

WPHP Advocacy: A Voice for You

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Introduction

For over 30 years, the Washington Physicians Health Program (WPHP) has served as a therapeutic alternative to discipline for physicians and physician assistants with health conditions that could impair their ability to safely practice. While many in our community are familiar with WPHP's mission to assist impaired or potentially impaired colleagues, fewer are aware of WPHP's important advocacy work intended to support the profession more broadly. We would like to take a moment to celebrate and share some of our recent advocacy victories.

Licensure Question Reform

In 2017, WPHP initiated a collaboration with WMC to revise licensing question language so that initial and renewal applicants were no longer required to disclose past mental health or substance use disorder diagnoses under the new "safe haven" provision for those known to WPHP. Recently, WMC went even further and developed an advisory model for the licensing application. Rather than asking any questions about mental health or substance use disorder diagnoses, the advisory educates applicants about professional responsibilities related to impairment, how to obtain help if needed, and the WMC's requirements for individuals that it believes may be impaired.

These reforms have made it easier for health professionals to seek care without fear of adverse professional consequences and demonstrate the WMC's clear commitment to physician and PA well-being. The WMC has now included information on its [website](#) to make sure prospective applicants are know that they will not subject to intrusive questions when seeking licensure Washington. Barriers to help seeking are complex and we do not expect that these changes alone will lead to a rush to care. Doctors probably fear their colleagues' negative perceptions and being seen as inferior as much or more than disciplinary involvement. However, such changes are critical first steps in dismantling systems of institutionalized stigma and bias toward individuals with behavioral health conditions and changing the culture of medicine that continues to discriminate against its own.

WPHP is currently collaborating with the other Boards and Commissions of the licensees we serve in order to bring similar reforms to their licensing application language.



If you missed our Coffee with the Commission that discusses the changes to the personal data questions on the licensing application, it can be [viewed at your convenience on our website.](#)

WPHP Report

Legislative Reform

In the 2022 legislative session, WPHP introduced SSB 5496 to ensure that the confidentiality protections afforded to WPHP substance use disorder participants were applied equally to WPHP participants with other psychiatric and non-psychiatric health conditions. In addition, this legislation updated, harmonized, and removed stigmatizing language from statutes that support our work. The bill received strong bipartisan support in both houses of the state legislature where it passed early in the session. We are grateful to Washington Senators Muzzall and Cleveland and the Senate Health Care Committee for sponsoring the bill as well as the many organizations, including the Washington State Medical Association, Washington Medical Commission (WMC), and Washington State Hospital Association, for their endorsements.

Credentialing Question Reform

In 2022, WPHP reached out to the [Washington Credentialing Standardization Group \(WCSG\)](#) to propose changes to the 2023 Washington Practitioner Application (WPA). The WPA is the credentialing application accepted by most physician organizations, hospitals, and health plans throughout the state. As with licensure question reform, the goal was to bring the health status attestation questions into alignment with regulatory best practices while protecting credentialing applicants from intrusive questions that were out of alignment with regulatory best practices and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). WCSG was enthusiastically supportive of improving the language and, under the leadership of its chair, Carrienne Dockter, published the updated WPA in December 2023. The updated health attestation includes clearer, more streamlined language that focuses on current impairment and asks only for contact information for any involved monitoring program rather than details around the health condition(s) or circumstances related to impairment. This ensures that no professional's health information ends up on the WPA.

In Closing

We hope this update raises awareness of the many other ways WPHP quietly serves the broader interests of the profession and how we all benefit from these efforts. We hope you will appreciate that we are singing for our supper and that our song has effectively inspired change for the better. In times of continuing challenge, it can be tempting to only look up the mountain at the difficult journey ahead. However, we should occasionally let our gaze drift down the mountain to remind ourselves of that which we have already overcome...

WPHP is grateful that our advocacy work has been graciously recognized by the Washington State Medical Association. You can read more about that [here](#) and [here](#).

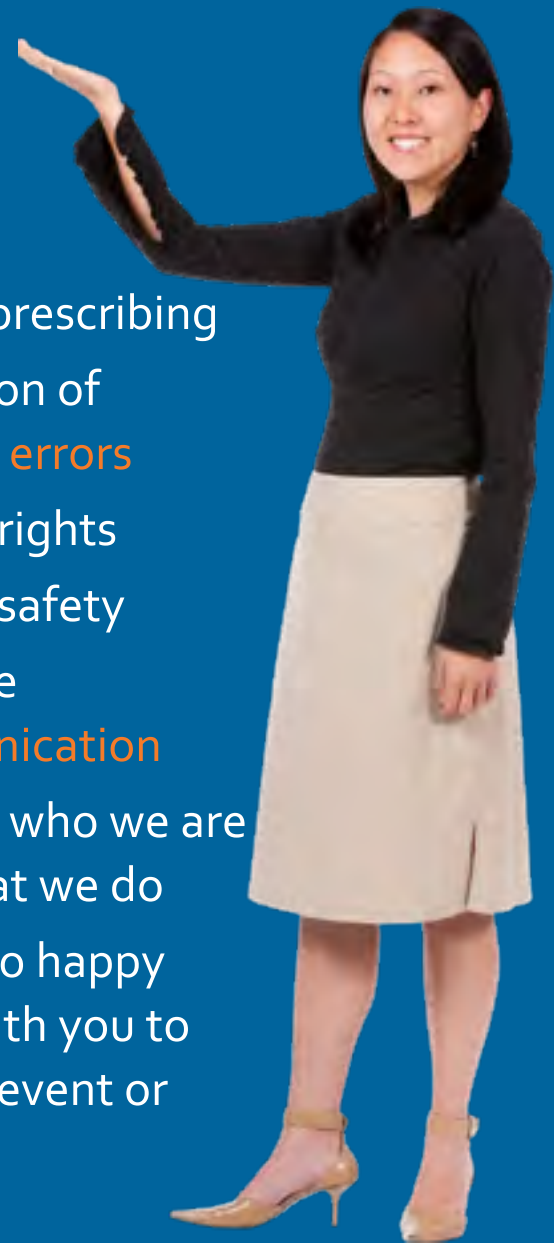
If you or a colleague need help, please do not hesitate to reach out to us: www.wphp.org 800-552-7236

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