Follow these 9 steps to lead change as a chief wellness officer

FEB 28, 2023

Tanya Albert Henry
Contributing News Writer

Appointing a chief wellness officer (CWO) to lead the charge to systematically improve professional well-being for physicians and other health professionals in the organization is gaining traction nationwide. And while it may be tempting for a newly appointed CWO to jump in and start changing things within your organization quickly, that is not the best approach.

As organizations create new C-level executive positions to systematically improve well-being, it is best for CWOs to take the time to define the scope they are responsible for. In medicine, this position focuses on improving a practice environment’s efficiency and elements of the organization’s culture at a time when burnout has physicians reducing hours and retiring early.

An AMA STEPS Forward® toolkit, “Chief Wellness Officer Road Map,” outlines an approach CWOs can follow to implement a leadership strategy to help improve professional well-being within their organization.

Reducing physician burnout is a critical component of the AMA Recovery Plan for America’s Physicians.

Far too many American physicians experience burnout. That’s why the AMA develops resources that prioritize well-being and highlight workflow changes so physicians can focus on what matters—patient care.

Here are nine steps CWOs can take to make a difference in the organization.

1. Clearly define your scope and charge
Health care CWOs are not "personal resilience" officers. Instead, they spend most of their time focused on creating a more efficient and supportive practice environment through workflow redesign and strengthening dimensions in organizational culture such as leadership, teamwork, professionalism, collegiality and community.

2 Study and understand your organization
Before a CWO can get started on implementing and tracking new initiatives, they must become well-versed in the organization's gaps and needs. This involves understanding organizational structures, knowing the leadership team's key priorities, gathering data, talking to people in the organization and more.

3 Build your team
The team should include administrative or operational leaders, administrative assistants, project managers, statistics and methodology experts, event planners, and communications experts.

4 Identify existing organizational programs, gaps and resources
Meet with other relevant organizational leaders—the chief quality officer, chief medical officer and others—to understand their efforts so you can ensure yours are complementary and integrated with other efforts.

5 Define and develop your team's mission and strategy
Once your team is in place, meet to clearly define and develop your team's mission. Envision an ideal future state—and a strategy to achieve it.

6 Establish partnerships, distributed leadership and thematic task forces
Partnerships with leaders throughout the organization are key to being an effective CWO. Thematic, time-limited task forces can also help the organization make progress on specific issues spanning multiple organizational silos or departments.

Copyright 1995 - 2021 American Medical Association. All rights reserved.
7 Develop a bidirectional communication strategy
It’s important to keep physicians informed about what is being done to support their professional well-being. Communication can happen through newsletters, emails, brief video report-outs, or guest presentations at department meetings.

8 Set performance metrics for the organization and the team
There are distinctions between organizational metrics and metrics for the CWO’s team. Cs can’t be held responsible for organizational metrics such as overall burnout scores, but should be responsible for providing education, advocacy and leadership, and a strategy to guide the organization.

9 Avoid common pitfalls and mistakes
This includes everything from trying to oversee too many initiatives to becoming the complaint department.

Learn more about how to lay the groundwork at your organization with the “Establishing a Chief Wellness Officer Position” toolkit.

Open-access AMA STEPS Forward toolkits offer innovative strategies that allow physicians and their staff to thrive in the new health care environment. These courses can help you prevent physician burnout, create the organizational foundation for joy in medicine and improve practice efficiency.