With a physician workforce in distress, set up peer support to help

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Slammed by the pandemic, medicine’s great resignation and more, health systems are in crisis and leaders are in a challenging spot, managing many priorities. When it comes to physician burnout and well-being, there are a lot of positive long-term solutions, but what is needed are strategies to implement now. By following the five critical actions to take now to improve well-being, health systems can make an immediate impact—especially with a peer-support program.

The “2022 Healthcare Workforce Rescue Package,” highlights the essential actions leaders can take to support physicians and other health professionals now. They are:

- Adjust expectations in recognition that these are not normal times.
- Get rid of stupid stuff.
- Get radical to shore up staffing.
- Designate a well-being executive.
- Recognize that employee-assistance programs (EAPs) are not enough.

“This is the one that is really near and dear to my heart: EAPs are not enough. … We must do more,” AMA member Heather Farley, MD, MHCDS, chief wellness officer at ChristianaCare in Wilmington, Delaware, said during an AMA Insight Network virtual meeting about key strategies to safeguard the well-being of physicians and other health professionals.

The network helps AMA Health System Partner Program members save time and resources, gain early access to innovative ideas, get feedback from their peers, network, and learn about pilot opportunities.

Dr. Farley and several other experts on doctor burnout, including AMA Vice President of Professional Satisfaction Christine Sinsky, MD, developed the package. They are urging implementation of three foundational elements:
Providing quality mental health services.
Reducing the barriers to seeking help—such as standing up a peer-support program.
Offering psychological first aid training for leaders.

“The Care for the Caregiver peer-support program at ChristianaCare has been an incredibly effective support strategy for our organization, particularly during the height of COVID-19,” Dr. Farley said.

During the virtual meeting, she focused on employee-assistance programs.

Make it available to everyone

“In our organization, we do have the peer-support program available to all 14,000 of our employees and it’s available also to our medical dental staff who are not employed,” said Dr. Farley. “We really want it to be inclusive in that way and our peer supporters come from a variety of roles and disciplines.

“We make sure that they’re embedded in all different places in the organization so that they really can have their ear to the ground for when there are traumatic cases that happen,” she explained. “EAPs are absolutely helpful, but what clinicians say they want and need in those times is to talk with someone who really gets it and what they want is peer support.”

It requires a unique skill set

ChristianaCare trained 75 peer supporters—who are volunteers—and ensures the program is available 24/7. Since launching seven years ago, the program has grown to over 600 activations per year, which has been the backbone of their support strategy during the pandemic.

“These are people who their colleagues feel would be the person they would go to at two o'clock in the morning when they're having a really hard time,” said Dr. Farley. “They're volunteers, but we do train them up because it is a very different skill set than the usual physician or nurse skill set.

“It's not about solving problems. It's about sitting with suffering,” she added. That is why “it's a unique skill that we need to help our peer supporters to learn.”

Reiterate it’s OK not to be OK
“We were very fortunate because we actually saw a huge uptick in the utilization of our peer-support program,” said Dr. Farley, noting there was “a threefold increase in individual peer support encounters and a tenfold increase in requests for group support encounters at the height of the pandemic versus baseline.

“That speaks to the culture that we’ve created where it’s OK not to be OK and we’ve truly decreased some of those barriers to help seeking,” she said. “This peer-support program was the most powerful program that we had in terms of how it’s impacted culture and moved us from a place of shame and blame and secrecy … to an environment of mutual support and self-compassion.”

Learn about three keys to a successful peer-support program for physicians.