

The AHA Physician Alliance provides resources to connect hospitals with work being done across the field to address the individual, environmental, and systemic factors that contribute to burnout and to foster resilience and well-being. You may find more case studies at our [knowledge hub](#).

Overview

ChristianaCare of Newark, Del., and other health systems pay attention to physician well-being for a wide range of reasons, but most important to ChristianaCare is confronting the disturbing statistics on physician suicide and burnout. Distressed physicians are also more likely to leave an organization, or even the profession, leading to significant turnover costs. For ChristianaCare, this forward-thinking approach led to the creation of the [Center for WorkLife Wellbeing](#), whose mission is to foster work-life meaning, connection and joy for providers and their teams. The Center's work is not just about minimizing stress, but also creating the conditions where clinicians can thrive.

Burnout in the Emergency Department

Heather Farley, M.D., FACEP, chief wellness officer at ChristianaCare, spent much of her career in emergency medicine. For Farley, being able to address the drivers of burnout was both a personal and professional journey. Through her own experiences in the emergency department, and particularly the

isolation and challenge of a malpractice case, she committed to helping her colleagues receive the needed resources to address burnout. She strongly advocates that the practice of medicine is a privilege with many joyful and meaningful aspects, but



Pet therapy is a popular activity provided by the Center for WorkLife Wellbeing to help clinicians de-stress.

she acknowledges that the repetitive trauma and challenges of health care delivery can push clinicians to their limits mentally and physically. It was very difficult to watch colleagues lose the spark that fueled them and become disconnected. Farley partnered with a like-minded psychologist, Vanessa Downing, Ph.D., to address these challenges and create the Center for WorkLife Wellbeing.

Building the System with Strong Foundations

ChristianaCare espouses the Stanford Medicine WellMD Professional Fulfillment Model, which includes three prongs: personal resilience, a culture of wellness and efficiency of practice. Farley underscores the importance of addressing all three areas, being careful not to overly focus on personal resilience.

“You cannot take the canary out of the coal mine and teach it to be more resilient, then stick it back in the same coal mine and expect it to survive. You actually have to change the coal mine,” Farley said.

While personal resilience is a key factor, Farley emphasizes that physicians are largely among the most resilient occupations, so resources for personal resilience can't be offered in isolation. ChristianaCare's approach includes creating a culture where caregivers are encouraged to acknowledge their humanity and need for support during challenging times. To support their physicians, ChristianaCare implemented several programs, including a calming OASIS room, Paws to De-Stress days, ice cream rounds, COMPASS (Clinician-Organized Meetings to Promote and Sustain Satisfaction), and the Care for the Caregiver peer support program.

Center for WorkLife Wellbeing

ChristianaCare partnered with an external vendor to provide Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) services,

specifically by physicians for physicians, to address mental health and suicide. All ChristianaCare physicians have access to this resource, as well as a liaison line to connect physicians to other internal or community resources.

Physicians were equipped to notice a struggling colleague and feel confident enough to engage them in conversation. At the same time, ChristianaCare ensured that policies and procedures were in place to preserve the dignity and privacy of clinicians.

ChristianaCare instituted several programs to ensure clinicians feel supported, including a peer support

program to provide emotional first aid after adverse events; a provider litigation program which provides mentorship and educational resources to explain the medical malpractice process; and reflective rounds to help providers process vicarious trauma in particularly challenging environments.

ChristianaCare augments these efforts with physician coaching and professional development, as well as the “Thank You Project,” designed to give patients the opportunity to share their health care experience and express their gratitude directly to their care team. These events reconnect clinicians with their core and purpose and are often a tear-filled experience for all.

Impact

One of ChristianaCare's biggest focuses over the last year has been to raise awareness and decrease the stigma surrounding physician mental health. In the



Caregiver-patient reunions serve as reminders of the things that truly matter.

last year, ChristianaCare has doubled the utilization of the physician EAP and has seen a steady increase in Resource Liaison Line use. At this point, approximately 13% of their residents have taken advantage of the Resource Liaison Line, which is technically separate from the physician EAP services. These numbers are a huge testament to decreasing barriers for those seeking help.

The Center for WorkLife Wellbeing, and particularly the “Thank You Project” and peer support program it offers, has received overwhelmingly positive feedback. Physicians shared that these programs refilled their “gas tanks” and renewed their sense of purpose. The COMPASS program also has helped decrease isolation, creating spaces to reflect and develop mutual support systems. It is critical to focus on ameliorating distress when it happens, but it is just as important to proactively reconnect with the joy and meaning of being a physician.

Lessons Learned

ChristianaCare recognized early that it was critical to decrease the stigma around help-seeking behavior, improve awareness and normalize mental distress in physicians. They started the conversation by screening for physicians a film, in partnership with the Medical Society of Delaware, about physician suicide statewide. They also held a symposium with physicians who shared their struggles with mental illness.

The thing that surprised and touched Farley the most was how much the clinicians continue to give of themselves; their compassion, their humanity, the selflessness that they display. Many physicians are aware of their tendency to self-sacrifice, but it is also a strength they can leverage to create mutual support systems. ChristianaCare built a community using the EAP and resource liaison lines, by equipping their physicians to have meaningful conversations about mental health issues, and using reflective rounds and professional coaching. Connecting to one another based on shared experiences and normalizing the human reactions physicians have to abnormal sets of circumstances within the medical field must occur. If

physicians can allow themselves to be vulnerable with one another in safe spaces, it is easier to receive the encouragement and support they need to flourish and have a long and fulfilling career.

Future Goals

In addition to building a supportive community and offering resources, multiple efforts are underway in ChristianaCare to ensure the physicians’ environment adds to their well-being rather than detract from it.

Future goals for ChristianaCare include:


1. Expanding the scope of the Center’s work to a broader audience of caregivers.
2. Operationalizing a well-being champion program to amplify the efforts of the Center.
3. Embarking on a system-wide continuous improvement journey entitled, “Making Tomorrow Happen,” which introduces processes and tools that help ChristianaCare staff remove barriers that can sometimes make doing the right thing seem like a struggle.

ChristianaCare physicians know that their greatest joy is creating an exceptional experience for patients, the community and each other. The current Center for WorkLife Wellbeing programs create the culture and support systems necessary to enable physicians to do what they do best and to reconnect with the joy and meaning in medicine. Future goals will further allow them to commit to being exceptional today and even better tomorrow, knowing that being better tomorrow does not happen by itself; we must make tomorrow happen together.

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