

Piloting SaverLife as a Tool for Workplace Financial Wellness

SAVERLIFE | MAY 2021

Many American households lack emergency savings, including 37% that would not be able to cover an unexpected expense of \$400.¹ At the same time, research shows that small amounts of precautionary savings may make a significant difference in the stability of lower-income households. With just \$100 in savings, a family is significantly better able to maintain payments on utilities, while balances above \$250 are correlated with increased housing security. A savings balance above \$100 is also strongly correlated with a greater likelihood of financial satisfaction in life and avoiding high-cost borrowing (like payday and auto title loans).²

In 2019, the FINRA Investor Education Foundation and SaverLife began a collaboration to create a scalable and sustainable savings program for use by community nonprofit providers of workplace financial wellness programs. This brief describes the design and implementation of a pilot program conducted in cooperation with two such providers. It summarizes the outcomes of the pilot for employee and employer participants and describes key findings about program implementation. The brief concludes with a description of the customizable SaverLife Solutions available to community nonprofit workplace financial wellness program providers.

Key Findings:

- 1. The introduction of an online savings tool for lower-income employees presents both opportunities and challenges for workplace financial wellness program providers.**
- 2. Employees trust services offered by their employers and a reputable nonprofit, but they still have a healthy skepticism when it comes to an offer that “sounds too good to be true.”**
- 3. Nonprofit providers should consider integrating SaverLife as a tool within their workplace financial wellness programs in a way that accommodates employee and employer needs.**

¹US Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. 2020. Report on the Economic Well-Being of US Households in 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2020-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2019-preface.htm>.

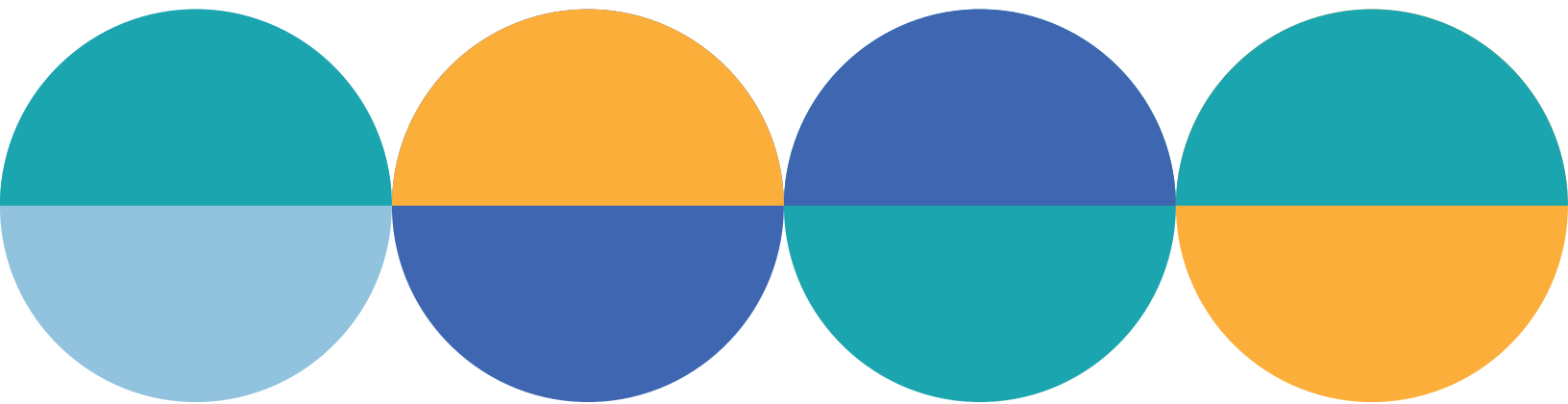
²SaverLife and FINRA Investor Education Foundation. 2020. Savings: A Little Can Make a Big Difference. Retrieved from <https://about.saverlife.org/finra>.

Background

A growing number of working adults report that they are stressed about their finances, and not having enough emergency savings is a primary cause. In 2019, a national survey found that a lack of emergency savings was the top financial concern of 62% of Millennial and 55% of Gen X employees. While Baby Boomers were somewhat more concerned about being able to retire when they wanted to (52%), not having enough emergency savings was also a top concern (44%).³

SaverLife is a nonprofit organization that uses an online platform and behavioral science to help working families build a savings cushion to avoid financial hardship. Since 2016, SaverLife has provided more than 500,000 members with financial education content, savings tools, and opportunities to receive cash matches and prizes for saving. SaverLife members are encouraged to share their saving success stories through a community forum. SaverLife initially reached and recruited members through social services agencies and community-based asset building programs. In 2018, SaverLife began developing customized programs to meet the needs of employers looking for ways to help employees improve their financial stability.⁴

The Financial Wellness at Work program, jointly administered by the FINRA Foundation and United Way Worldwide, provides training, tools, research, and other resources to expand the capacity of community nonprofits to provide high-quality workplace financial wellness programs. The Financial Wellness at Work network includes more than 20 community nonprofits providing workplace financial wellness programs to meet the needs of local employers and employees across industry sectors.



³PwC US. 2019. PwC's 8th Annual Employee Financial Wellness Survey. Retrieved from <https://www.theexperience.work/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/pwc-2019-employee-wellness-survey.pdf>.

⁴Between 2014 and 2019, the number of employers that said they were "very likely" to add or expand financial wellbeing benefits beyond traditional retirement education increased from 30% to 65%. Alight. 2019. 2019 Hot Topics in Retirement and Financial Wellbeing; Building on the Past, Working Toward the Future. Retrieved from <https://alight.com/research-insights/building-on-the-past-working-toward-the-future>. In 2018, more than 71% of working adults said they would participate in an employer-based rainy-day savings program. AARP Public Policy Institute. 2018. Saving at Work for a Rainy Day: Results from a National Survey of Employers. Retrieved from: www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2018/09/rainy-day-national-survey.pdf.

Pilot Program Design and Implementation

The pilot program was designed and implemented in collaboration with two community nonprofits in the FINRA Foundation's Financial Wellness at Work network.



The United Way of Northwest Vermont Working Bridges program provides the employees of participating employers in Burlington with financial education, referrals to supportive community resources, access to an employer-sponsored small-dollar loan, English language learner classes, and GED classes.⁵ At the time of the pilot, 11 employers, representing approximately 3,000 employees, participated in the Working Bridges collaborative, including small manufacturers and healthcare providers.



In northeast Ohio, the Bridges@Work program, sponsored by United Way Services of Geauga County in partnership with the Geauga Growth Partnership, provides employees of participating employers with financial education, referrals to supportive community resources, and access to an employer-sponsored small-dollar loan. At the time of the pilot, 16 employers, representing nearly 3,500 employees, participated in the Bridges@Work collaborative, including small manufacturers, service companies, and healthcare providers.

The pilot was designed as a six-month matched savings program, including:

- Weekly emails or text messages containing motivational and informative content, and online financial education resources created by a certified financial coach
- An incentivized savings program that rewarded users who saved \$20 per month with a \$10 match, for up to six months
- Opportunities to win prizes for taking positive financial actions

The program was provided at no cost to the community nonprofits, employers, or employees.⁶ There is never a charge to individual members of SaverLife.

SaverLife provided a co-branded landing page with a unique web address for each pilot site. The unique web address allowed the nonprofit providers to access an aggregate data dashboard to track the number of employees enrolled, the number of accounts linked, and dollar amounts saved. SaverLife furnished each site with co-branded marketing materials including email templates, web banners, postcards, posters, and pop-up banners.

⁵Employer-sponsored small-dollar loans typically are designed in cooperation with a local financial institution to provide employees with an alternative to high-cost borrowing (such as payday and auto title loans) and an opportunity to build or repair credit. Loans may include features that help borrowers start to save (during or after loan repayment) and with guardrails to prevent a cycle of debt. Filene and FINRA Investor Education Foundation. 2017. Implementation Guide: Employer-Sponsored Small-Dollar Loan. Retrieved from: www.finrafoundation.org/fin-wellness-work-implementation-guide-employer-sponsored-small-dollar-loan.

⁶SaverLife provided all matched savings and prize incentives for the pilot through contributions from partner foundations, corporations, and individual donors. FINRA Foundation funding enabled SaverLife to conduct the pilot program with community-based workplace financial wellness programs in the Financial Wellness at Work network.

SaverLife, the FINRA Foundation, United Way Worldwide, and each local nonprofit hosted in-person informational meetings for employers in September 2019. To participate in the pilot, employers were asked to make the program available to all employees, to provide computer access to employees that lacked such access, and to participate in a phone interview with SaverLife researchers at the conclusion of the pilot. Local direct-service staff received training on how to help employees enroll in SaverLife and navigate the site, information about frequently asked questions (see Box 1), and SaverLife member support.

Following the kick-off meetings, local program partners completed employer onboarding, and recruited and enrolled employee participants in the six-month matched savings program, which ran from either October 2019 to March 2020 or November 2019 to April 2020.

To enroll in SaverLife, employees were required to be 18 years old or older, have access to a computer or smartphone, and have a valid email address. To participate in the matched savings program, employees were required to link a personal bank account with online banking credentials or a PayPal account. After employees enrolled and confirmed their email address, they received access to a personal activities page. Employees that missed the matched savings enrollment period, or that chose not to link a bank account, were able to enroll at any time to receive the other benefits of SaverLife membership, including eligibility for prizes. Enrolled employees may remain SaverLife members indefinitely.

Box 1: Frequently Asked Questions

How Does SaverLife Connect to Banks and Credit Unions?

SaverLife links to banks and credit unions through Plaid, a third-party host that many financial apps, such as Venmo and Acorns, use to link members to their platform. Plaid partners with over 9,000 financial institutions, so there is a good chance that the employee's preferred bank can be linked. If not, the employee can link a PayPal account or consider creating a dedicated savings account at a participating financial institution.

Does SaverLife Have Access to Employees' Money?

SaverLife does not have access to the bank account linked by employees. SaverLife has a read-only view of transaction details, such as amount, date, and merchant name.

How Does SaverLife Protect Employees' Personal Information?

SaverLife uses industry-standard security practices, including 256-bit encryption, and works with independent experts to conduct regular security tests of the platform.

Does SaverLife Sell Employees' Data?

SaverLife does not sell members' personal data to advertisers or anyone else.

Does SaverLife include advertising or content that has commercial intent?

Communication with members and SaverLife online resources and materials may include branded content from national SaverLife sponsors.

Pilot Program Outcomes

Program outcomes were measured in three ways: administrative data, surveys of participating employees and employers, and telephone interviews. Employees that completed a survey received a \$5 gift card. SaverLife researchers originally planned to conduct telephone interviews with employers, but instead administered a brief online survey due to the demands on employers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Box 2 on page 6).

Sixteen employers, with a total of 4,365 employees, participated in the pilot program. During the pilot, 654 employees (15%) joined SaverLife, and 361 (8%) linked their bank accounts and saved a total of \$360,385 during a six-month matched savings period. The average net monthly savings was nearly \$120 for savers in Geauga County, and nearly \$155 for savers in Burlington (see Table 1). Nearly half (167) of the employees that linked accounts earned a total of \$8,680 in matched savings, and 118 employees received \$5 prizes.

Table 1: SaverLife Enrollment and Savings by Pilot Location

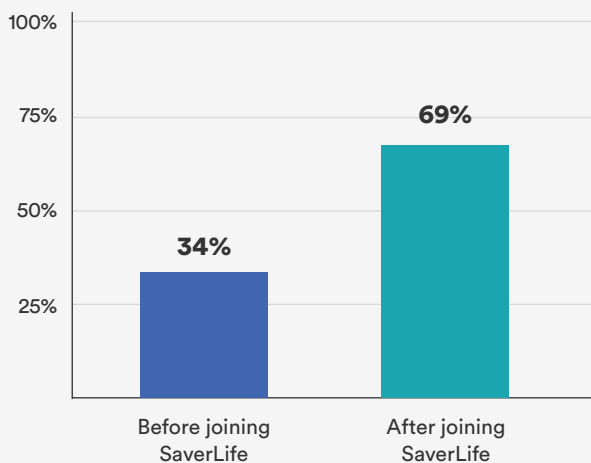
	Members	Savers	Total Net Savings	Average Net Monthly Savings
United Way Services of Geauga County and Geauga Growth Partnership 9 employer participants with 2,055 employees	149	102	\$73,404	\$119.94
United Way of Northwest Vermont 7 employer participants with 2,310 employees	505	259	\$286,981	\$154.89
Total	654	361	\$360,385	\$166.38

SaverLife’s direct-to-employer programs achieve an average saver (members that linked accounts) sign-up rate of 10%. Bridges@Work partners in Geauga County achieved a saver sign-up rate of nearly 5%, while United Way of Northwest Vermont achieved a saver sign-up rate of over 11%. Numerous factors may account for the local difference. For example, practitioners in Geauga County learned that many employees did not use online banking, including a large number of Amish employees that do not use computers or cell phones. Geauga County experienced management staff turnover during the planning of the pilot program, and the direct-service staff in Geauga County was tasked with recruiting employees in a greater number of locations with fewer personnel.

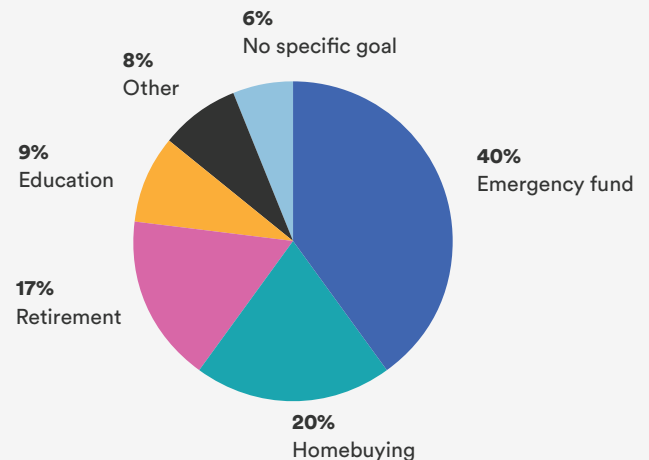
Survey Findings

Among employee participants that responded to a survey, 43% agreed or strongly agreed that the SaverLife program helped them feel less stressed about money, while the number that said they saved frequently or very frequently increased from 34% before joining SaverLife to 69% six months or more after joining SaverLife.⁷ Nearly six in ten employees (57%) said they were more likely to sign up for SaverLife because it was backed by their employer, and 29% indicated that benefits like SaverLife increased their loyalty to their employer.

The number of participants that said they saved frequently or very frequently



Pilot participants' primary reason for saving



Box 2: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The last months of the pilot program and data collection efforts were disrupted by the onset of the pandemic. As participating employers adjusted their operations, SaverLife raised funds and administered an emergency relief program. SaverLife used administrative data to identify members that had a rapid decline in income or savings and invited those members to apply for emergency grant funds. Sixty participants in the pilot received \$500 cash grants for a total of \$30,000. Grant recipients were offered free

financial coaching through a SaverLife partnership with Neighborhood Trust.

Due to stimulus payments and emergency relief funds, there was a 116% increase in savings among SaverLife members in April 2020 compared to April 2019. In July and August 2020, SaverLife members were 18% more likely to decrease their savings balances by \$100 compared to the same time in 2019.

The survey was sent to 361 employees that linked savings accounts to the SaverLife platform. Thirty-five respondents, representing a response rate of nearly 10%, received a five-dollar gift card for completing the survey.

Key Findings & Recommendations for Future Implementation

The pilot revealed three primary lessons about SaverLife implementation by third-party nonprofit workplace financial wellness program providers:

1

The introduction of an online savings tool for lower-income employees presents both opportunities and challenges for workplace financial wellness program providers.

The nonprofit providers that participated in the pilot had not previously offered an online savings tool or resource. One provider observed that there were employees (particularly younger employees) that welcomed an online tool. At the same time, many employees were unfamiliar with online banking, and they required more assistance than anticipated with program enrollment and SaverLife site navigation. Successful implementation of SaverLife requires that nonprofit providers identify and train staff to help employees that are less familiar with online banking and related technology.

2

Employees trust services offered by their employers and a reputable nonprofit, but they still have a healthy skepticism when it comes to an offer that “sounds too good to be true.”

Employees were generally enthusiastic about the matched savings offer, but a few thought it “sounded too good to be true,” and asked questions about SaverLife and the security of their personal information. Marketing information about SaverLife should proactively address employee concerns about security and privacy, and nonprofit staff should be prepared to answer frequently asked questions about information security.

3

Nonprofit providers should consider integrating SaverLife as a tool within their workplace financial wellness programs in a way that accommodates employee and employer needs.

The pilot program was designed as a six-month savings practicum with set start and end times to facilitate implementation and data collection. The pilot design did not allow adequate time for certain employees to gain trust in the program or to be ready to participate. Promoting enrollment in SaverLife on a regular basis, and/or allowing for a flexible start to a matching funds program, would accommodate employees at different stages of preparedness to make a change in their savings behaviors.

Employers that engage a community nonprofit to provide workplace financial wellness services often do so to expand the capacity and expertise of company human resources staff. Nonprofit practitioners should consider adding a savings tool within their workplace financial wellness program in the normal course of business and with few additional demands on employers.



“I was apprehensive at first, but...having [SaverLife] promoted and supported by my employer made it seem like an opportunity worthy of my time.”

-Participating Employee

Cost and Customization

SaverLife has options to meet the budgets and needs of nonprofit providers of workplace financial wellness programs (see Table 2 on page 10).

SaverLife.org

Nonprofit providers may refer clients to SaverLife.org at no cost to the nonprofit, employers, or employees. The basic program, including cash rewards and prizes, is underwritten by SaverLife's national sponsors.⁸ While clients that access the program through SaverLife.org receive all the benefits of membership, referring organizations do not have access to participant outcomes data.

SaverLife Solutions

SaverLife Solutions offers three tiers of products, with annual fees based on the number of users and other criteria, and provides nonprofits with opportunities for co-branding, data collection, and the ability to offer customized savings incentives:

SaverLife Essentials

Program providers receive a unique SaverLife web address that directs clients to a co-branded landing page. Providers have access to a data dashboard that aggregates data across all participants from all companies. Key metrics include:

- Number of enrollments and number of linked accounts
- Percentage of members with linked accounts saving at least \$10, \$20, \$30, and \$40 per month, and the percentage of savers who have increased savings since enrollment
- Aggregate FinHealth Score™ of members with linked accounts⁹

SaverLife Solutions Plus

In addition to the national SaverLife challenges and an aggregate data dashboard, program providers may run a partner-funded, customized savings challenge. For example, SaverLife will help partners design a matched-savings challenge, or a challenge that provides savers with chances to win matched savings.

SaverLife Enterprise

The most customized SaverLife program provides nonprofit partners with the opportunity to run a partner-funded, customized savings challenge, a data dashboard (that can be filtered by company) with individual saver-level data, the opportunity to ask savers two onboarding questions, and a private email address for customer support.

⁸SaverLife national sponsors at the time of this report included the Intuit Financial Freedom Foundation, JPMorgan Chase & Co., the MasterCard Center for Inclusive Growth, the MetLife Foundation, and Prudential.

⁹The Financial Health Network's FinHealth Score™ is a measurement of the comprehensive financial health of individuals or groups over time. See: <https://finhealthnetwork.org/score/>

Table 2: Comparison of SaverLife.org and SaverLife Solutions Features

	SaverLife.org Supported by SaverLife national sponsors	SaverLife Solutions Annual fee based on number of users + cost of savings challenges		
		Essentials	Plus	Enterprise
SaverLife Members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access financial content and a supportive community • Receive weekly email messages with informative and motivational content, including branded content from national sponsors • Track savings progress on a personal dashboard • Earn points for taking positive actions toward financial well being • Earn cash rewards and prizes for building savings 	✓	✓	✓	✓
Co-branded landing page		✓	✓	
Customizable marketing templates		✓	✓	✓
Data dashboard – aggregate level		✓	✓	✓
Custom partner-funded savings challenges			✓	✓
Partner-branded landing page				✓
Baseline onboarding questions				✓
Data dashboard – individual level				✓
Unique customer support email addresses				✓

Conclusion

Employees want to build emergency savings and reduce their financial stress—and they want help from their employers. At the same time, employers are looking for ways to help employees build emergency savings so that one flat tire or other unexpected expense doesn't prevent a good employee from getting to work and performing well on the job.

SaverLife.org is a proven, turn-key tool that nonprofit providers of workplace financial wellness programs can use to help employees develop a savings habit. Fee-for-service SaverLife Solutions customizations are designed to meet provider needs for co-branding and data collection while supporting the sustainability of the SaverLife platform. While SaverLife Solutions customizations may not be cost-effective for small and mid-sized companies acting alone, nonprofit providers of workplace financial wellness programs may feasibly facilitate data collection and customized savings challenges for such employers who choose to form a financial wellness collaborative.

Acknowledgements

SaverLife and the FINRA Foundation are grateful to the employers and employees that participated in this study, to Working Bridges Resource Coordinators Sarah Allerton, Paul Chapman, Liz Jarvis, and Kristin Kany at the United Way of Northwest Vermont, and to Bridges@Work Resource Coordinator Missy Besednjak at United Way Services of Geauga County. Special thanks are reserved for Connie Beal, Working Bridges Initiative Director, and Monica Bricker-Thompson, Director of Programs at Geauga Growth Partnership.

About SaverLife

SaverLife (formerly EARN) is a nonprofit that uses an online platform and behavioral science to help lower-income consumers save and improve their financial stability. Through a network of financial institutions, nonprofits, employers, and advocacy groups, SaverLife supports aspirational savings programs, analytic insights, and policy initiatives to achieve a more equitable America. For more information, visit saverlife.org.

About the FINRA Foundation

The FINRA Investor Education Foundation supports innovative research and educational projects that give underserved Americans the knowledge, skills, and tools to make sound financial decisions throughout life. For more information about FINRA Foundation initiatives, visit finrafoundation.org.

About FINRA

FINRA is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to investor protection and market integrity. It regulates one critical part of the securities industry—brokerage firms doing business with the public in the United States. FINRA, overseen by the SEC, writes rules, examines for and enforces compliance with FINRA rules and federal securities laws, registers broker-dealer personnel and offers them education and training, and informs the investing public. In addition, FINRA provides surveillance and other regulatory services for equities and options markets, as well as trade reporting and other industry utilities. FINRA also administers a dispute resolution forum for investors and brokerage firms and their registered employees. For more information, visit [finra.org](https://www.finra.org).

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