

Commonwealth is a national nonprofit building financial security and opportunity for people earning low-to-moderate income through innovation and partnerships. For over two decades, Commonwealth has designed effective innovations, products, and policies enabling over 2 million people to save nearly $8 billion. Commonwealth collaborates with consumers, the financial services industry, employers, and policymakers. Because Black, Latin, and women-led households disproportionately experience financial insecurity, we focus especially on these populations. The solutions we build are grounded in real life, based on our deep understanding of people who are financially vulnerable and how businesses can best serve them. To learn more, visit us at www.buildcommonwealth.org.

BlackRock's Emergency Savings Initiative

In 2019, BlackRock launched the Emergency Savings Initiative to help millions of people living on low- to moderate-income gain access to and increase usage of proven savings strategies and tools—ultimately helping them establish an important safety net. BlackRock's support of this initiative is provided through grants from The BlackRock Foundation and The BlackRock Charitable Gift Fund. The size and scale of the savings problem require the knowledge and expertise of established industry experts who are recognized leaders in savings research and interventions on an individual and corporate level. Led by its Social Impact team, BlackRock is partnering with innovative industry experts like Commonwealth in the US and Nest Insight in the UK, giving the initiative a comprehensive and multilayered approach to address the savings crisis.