

# How to promote physician well-being during a pandemic and beyond

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EvergreenHealth in Washington state was the first spot in the United States to have a confirmed COVID-19 case.

The number of patients that the Seattle-area health system diagnosed quickly grew and physicians, administrators and staff found themselves on the front lines of dealing with the unknown, needing to quickly respond to keep everyone safe, provide patients with the best possible outcomes, and support the well-being of clinicians as the world rapidly changed.

Two EvergreenHealth leaders recently shared their proactive strategies to help ensure their workforce's well-being throughout the pandemic during an AMA webinar, "Promising practices to support physician well-being during COVID-19: A case study from EvergreenHealth."

They talked about successful strategies to support physicians during times of crisis, including their transition to a virtual environment, creating separate spaces for those with and without COVID-19-like symptoms to reduce widespread transmission and their ongoing communications strategy.

"We took time to pause and reflect, ask ourselves this question: How do we want to lead through one of the most challenging times in recent health care history?" Betsy Hail, EvergreenHealth's executive director of primary care said during the webinar. "We needed guiding principles which started and ended with people. First and foremost, we really committed to preserving relationships with patients, staff and the community. This was really something that we could not compromise."

The webinar is part of the AMA STEPS Forward™ webinar series that features interactive instruction from leaders in the medical field giving doctors the tools they need to transform their practices and the medical field at large. It is part of the AMA STEPS Forward™ Innovation Academy that lets physicians learn from peers and experts and discover ways to implement time-saving practice innovation strategies.

## Guiding principles

Throughout the past year and a half, Hail said they relied on their guiding principles when making decisions that focused on people, but had to preserve the organization’s long-term financial health.

The guiding principles are:

- People—preserve current and develop new relationships with patients, staff, clinicians and community.
- Quality—provide quality care within emerging crisis guidelines.
- Change management—balance the degree of change with desired outcomes.
- Transparency—get front-line input and maintain transparency around all decisions.
- Communication—is key.

EvergreenHealth then used a number of tactics to ensure physicians’ well-being, as well as that of patients and staff. For example, they employed strong governance and central coordination by doing things such as creating dedicated phone lines to address community questions and tracking visit types and call volumes to manage impact on the health system.

They also had a massive and rapid reorganization of clinical and surgical activities and ensured the readiness and availability of health care personnel by coordinating delivery of personal protective equipment, providing nurse consultation phone support for staff experiencing COVID-19 symptoms and putting social distancing and twice-daily symptom screening in place for all staff.

Clear internal communication about everything going on was also key as information changed hourly at the beginning of the pandemic.

To ensure strong communication, EvergreenHealth:

- Gave daily updates to all employees.
- Provided daily incident command.
- Held daily divisional huddles.
- Transitioned administrative meetings to virtual format.
- Launched EvergreenHealth Medical Group Survey Monkey to assess employee concerns, learnings and feedback.
- Created auto texts to respond to repeat questions and to standardize messaging.
- Held weekly Town Halls to bring together administrators, physicians and staff.

Pratima Sharma, MD, EvergreenHealth’s executive medical director of primary care said communication is one of the main takeaways—what some call a COVID-keeper—from what they learned during the last year and a half.

“Important things need to be shared. We need to make sure everyone hears it,” Dr. Sharma said. She said it is also critical to repeatedly share with physicians and their teams that they are valued, that their work is important and that they are important to the organization.

“We need to be saying that more often. We need to be showing that with our actions, too. All our actions need to be to support their well-being,” she added. “We need to make sure we modify our workflows to allow them to have more time with their patients and ... we need to modify our EHR to make sure that patient care and that relationship becomes more important.”