



Delivering Patient Care and Quality Jobs

Great Organizational Culture Drives Sunrise Treatment Center, Cincinnati, Ohio

By Mark G. Popovich and Yoorie Chang



Introduction

Boosting job quality transforms workers' lives. Done right, it also benefits businesses' performance and bottom lines. Improving job quality is core to the Economic Opportunities Program's mission to advance strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. As race, gender, and place intersect with and intensify the challenge of accessing good jobs, improved job quality advances progress toward a more just and equitable society and economy.

[Sunrise Treatment Center](#)¹ provides stable, sustainable jobs and is a leader in the addiction treatment sector. The firm, anchored in the Appalachian region centering on Cincinnati, has rapidly grown and evolved from its start in 2007 in founder Dr. Jeffrey Bill's family medical practice. Over the last few years, we've met and interviewed the treatment services' leadership and delved into data they've shared about the quality of the jobs they've developed and scaled up.

Today, the Sunrise team delivers advanced outpatient care with a focus on opioid use disorders. Its daily work saves lives. The center's mission is explicitly twofold — provide the highest quality treatment for patients with substance abuse issues and mental illness and offer a great place to work to employees.





While substance addiction is an epidemic nationwide, this area is at the epicenter of the scourge. [Ohio](#)² suffers from the fourth highest rate of overdose deaths at a level 44% higher than the national average. The state also has [among the highest rates of binge drinking](#)³ and [deaths of despair](#)⁴ — from drugs, alcohol, and suicide — nationally.

Lifesaving care and renewed hope come from effective treatment and recovery. The treatment field, however, confronts [a terribly high burnout rate](#)⁵ that typically leads to high turnover. Founder Dr. Bill, Chief Operating Officer Steven Smith, and Chief Human Resources Officer Brett Burns knew the field's vital impact and significant challenges, so they developed strategies to simultaneously meet the needs of their patients and their commitment to employees.

Much of their focus from the start was on nurturing a great organizational culture. They prioritized job quality for staff while also expanding the firm to help meet the urgent need for more outpatient treatment. Since 2015, the number of patients cared for by Sunrise soared. From 2015 through 2018, they experienced a 252% rise in patients seen. Growth continued at a comparable high pace with a 232% increase in the three years ending with the fourth quarter of 2020.

Through that remarkable upswing in capacity and caregiving, the firm's leaders attended to and improved conditions for staff. In fact, Sunrise earned B-Corp Certification in 2020 — the first for the sector

in the US — and was among the first firms to earn the top five-star rating for job quality compared to national data on its sector peers from the [Working Metrics](#)⁶ system. When rigorously benchmarked against industry peers, Sunrise considerably outperforms. (Data were reported at separate points for two overlapping periods. These are reported separately and reviewed in the following table.)



		2015Q3-2018Q3	2017Q4-2020Q4
Total Staff	Number	23 (base year)	188 (2020Q4)
	% Change for Span	+404%	+366%
		+48.5% average annual growth from 2015Q3-2020Q4	
Frontline Workers	Number	21 (base year)	144 (2020Q4)
	% Change for Span	+271%	356%
		+44% average annual growth from 2015Q3-2020Q4	
Pay for Frontline Workers	% Change for Span	40% (12%/year)	22% (6.7%/year)
3-Year Retention	All Staff	74%	93%
	Frontline Staff	71%	93%

Many treatment program workers have demanding, difficult jobs with low wages, limited benefits, high productivity requirements, and unstable schedules — driving high turnover. Sunrise has an enviable record on this key metric. The industry benchmark for three-year retention hovers just below 50%. Through its remarkable growth and quality employment standards, Sunrise's three-year retention rates have, at over 70%, far exceeded its peers. Sunrise even bested its already exemplary performance all the way up to a very impressive 93% retention rate in its most recent reporting period.

Outstanding performance includes robust growth in average pay for frontline workers — over 7% per year — and the high-quality health insurance, paid leave policy, and retirement benefits offered to employees by the firm. In each of these three areas, its

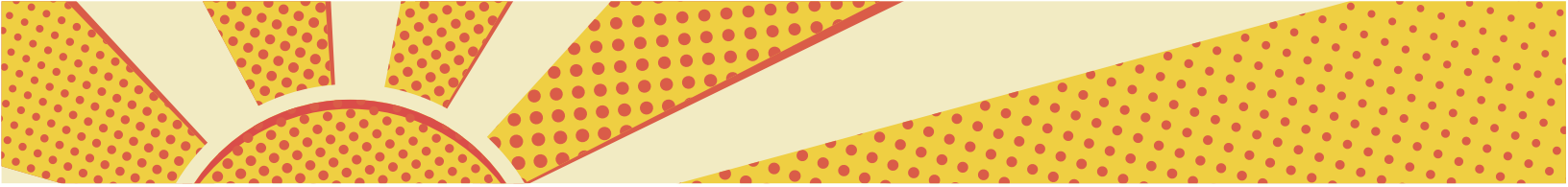
policies exceed the offerings that are typical in the sector.

We recently spoke with founder Dr. Bill and their CHRO Brett Burns to learn more about Sunrise's job quality efforts.

Sunrise Treatment Center Garners Awards and Recognition as a Good Company with Good Jobs

- ★ 2020 Coveted B Corporation Certification
- ★ Global Impact Investment Rating System (GIIRS) Impact Scored
- ★ 2020 Top Workplaces Award, and 2021 Top Workplace amongst midsize companies, from Cincinnati Enquirer





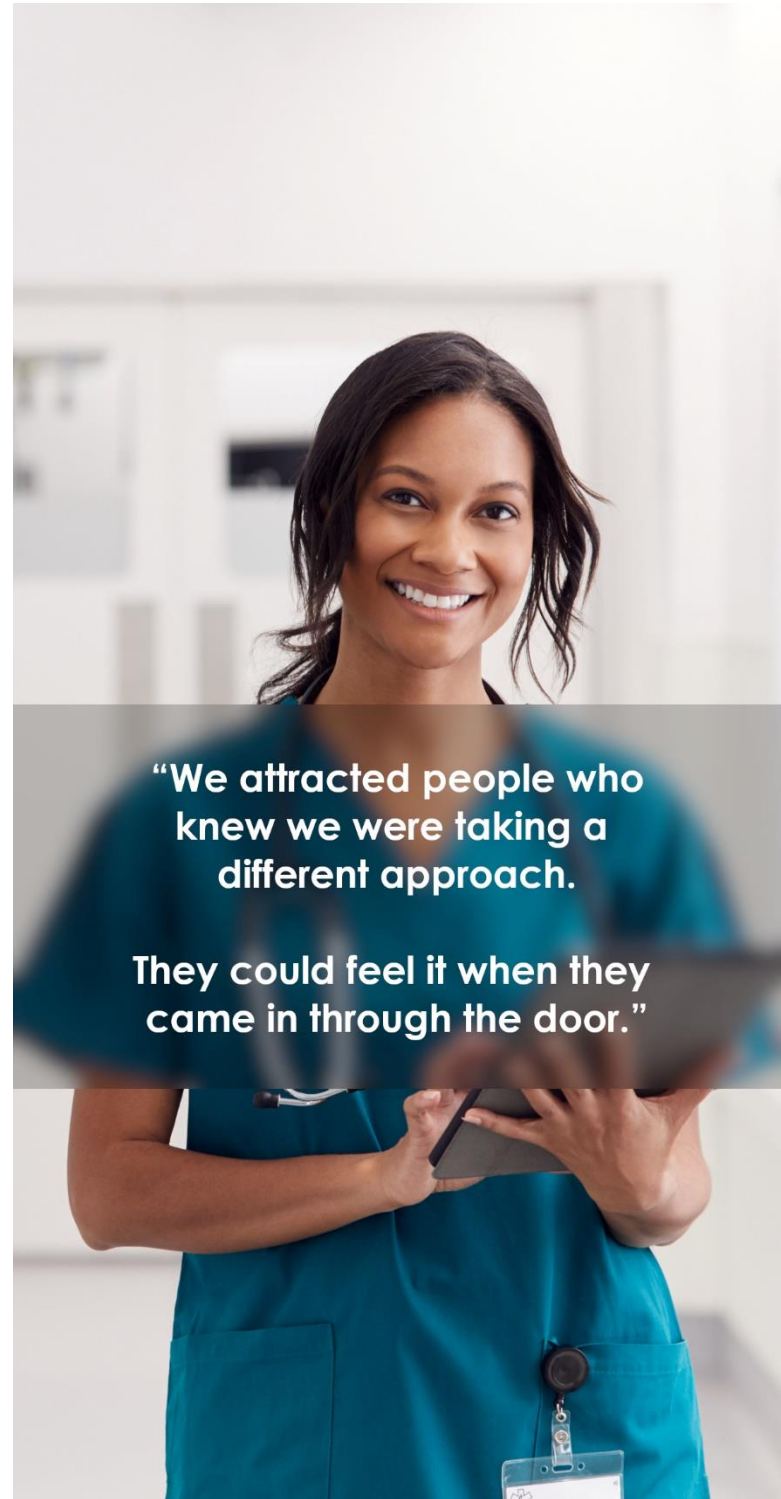
“It is important to me that we treat employees a certain way. We want to employ people fairly, pay living wages, and provide comprehensive benefits.”

Q: Dr. Bill, Sunrise Treatment Center has grown at a remarkable pace. That must be rewarding, but it must come with some challenges. What are some of the challenges you’ve encountered as you manage this growth and offer a great workplace to employees?

Dr. Bill: This could have stayed a smaller operation, but I saw a tremendous need in our community for the services that we were providing. As I started to hire people, I was looking for people who were looking for an organization that would take a different approach to how we deliver these services and how we treat each other as colleagues. There was energy and excitement that built with every new person hired. Everybody wanted to do more. From the beginning, my biggest priority in expanding into a larger organization, knowing that we’d require the services of many more colleagues, revolved around the management and culture we were creating. It is important to me that we treat employees a certain way. We want to employ people fairly, pay living wages, and provide comprehensive benefits. It is only fair and right, as they are the ones doing the hard work, delivering services, and providing care. I want them to feel stable, healthy, happy, supported, valued, and respected. If I could do that, I will not only be at peace with myself, but the business will also do better. People are going to be more productive, stay, and continue to serve the organization and patients.

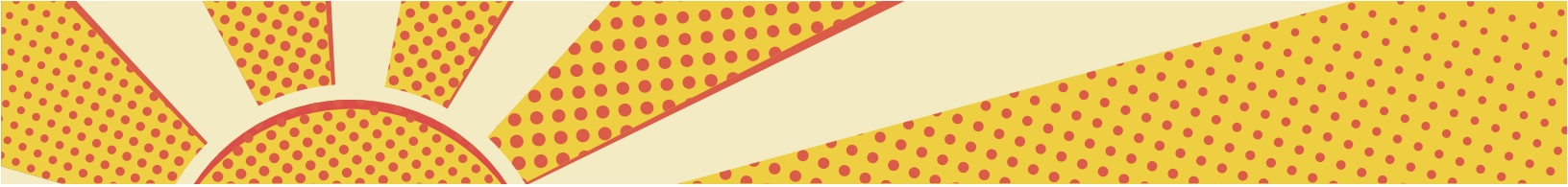
Q: Sunrise has offered high job quality throughout a long span of rapid growth. Did growth fuel job quality or did the retention and performance of these frontline workers help spark growth?

Dr. Bill: It is both right now. We've reached a size and are growing at a pace where people know that more opportunities are becoming available within the organization. Earlier on, I absolutely think that retention fueled growth. The system and approach we created meant that we hired "misfits" who had gotten completely burned out at other organizations because of culture, poor pay, and dangerous work environments with ludicrous productivity expectations. We attracted people who knew we were taking a different approach. They could feel it when they came in through the door. There wasn't chaos, despair, or stressors. For example, people like what they hear about our approach to managing caseloads. We manage caseloads based on how many hours per week of direct patient care we believe is appropriate for our clinicians. Our model predominantly revolves around hour-long, individual counseling sessions. The way we see it, a clinician should be able to be engaged, therapeutic, and able to deliver high-quality care for 25-27 hours of any given 40-hour week. We don't have any regulations that set an official patient limit like you'll find in other treatment settings, and most of our clinicians have a mixed caseload of people who need different frequency of sessions. It is an easy sell. Once they started working here, they would tell their friends. Whenever we had an opening, it would get filled quickly. In the early days, this approach led to high employee satisfaction and retention. This allowed us to develop a good base that fueled future growth.



"We attracted people who knew we were taking a different approach.

They could feel it when they came in through the door."



“We walk the walk and talk the talk. We'll send out an employee survey and look at how we could implement ideas and make them real.”

Q: Dr. Bill, what led you to specialize in addiction treatment?

Dr. Bill: My eyes weren't open to the level of the problem in my community until a few years after residency. I was introduced to Suboxone, a new medication-assisted treatment option for opioid disorder, at the first practice I joined. I decided I could build a program with this and do this safely within the outpatient setting. I started treating people and saw the numbers of people in my community who needed help. I listened to their stories and saw the impact I could have. I left family medicine to focus on addiction medicine full-time, completed board certification in addiction medicine, and converted my little office practice into a comprehensive treatment program. Since then, we've tried to perfect our model and replicate it so we could meet the needs of our community.

Q: Mrs. Burns, how do you incorporate the voices of your employees in your company and its operations?

Mrs. Burns: We walk the walk and talk the talk. We'll send out an employee survey and look at how we could implement ideas and make them real. Our culture is real. When we talk about the Sunrise way, we talk about the family. There is no hierarchy. I don't feel like my manager is this tyrant that I can't speak to. There is an open-door policy. We truly are transparent with each other and we push that in our code of conduct. It's important for us to have the right people, so that's what employees feel across the board. No matter how far we go from the nucleus of our Cincinnati office or our corporate office out to the very ends of the Sunrise world, we have the same culture, the same message, and the same beliefs. That's key to why we're so successful.



Q: Dr. Bill, we first met at a United Way-hosted meeting of employers and others who came together to address high rates of child poverty in Cincinnati. Sunrise is actively participating in consulting services offered by the [Workforce Innovation Center](#)⁷ at the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber led by Audrey Treasure. Could you share a bit about why you're involved and what it entails for your organization?

Dr. Bill: The issue of childhood poverty stresses me out as an employer. I don't want to be undercompensating my employees. I want to offer the support and benefits they need. That's only right and humane. Plus, there's a business case. If you employ people at higher standards, you will retain them and they will be healthier, won't miss work, and will be more productive. It is not going to hurt your bottom line. We want to be involved in the Workforce Innovation Center's efforts to show that and maybe inspire others to do the same. Many societal ills and social struggles stem from poverty. Lower income stressors and instability lead to physical and mental health impacts, life instability, and substance disorder issues. I also want to make sure that when I'm retired and gone, this is the type of organization Sunrise is and always wants to be. We can and will continue to make the business case for why others should be that way too.

Mrs. Burns: Through our work with the Workforce Innovation Center, we connected with Working Metrics and have done the data and analyses and are diving into the results. We meet regularly and have opportunities to talk with other employers about what Sunrise does and how we do it. We hear ideas we can also implement from other places too. The group helps each other learn more. We talk about policy changes or other improvements we could adopt, such as flexible work environments. We will work with the Center to implement any recommendations for Sunrise they might have.

Conclusion

Sunrise Treatment Center illustrates the link between offering good jobs and reaching impressive growth and performance goals. The people within organizations are an asset to build upon rather than a cost to be minimized. Other business examples in this series are found on our [website](#). Practical tools for boosting job quality are also available from EOP's [Job Quality Tools Library](#).⁸

We are grateful to Prudential Financial for its support of this blog series and to the Economic Opportunities Program's work to build a job quality field of practice.



About the Authors

Mark G. Popovich is the director of Good Companies/Good Jobs, an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program. Good Companies/Good Jobs encourages and equips business leaders to enact strategies that simultaneously produce outstanding outcomes for their businesses and their frontline workers. Learn more at [as.pn/gcgj](https://aspeninstitute.org/gcgj). Connect with Mark on Twitter [@mpopov1229](https://twitter.com/mpopov1229).

Yoorie Chang is a research assistant for the Workforce Strategies Initiative (WSI), an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program. Through research and evaluation, WSI explores strategies that help workers attain stability and mobility, including through training, education, and broader systems change. Learn more at [as.pn/wsi](https://aspeninstitute.org/wsi). Connect with Yoorie on Twitter [@yooriechang](https://twitter.com/yooriechang).

About EOP

The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program (EOP) advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. We recognize that race, gender, and place intersect with and intensify the challenge of economic inequality and we address these dynamics by advancing an inclusive vision of economic justice. For over 25 years, EOP has focused on expanding individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. Learn more ([as.pn/eop](https://aspeninstitute.org/eop)), join our mailing list ([as.pn/eopmail](https://aspeninstitute.org/eopmail)), and follow us on social media:

 [@AspenWorkforce](https://twitter.com/AspenWorkforce)

 fb.me/AspenEOP

 linkedin.com/company/aspeneop

References

- ¹ <https://www.sunrisetreatmentcenter.net/>
- ² <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/opioids/opioid-summaries-by-state>
- ³ <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/data-stats.htm>
- ⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/data-stats.htm>
- ⁵ <https://www.advancedrecovery.com/15-tips-prevent-addiction-counselor-burnout/>
- ⁶ <https://www.workingmetrics.com/>
- ⁷ <https://workforceinnovationcenter.com/>
- ⁸ <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/longform/job-quality-tools-library/>

