

# Target these opportunities to tackle physician burnout in 2022

JAN 13, 2022

**Jennifer Lubell**

Contributing News Writer

---

Burnout has become endemic in the physician community as COVID-19 rages on and unprecedented numbers of patients flood the health care system. While it manifests in individuals, burnout originates in systems, according to Christine Sinsky, MD, the AMA's vice president of professional satisfaction.

This has repercussions for patient care, health care organizations, and for the U.S. health system at large, she said. In a recent episode of the "AMA Moving Medicine" series, Dr. Sinsky discussed the AMA's efforts to address doctor burnout and opportunities to prioritize physician well-being in 2022.

## Workforce in peril

In line with the "great resignation" taking place across the United States, Dr. Sinsky anticipates a similar exodus for physicians and other health care workers exhausted by COVID-19. "People have really heroically stood up to the challenge and can do this when it's an acute crisis, but when it becomes a chronic steady state, many people are reassessing and are leaving their profession and that's really worrisome," she said.

The AMA has supported physicians across several domains to address burnout, developing resources to promote joy, purpose and meaning in work, said Dr. Sinsky.

One of those resources is the AMA STEPS Forward™ Innovation Academy, which supplies free, online toolkits written by physicians for physicians. "We've had over a million users of those toolkits since we started a few years ago. Now, we have podcasts and webinars and case studies that go along with that," she explained.

Dr. Sinsky and her team also created a de-implementation checklist (PDF) that organizational leaders can use to help reduce physician burden.

“It’s related to one of our STEPS Forward toolkits called ‘Getting Rid of Stupid Stuff.’ It is a step-by-step workbook, if you will, for how to implement a getting-rid-of-stupid-stuff initiative at your organization, how to cull out a lot of the waste that is currently clogging up the gears of health care and adding to the burden,” she said.

Overall, STEPS Forward™ has 70 different practical, actionable how-to toolkits on a variety of topics ranging from practice efficiency to team building, to leadership skills.

## Rebuilding community in small groups

Outlets that once provided peer support, such as physician lounges, are less common than they once were. “We don’t have radiology reading rooms or relaxed Saturday morning rounds as we used to. So, some organizations are creating ways to rebuild community,” said Dr. Sinsky.

The Mayo Clinic, for example, hosts small groups of eight to 10 physicians for a dinner every six weeks to discuss a question of interest and offers time for peer support building. AMA’s STEPS Forward Innovation Academy highlights similar peer coaching and support programs from the Cleveland Clinic and the Mass General Brigham health system.

“There’s a lot of resources to help people so they don’t have to start from scratch but can learn from what others have done and then adapt that to their own environment,” said Dr. Sinsky.

Read about the AMA’s 2021 survey on COVID-19 burnout ([PDF](#)).

## Addressing inbox overload

One opportunity to improve physician satisfaction this year relates to a mundane but important topic: the physician email inbox.

Test results and notifications and patient medical advice requests are driving an exponential rise in inbox work for physicians, which is affecting their work in clinic. A physician may spend so much time dealing with their inbox, they may decide to stop seeing patients in ambulatory care, said Dr. Sinsky.

Patient medical advice requests is one of the strongest drivers pushing physicians out of practice. “And yet it is a completely solvable problem. We just have to put our minds to it.”

STEPS Forward has a toolkit on ways to “tame” your inbox, such as turning off unnecessary notifications, she advised.



“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.