A mental health crisis has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For more than a year, physicians and other health professionals have been dealing with elevated levels of anxiety, depression, isolation, post-traumatic stress disorder and burnout. But a new health campaign aims to make an impact in this arena.

The AMA has joined the American Nurses Foundation, American Hospital Association and Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare for the All In: WellBeing First for Healthcare campaign. It is a call to action from #FirstRespondersFirst and the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation to prioritize front-line worker well-being and mental health. More than 200 organizations and individuals are taking part in the effort.

"We want to convene experts to advance health care workforce solutions now, keying to the urgency of the moment and the fact that as COVID volumes decrease, we will see an increase in depression and other trauma-related symptoms," said J. Corey Feist, co-founder of the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation. "We want to accelerate a culture shift here that prioritizes the well-being of the health care workforce and also create systems of accountability.

Feist added that the campaign aims "to amplify the work that's already being done by organizations like the AMA, as well as other organizations who have revised their models of care delivery and their support services for the health care workforce."

The foundation is named after the 49-year-old physician whose tragic death made headlines in an early pandemic hot spot already overwhelmed by COVID-19. Watch this episode of the "AMA COVID-19 Update" where Feist and his wife, Jennifer Breen Feist, share their loved one's story and discuss legislation designed to normalize asking for help as a physician.
Bone tired and brain fried

"Everyone is at a point of beyond exhaustion and now they're faced with dire financial consequences that are now going to require them to ask that same workforce that has been working so hard forever to double and triple down to help them get out of this financial spiral that they're in," Feist said. "It's all the same people we're asking to do this work and it's driving a burnout rate of 55% across the industry.

"We've got to take care of the workforce so they can take care of the patient," he emphasized.

"I've been in the health care industry for over 20 years, and we know how siloed the industry is," Feist added. He is CEO of the University of Virginia Physicians Group. "This is an issue that transcends organizations, it transcends specialties, it transcends the type of clinician and really it transcends the entire workforce."

"This is one where we need to come together as a health care community and implement comprehensive solutions because there are many solutions out there that have been utilized in isolation and we need to really let people know what to do," he said. There's "increasingly a call from health care organizations for a road map and tools and this initiative is going to provide a road map and tools."

The AMA offers resources to help physicians manage their own mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides practical strategies for health system leadership to consider in support of their physicians and care teams during COVID-19.

Making a difference that persists

"Short term, this is the change work that needs to happen to make a lasting impact and a lasting change," Feist said, adding that "it can't be something that's just one more thing to do and it can't be short-lived or a flash in the pan, if you will—it needs to be part of the work moving forward for all health care organizations."

While the triple aim focuses on the patient, "we need to recognize that in order to obtain those goals, we need to first take care of the workforce," said Feist. That is "because when the workforce is at its best, it enables those goals to be achieved."

Health systems with more than 100 physicians or advanced practice providers (APPs) are invited to apply for the 2021 Joy in Medicine™ Health System Recognition Program. Organizations must also have signed the Charter on Physician Well-Being and assessed physician well-being within the last
three years using one of four validated tools. Applications should be submitted on behalf of the organization, not individual departments.

If an organization has fewer than 100 physicians or APPs, they are encouraged to sign the Charter to note their commitment to the four guiding principles that promote and advance physician well-being and engage in the AMA's STEPS Forward™ webinar series.

The All In campaign is a call to action for leaders to create workplace cultures that prioritize the well-being of physicians and other health professionals. It will also provide—and amplify—a road map for institutions, health systems and organizations to cultivate environments that allow the health care workforce to feel valued and supported. A fund will also be created to help serve as a catalyst for those who joined the campaign, similar to an internal grant program.

#FirstRespondersFirst, an initiative of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Thrive Global and the CAA Foundation, takes a whole human approach to addressing the needs of front-line workers in order to support their ability to serve on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.