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Bill supporting healthcare workers' mental health gets approved

Week of April 3 - April 9, 2022

| APR 08, 2022

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Physician Enterprise

The Buzz This Week

In March, President Biden signed the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act into law. The bill, which received bipartisan support, aims to address burnout among healthcare workers and support mental health wellness. The Senate passed the bill last month, and the House passed it in December. The bill was spurred on in large part from the [ALL IN: WellBeing First for Healthcare](#) campaign, driven by the #FirstRespondersFirst and The Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation.

The Breen Bill is named after Dr. Lorna Breen, a New York City emergency medicine physician who died by suicide while working on the front lines at the onset of the pandemic in 2020. After caring for COVID-19 patients and contracting COVID-19 herself, Dr. Breen never took a complete break from work nor sought help for stress and burnout due to [fear of professional repercussions and stigma](#) around seeking mental health support, according to the [foundation](#) established in her name.

As of 2021, medical boards in [37 U.S. states and territories](#) asked questions that could require a doctor seeking licensure to disclose any mental health treatments or conditions. Physicians are subject to these kinds of questions on hospital credentialing forms, when applying for malpractice insurance, and to collect payment from private insurance for seeing patients. Dr. Breen had no history of mental health illness, and like countless other healthcare workers, continued to endure the burden of her vocation.

The new law, which is the first to provide federal funding to support such programs, will allot up to \$135 million over 3 years to support the mental health of healthcare students, residents, and other healthcare professionals. [This legislation helps address](#) the urgent public health crisis of the wellbeing of the healthcare workforce through:

- Establishing grants to train staff on ways to reduce and prevent burnout, suicide, substance abuse, and other mental health conditions
- Creating a national education and awareness campaign led by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) focused on encouraging healthcare workers to seek assistance for behavioral health concerns
- Funding grants for employee education, peer support programming, and behavioral health treatment
- Establishing a comprehensive study on behavioral health and burnout in the profession

Why It Matters

Mental health has been a challenge for healthcare workers for years and has become increasingly significant in the context of the pandemic for physicians, as well as across the spectrum of healthcare professionals. A [recent study](#) found the rate of suicidal thoughts among physicians is almost twice as high as the general public (7.2% vs. 4%), though many experts find this figure to be low. [Medscape's 2022 Physician Suicide Survey](#) of 13,000 physicians found that emergency medicine has one of the highest suicide rates of all medical specialties. In addition, [Medscape's 2022 Burnout & Depression Survey](#) of 13,000 physicians found that burnout among emergency medicine physicians has increased from 43% last year to 60% this year.

Despite the alarming statistics around provider burnout, physicians [reported](#) that 41% of their healthcare organizations do not offer a program to reduce stress and/or burnout. A poll conducted in October 2020 by the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) and Morning Consult found that [45% of emergency physicians](#) are not comfortable seeking mental health treatment, largely due to stigma in the workplace and professional reprisal. For physicians to seek the help they need, these institutionalized requirements and barriers must be eliminated.

Signing of the Breen bill into law is a critical step forward in providing mental health resources for healthcare workers and breaking down the stigma for them around mental health issues and actively seeking treatment. Prior to the pandemic, physician suicide and burnout had reached [crisis levels](#). That crisis was exacerbated during the pandemic and requires immediate solutions.

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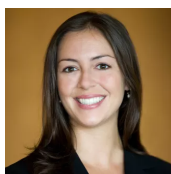
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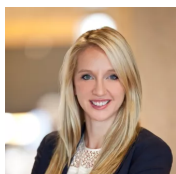
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