



Advancing Physician Mental Health Through Support and Advocacy

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Physician mental health remains a critical issue in healthcare, with recent data revealing both persistent challenges and signs of progress. Nationwide, there is growing momentum to improve the mental health of healthcare workers. Institutions and organizations are increasingly recognizing that supporting employee well-being is not just ethical, it's a smart business strategy with measurable benefits.

Health Workforce Well-Being Day in March and Mental Health Awareness Month in May continue to shine a spotlight on the mental health struggles of healthcare professionals and encourages the removal of stigmatizing policies that prevent them from seeking the help they need. These efforts aim to ensure access to evidence based care and foster a culture of support within the healthcare system.

Physician Health Programs (PHPs), such as the Washington Physicians Health Program (WPHP), play a pivotal role in this movement. These programs provide confidential care protected by legislation, supporting physicians through health conditions while safeguarding patient safety and professional careers. Through PHPs, physicians restore their lives, often returning to their work, with renewed strength and purpose.

WPHP continues to lead on this front, partnering with local and national partners to address systemic barriers to mental health care and advocating for critical licensing and credentialing reforms.

Partnering for Change – ALL IN: Wellbeing First for Healthcare Campaign

A mental health crisis has been plaguing modern medicine for decades. According to the [CDC](#), health workers' mental health is worse than any other segment of the U.S. workforce. Further, among health workers [reporting mental distress](#) severe enough to meet diagnostic criteria for a mental health condition, only 38% reported seeking care and 20% shared they did not need care, despite severe symptoms.

The Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation is leading a coalition in the [ALL IN: Wellbeing First for Healthcare](#). This effort empowers health workers to access the mental health care and support they may need, while equipping employers, policymakers, and other decision makers with resources to eliminate systemic barriers to mental health care.

The ALL IN coalition is dedicated to advancing a state where the healthcare workforce's well-being is prioritized, and health workers feel valued and supported so they can sustain their sense of purpose and meaning in their work. By making beneficial progress to support health workers' mental health and well-being, the coalition aims to strengthen our healthcare systems and secure a healthier future.

The initiative calls for six actions to improve access to mental health care for health workers - addressing unique stressors, eliminating stigma, and creating a system that supports professional well-being and safe, compassionate patient care. Two of these actions highlight the role of PHPs: strengthening access to confidential Professional or Physician Health Programs and advancing a supportive pathway for practice re-entry for health workers, ensuring a transparent, structured, and reasonable process to return to practice.

Like Washington, almost every state has a recognized PHP. These programs provide confidential assessment, referral to treatment, resources, and health support agreements for healthcare professionals and those in training when there is a concern that a health condition may be negatively affecting their ability to provide safe, effective care. So long as no patient harm occurred, health workers participation in a PHP provides an alternative to credentialing or regulatory action.

WPHP and the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation are united in advocating for a system where seeking mental health support is not a risk, but a right. As part of this mission, I recently co-presented with Dr. Stefanie Simmons, Chief Medical Officer of the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation, for the Washington State Medical Association's Physician and Practitioner Wellness Webinar series on the topic of "Advocacy as Wellness: Navigating the Path to Reform and Resilience." Dr. Simmons will also be speaking at WPHP's 30th Annual Reunion on advocacy efforts to support mental health of the healthcare workforce.

Barriers and the Need for Support

Reducing barriers for healthcare professionals seeking help remains essential along with providing greater financial support. A 2023 article that I co-authored in The American Journal on Addictions, titled "Barriers to Recovery for Medical Professionals" highlighted, "There is increasing focus on physician burnout, psychiatric problems, and substance use disorders."

And that “PHPs are vital to physicians, especially physicians-in-training, as ‘safe haven programs.’”

Given the rates of burnout, mental health issues, and substance use disorders in the medical profession, it’s imperative that access to PHPs be expanded, destigmatized, and financially supported.

“Meaning in Medicine” and “Well-Being” in Graduate Medical Education

Earlier in the year I attended the 2025 Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) Annual Educational Conference “Meaning in Medicine.” This is the world’s largest Graduate Medical Education (GME) conference and highlighted the importance of aligning personal and professional values, promoting well-being, and fostering collaboration within the healthcare community.

In a session titled “Physician Health Programs and GME: A Candid Conversation,” I joined panelists including Dr. Courtney Barrows McKeown, a surgeon and physician in recovery, and Cindy Hamra, JD, MA, Associate Dean at the University of Washington. We discussed best practices, real-life experiences, and how GME and PHPs can collaborate to support trainees in crisis while mitigating the risk of adverse professional consequences that can discourage residents from seeking and accepting help when needed.

I also took part in the ACGME “2024 Well-Being Symposium: Charting New Directions for GME.” One key outcome was the formation of several Well-Being Affinity Groups that will convene throughout the year to identify resources to support resident well-being. As part of this initiative, I will be leading the Access the Mental Health Care Affinity Group.

Credentialing Reform: A Model for Change

WPHP also collaborated on a groundbreaking development in healthcare credentialing, led by Dr. Brian Johnston of UW Medicine. This landmark reform has set a new standard for credentialing processes, placing a strong emphasis on the well-being and mental health of healthcare professionals.

WPHP played a critical role in providing consultation and technical assistance throughout this initiative, helping UW Medicine align credentialing procedures with best practices that support the health and sustainability of their workforce. By integrating comprehensive well-being measures into the credentialing process, UW Medicine has demonstrated a deep commitment to the mental health of their physicians and healthcare teams. Some of the key tools involved in this reform include the Peer Reference Form, the Washington Practitioner Application, and the Medical Staff Reappointment Application, all designed to streamline the credentialing process while focusing on practitioner well-being.

This reform serves as a model for other healthcare institutions, not just within Washington but across the

country. It highlights how a thoughtful, well-supported credentialing process can promote the long-term wellness and success of healthcare professionals.

Advancing the Health and Well-Being of Our Medical Community

For more than 35 years, WPHP has been Washington’s trusted resource for restoring the health of medical professionals. Our confidential and support and exceptional outcomes provide reassurance of safe practice and promote workforce sustainability. If you or a colleague need help, please do not hesitate to reach out to us at wphp.org or 800-552-7236.

References:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Health Workers Face a Mental Health Crisis.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 24 Oct. 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/health-worker-mental-health/index.html>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Gaps in Mental Health Care—Seeking Among Health Care Providers During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, September 2022–May 2023.” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, vol. 74, no. 2, 16 Jan. 2025, pp. 19–25, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/74/wr/mm7402a1.htm>.
- Weinhouse, Samuel, et al. “Barriers to Recovery for Medical Professionals: Assessing Financial Support through a Survey of Physician Health Programs.” *The American Journal on Addictions*, vol. 32, no. 4, July 2023, pp. 385–392.



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