HOW WORKPLACE EMERGENCY SAVINGS ACCOUNTS CAN BOOST EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

FINANCIAL SECURITY PROGRAM
aspen institute

Summary of Key Takeaways

Earlier this year, the Aspen Institute Financial Security Program (Aspen FSP) partnered with SecureSave, a provider of workplace emergency savings accounts (ESAs), to design a survey of 274 SecureSave users focused on financial well-being. Aspen FSP used the survey responses and administrative data on ESA activity to independently conduct an analysis and explore the relationship between financial well-being and workplace ESAs. Given the relatively small sample size, this research brief is meant to start the discussion and catalyze further research, focusing on three major takeaways, all of which hold across the income spectrum:

1. **Having more workplace emergency savings is strongly associated with higher financial well-being.**
2. **Having higher financial well-being scores and more emergency savings is associated with better employee satisfaction and higher retention.**
3. **ESAs do not reduce retirement savings, with many people increasing contributions to retirement savings plans while contributing to a workplace ESA.**

The State of Emergency Savings

Over the last few years, researchers have contributed to a growing body of evidence on the positive impacts of emergency savings. A number of studies have found that having emergency savings improves employee financial well-being, bolsters the bottom line of companies by improving retention and attendance, and appears to boost longer-term savings, especially workplace retirement savings.[1, 2, 3]

These insights are reinforced by the fact that private sector adoption of workplace emergency savings solutions has grown rapidly. Ten years ago, while there were numerous types of workplace savings programs, there were effectively zero workplace ESAs outside of some trial programs. Today, with major employers like Delta, Humana, and Amazon offering workplace emergency savings solutions to their employees, there are several million workers in the United States who now have access to a payroll-deduction ESA at work.

Employees, including those earning low to moderate incomes, want these programs and find value in them when employers offer them. New research from Commonwealth shows that workplace ESAs are among the most desired benefits for people earning low to moderate incomes, and those with access rate them highly compared to other benefits.[4]

Despite progress in research and market adoption, however, emergency savings has not yet achieved national scale. To reach the majority of the 160 million+ workers in the U.S., workplace ESAs need to become core offerings of benefits brokers, retirement savings recordkeepers, payroll providers, and other key stakeholders in the workplace benefits ecosystem.

So how can workplace ESAs reach this national scale? What questions need to be answered so that both employers and private sector leaders in the employee benefits world—and policymakers who have the ability to drive scale via legislation and regulation—have the insights they need to take action? To identify high-priority research questions, we turned to a range of experts—specifically, the Aspen FSP-convened **Emergency Savings Cohort**, a group of cross-sector leaders focused on a wide range of emergency savings solutions.

From that group, these questions have emerged:

1. What is the impact of workplace ESAs, as opposed to generic, non-workplace emergency savings, on employee financial health?
2. Is there a link between workplace ESAs (including the amount saved in them) and workplace productivity?
3. Crucially for benefits providers, what is the connection between emergency savings and retirement savings?

To summarize: What do we know about the impact of workplace ESAs specifically, as opposed to emergency savings more broadly?

Findings

Guided by that question, in this brief Aspen FSP analyzes financial well-being and workplace productivity measures of 274 confirmed workplace ESA users, utilizing both administrative data and a joint FSP-SecureSave survey conducted in 2025.

While the survey covers a wide range of topics, Aspen FSP's primary interest is the relationship between financial well-being and workplace ESAs. Given the relatively small sample size, this brief is meant to start the discussion and catalyze further research, focusing on three major takeaways.

About the Emergency Savings Cohort

Organized by Aspen FSP, the Emergency Savings Cohort is comprised of leaders and experts in the emergency savings field, including the Bipartisan Policy Center, BlackRock, Commonwealth, DCIIA, ideas42 Policy Lab, Nest Insight, SaverLife, SecureSave, and others, who share insights and key learnings about the field as well as policy and market innovations.

What are Workplace Emergency Savings Accounts (ESAs)?

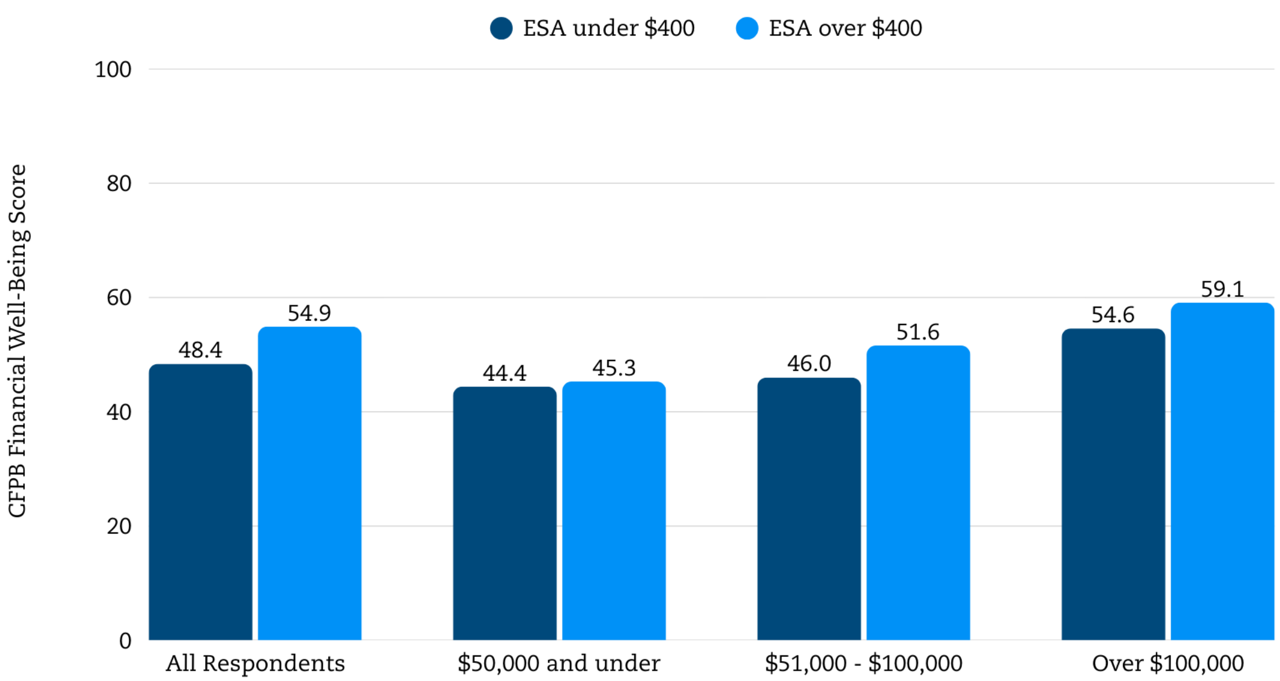
High-quality ESAs leverage automatic saving, including through payroll, to build savings through the trusted channel of the employer. They are distinct from a savings account someone opens on their own at a financial institution outside of the workplace. Because these programs have not existed for very long, users of workplace ESAs have not been studied, and important questions remain on their impact on the financial well-being and productivity of workers.[5]

1 Having more emergency savings is strongly associated with higher financial well-being.

The average financial well-being score of SecureSave users surveyed was 51.9 (medium high on the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's Financial Well-Being Scale). Digging into the data we found that, overall, people with higher mean levels of emergency savings had higher financial well-being scores and less financial stress across the income spectrum.[6]

Figure 1. Higher Amounts of Emergency Savings is Associated with Greater Financial Well-Being

Average CFPB Financial Well-Being Score by income and Emergency Savings Account amounts



Note: N = 274

Consistently having even $400 in emergency savings is associated with stronger financial well-being across the income spectrum; those with less than $400 in emergency savings had a financial well-being (FWB) score of 48.4 versus 54.9 for people with ESAs totaling over $400. We chose this cut-off not because $400 is the famous benchmark number, but because it was the point where we began to observe a real change in financial well-being scores, including for low-income employees. Additionally, SecureSave reported, separate from Aspen FSP's independent analysis, that most SecureSave users save $400 within six months of opening an account.

For those earning under $100,000 a year, more emergency savings is associated with higher financial well-being as well. Specifically, with $400 or more in emergency savings, those earning $50,000 to $100,000 have a mean FWB score of medium high (51.6), while those with less than $400 have a medium low score (46).[7] Put another way, having a workplace ESA with a mean balance greater than $400 over the course of a year is associated with a 12 percent higher level of financial well-being for these workers, as compared to having less than $400.

These findings are generally in line with several recent studies on emergency savings, including Vanguard's recent analysis of retirement savers which found that "emergency savings are the strongest predictor of financial well-being."[8]

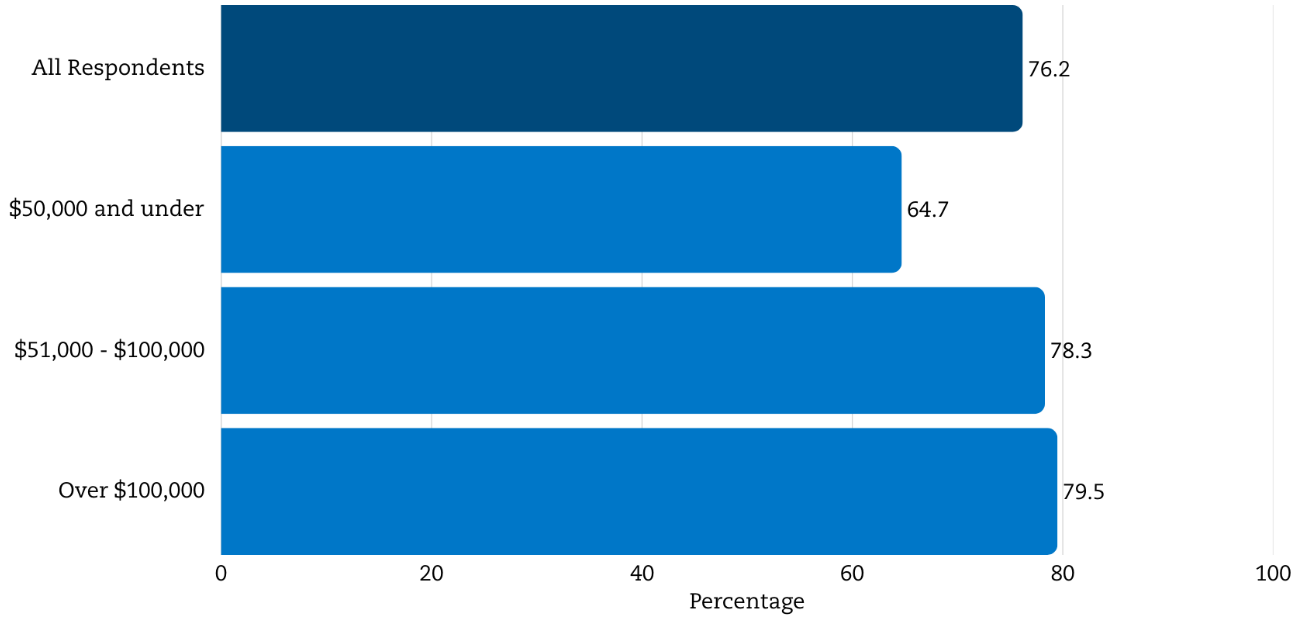
We are strong proponents of the research-backed "build, use, rebuild" concept: People using their emergency savings is a marker of a product's success.[9] Put another way, the goal of emergency savings is not to endlessly accumulate funds, but to use them when needed. And having any emergency savings at all is positive for account owners, particularly those earning lower incomes.[10] That said, this finding, alongside the recent research from Vanguard, suggests that having a certain amount of consistent savings, or a number above some certain threshold, may matter a great deal for advancing financial well-being. We look forward to diving further into this question in future research.

2 Having higher financial well-being scores and more emergency savings is associated with better employee satisfaction and higher retention.

Financial well-being scores and higher emergency savings aren't just good outcomes for employees; the survey suggests they are good outcomes for employers too, as 76 percent of SecureSave users (including 74 percent of users making $100,000 or less) surveyed feel more positive about their employer benefits because their employer offers emergency savings.

Figure 2. Emergency Savings Accounts Makes Employees Feel More Positively about Employer Benefits

Percentage of employees who agree or strongly agree that having access to an emergency savings account makes them feel more positive about their employer benefits, for all respondents and by income



Note: N=274

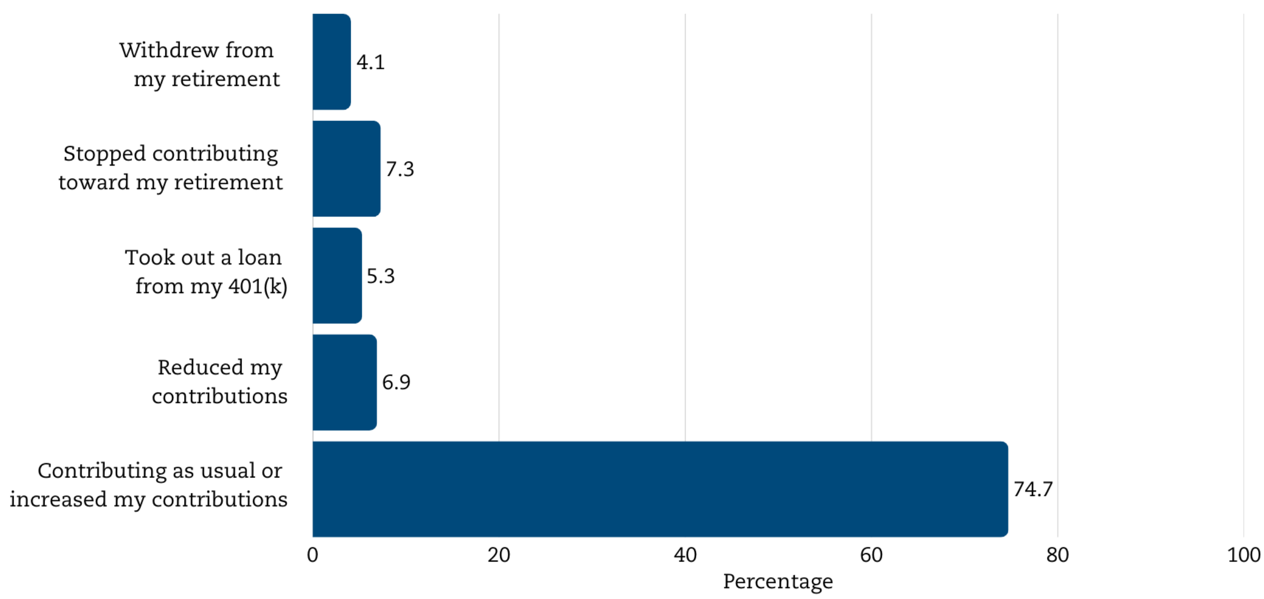
Large majorities of the SecureSave users surveyed express plans to stay with their current employer (74 percent) compared to those who are looking to leave (12 percent looking right now). An earlier survey of workers conducted by SecureSave (not SecureSave users) found that 40 percent of workers were planning on staying with their current employer and 22 percent were actively looking for new work, roughly tracking with other, broader surveys on this topic.[11]

3 ESAs do not reduce retirement savings, with many people increasing contributions to retirement while contributing to a workplace ESA.

When employees with ESAs realized an improvement in their financial situation, many opted to increase their retirement savings contributions.

Figure 3. Large Majority of Surveyed Employees Contribute to Their 401(k)s in Stable or Increasing Amounts

Distribution of 401(k) plan actions taken within the past year among surveyed employees with ESAs (percentage)



Note: N = 245. 16 surveyed employees with ESAs (6 percent) did not have a retirement account and are not included here. Another 11 surveyed employees (4 percent) reported conflicting actions and are also excluded here.

While further research and larger sample sizes are needed to better unpack the connection between workplace ESAs and retirement saving, our findings suggest that, for the survey respondents, ESAs do not detract from retirement saving—and may, if anything, bolster retirement savings across the income spectrum. In both surveys of SecureSave users and non-SecureSave users, relatively few people (consistent with larger analyses of retirement withdrawals and loans) withdrew or stopped contributing to retirement savings. Of note, SecureSave users were more likely to report increasing contributions to retirement savings and less likely to report decreasing contributions to retirement saving.

These findings are consistent with other work. Most recently, Commonwealth released a groundbreaking report assessing the connection between workplace emergency savings accounts and retirement savings at a large healthcare company that automatically enrolls most workers into retirement savings. About 73 percent of eligible employees had enrolled into a workplace ESA, and that group on average contributed more to retirement savings as compared to those at the company without a workplace ESA. Furthermore, those with workplace ESAs experienced lower rates and amounts of loans and withdrawals from retirement accounts. In both cases, the link between ESAs and boosting and protecting retirement savings was even stronger for low- and moderate-income employees.[12]

A study conducted by the Bipartisan Policy Center reveals that 61 percent of workers with access to retirement benefits would deposit into emergency accounts if offered—in addition to their continued deposits to retirement accounts.[13] Furthermore, a joint survey between Commonwealth and SaverLife found that 30 percent of respondents indicated a willingness to contribute more to existing retirement accounts if they were offered liquid savings options (such as emergency savings accounts)—with very few respondents claiming that they would deposit less in their retirement accounts.[14] **These early data from real workplace ESA users appear to support that survey finding: Emergency savings may well provide a buffer people need to save even more for retirement.**

Next Steps for Emergency Savings Research and Action

As we state above, we hope this brief lays the groundwork for further research on the relationship between ESAs and a series of important financial health and workplace productivity measures. As ESAs become more widespread, we see value in understanding their full range of effects so that practitioners are better equipped to improve their design to meet the needs of low- to moderate-income workers. Moreover, for ESAs to achieve national scale, more independent research of their impact—on both the business bottom line and employee financial well-being—is needed to continue to drive adoption and make high-quality emergency savings a standard workplace benefit.

In addition, we think it is worth mentioning the other areas needed to drive scale on workplace emergency savings:

Removing Saving Penalties/Asset Limits

This survey asked SecureSave users: "Have you ever not saved, stopped saving, or spent down savings because of fear of having too much saved and losing access to benefits like SNAP, SSI, Medicaid, TANF and LIHEAP (i.e. crossing "asset limits")?"

About 5 percent of total respondents (13) answered "yes" to this question. Given that this survey did not focus exclusively on low-income workers, we think this result indicates the need for deeper and more targeted analysis on this question. If we ignore this problem, workplace ESAs (or any emergency savings account) could leave out people who have the most to gain from having one.

We need policy action to remove the explicit barriers to saving that threatens to blunt the impact of these innovations for those who could most benefit. Currently, momentum is building behind legislative efforts to reform asset limits in the Supplemental Security Income program, which have remained at $2,000 for individuals since 1984. Research from the JPMorganChase PolicyCenter concludes that modernizing asset limits in that program would not only raise the ceiling of savings allowed by beneficiaries of that program but increase their work hours and earnings that could be devoted to savings by reducing concerns they might run afoul of eligibility rules.[15]

Automatic Enrollment

While this survey did not dive into the question of automatic enrollment, we continue to see a need for policy solutions that allow for automatic enrollment into out-of-plan emergency savings vehicles. The lessons from retirement savings are too strong to ignore—automatic enrollment is effective at driving savings, particularly for people earning low- to moderate-incomes.

SECURE 2.0 enabled for automatic enrollment into in-plan emergency savings (Pension Linked Emergency Savings Accounts, or PLESAs), and several companies are advancing plans to roll these out in coming years.[16] But we know millions of workers will be unable to benefit from those even if they were widely adopted, given that 57 million workers lack access to a workplace retirement account and, by default, would lack access to an opt-out in-plan emergency savings option. We need to build on this success of in-plan automatic enrollment from SECURE 2.0 and support policymakers, employers, and innovators as they work to enable automatic enrollment into out-of-plan emergency savings accounts.

Conclusion

This brief comes at an exciting moment, where many researchers and organizations are publishing independent research on the impact of emergency savings and policy leaders are pushing toward solutions that will make emergency savings more effective for low- to moderate-income workers and more common both inside and outside the workplace. We hope it catalyzes further action, research, and investment in this dynamic and promising field, and we look forward to partnering with policymakers, employers, and innovators as they work to deliver emergency savings solutions that help families better cope with financial shocks and set a foundation for longer-term wealth-building.

Note: This brief is Aspen FSP's independent assessment of the data. Aspen FSP was not compensated by SecureSave in any way.

Endnotes

1 Ratcliffe, Caroline, Brianna Middlewood, Melissa Knoll, Misha Davies, and Grant Guillory. "Emergency Savings and Financial Security: Insights from the Making Ends Meet Survey and Consumer Credit Panel." Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, March 2022. https://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/documents/cfpb_mem_emergency-savings-financial-security_report_2022-3.pdf.

2 Costa, Paulo, Marsella Martino, and Malena de la Fuente. "The relationship between emergency savings, financial well-being, and financial stress." Vanguard, April 2025. https://corporate.vanguard.com/content/dam/corp/research/pdf/relationship_between_emergency_savings_financial_well_being_financial_stress.pdf.

3 Leana, Carrie, Xue Yang, Daniel Berkowitz, and Daniya Kamran-Morley. "The Effect of an Emergency Savings Program on Employee Savings and Work Performance: A Two-Year Field Intervention." ILR Review 78, no. 5 (2025): 806–831. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00197939251343044.

4 "Transforming Workplace Benefits into an Engine for Financial Health: A Closer Look at the Needs of Workers Earning LMI." Commonwealth, October 2025. https://buildcommonwealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/CW_Transforming-Workplace-Benefits-into-an-Engine-for-Financial-Health.pdf.

5 Ewas, Jason, Kara Woolley Watkins, and Karen Biddle Andres. "At a Tipping Point: The Workplace Emergency Savings Landscape as SECURE 2.0 Implementation Begins in 2024." The Aspen Institute Financial Security Program, January 12, 2024. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/at-a-tipping-point-the-workplace-emergency-savings-landscape-as-secure-2-0-implementation-begins-in-2024/.

6 "Measuring financial well-being: A guide to using the CFPB Financial Well-Being Scale." Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Last modified August 8, 2023. https://www.consumerfinance.gov/data-research/research-reports/financial-well-being-scale/.

7 "Financial Well-Being Score ranges." Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. https://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/documents/cfpb_financialwellbeing_scores_12202018.pdf.

8 Costa, Martino, and de la Fuente. "The relationship between emergency savings, financial well-being, and financial stress."

9 Elmi, Sheida and Laura Tamayo-Castillo. "The Cycle of Savings: What We Gain When We Understand Savings as a Dynamic Process." The Aspen Institute Financial Security Program, September 2020. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/The-Cycle-of-Savings.pdf.

10 McKernan, Signe-Mary, Caroline Ratcliffe, Breno Braga, and Emma Kalish. "Thriving Residents, Thriving Cities: Family Financial Security Matters for Cities." Urban Institute, April 21, 2016. https://www.urban.org/research/publication/thriving-residents-thriving-cities-family-financial-security-matters-cities.

11 Gallup, "Workers Looking for Greener Pastures as Employee Turnover Risk Highest since 2015." KTUL (blog), July 10, 2024. https://ktul.com/news/nation-world/employee-turnover-risk-highest-since-2015-gallup-report-jobs-labor-market-effective-management-people-skills-turnover-costs-leadership-skills-career-satisfaction.

12 "Driving Impact: How a Large Healthcare Employer Created Emergency Savings and Retirement Outcomes at Scale." Commonwealth, November, 2025. https://buildcommonwealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/CW_Driving-Impact-Case-Study.pdf.

13 Bahal, Sanya, and Lettie Nocera. "Bridging the Gap: Expanding Workplace Emergency Savings Access for Low- to Moderate-Income Workers." Bipartisan Policy Center, December 12, 2024. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/article/expanding-workplace-emergency-savings/.

14 "Accounting for Emergencies: The Relationship between Emergency and Retirement Savings." SaverLife, March 11, 2022. https://saverlife.org/research/accounting-for-emergencies.

15 "Expanding Economic Opportunity and Mobility for People with Disabilities." JPMorganChase Newsroom, May 4, 2022. https://www.jpmorganchase.com/newsroom/stories/expanding-economic-opportunities-and-mobility-for-people-with-disabilities.

16 Ewas, Watkins, and Andres. "At a Tipping Point."