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Chief Wellness Officers addressing workforce burnout and promoting employee wellbeing

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The Buzz This Week

Health systems are grappling with the effects of the pandemic on an already strained workforce, contributing to the continued rise of employee burnout, especially for front-line staff. As more healthcare workers have felt increasingly burdened by their jobs, many health systems have suffered higher employee turnover. 76% of U.S. front-line workers express feeling burned out and exhausted, two key contributing factors to employees leaving the field. 67% of nurses plan to leave their current position within the next 3 years, citing insufficient staffing, workload, and burnout. High turnover has resulted in significant increases in expense to backfill those positions, as seen with contract travel nurses who accounted for 23% of total nurse hours in January 2022 yet recorded nearly 40% of the labor expenses for nurses.

Organizations are trying to mitigate these trends and the current environment by implementing a workforce wellness strategy to help combat turnover and burnout. It has been reported that nurses with burnout reduction programs stayed at jobs 20% longer than nurses at facilities without programs in place.

Heather Farley, MD, Chief Wellness Officer at ChristianaCare, uses the analogy, “You cannot take the canary out of the coal mine and teach it to be more resilient and then put it back in the same coal mine and expect it to survive. You actually have to change the coal mine—the environment surrounding our caregivers and clinicians.” Organizations must re-evaluate their approach to wellbeing and focus on creating an inclusive culture that supports wellness and safety.

Why It Matters

Burnout and professional fulfillment for physicians has gained attention over the years, as demonstrated by the emergence of the informal Fourth Aim of Clinician Well-Being in the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's Triple Aim framework. In the years leading up to and during the pandemic, several high-profile institutions have appointed Chief Wellness Officers (CWO) and created an Office for Wellbeing. Key responsibilities of the CWO include advocating and leading through influence to drive enterprise change, and collaborating with senior leaders to create a culture that aligns with various departments and boosts the employee experience.

Through this leadership, health systems can advance their efforts to address common influencers of burnout. This can help them remain compelling employers of choice for healthcare workers who are increasingly scarce and who expect work environments and benefits that comprehensively support their overall wellbeing.

Organizations are enhancing wellbeing programs and support mechanisms to help front-line workers now and well into the future, as seen with ChristianaCare's peer support program that is hardwired into post-event debriefs and proactively offered to drive down mental health stigma and promote healing. Michigan Medicine utilizes a Wellness Advocate Network to liaison with departments across the enterprise and keep leadership informed, and representatives can apply for wellbeing innovation grants. Many organizations are also focusing on the efficiency of practice, prioritizing electronic health record (EHR) optimization and annual retraining, as seen at Ochsner Health, to promote clinician wellbeing.

In addition, there are external endeavors occurring at the regulatory level to stem the rising tide of providers in crisis and improve their wellbeing, as discussed in a previous edition of Top Reads on the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act. Health systems, as well as government and regulatory entities, must recognize the critical role they play to help shape the employee experience and provide proper support. This effort not only helps the healthcare workforce but also improves the patient experience and health outcomes.

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