Confidential Virginia mental health service saves doctors from burnout

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It’s no secret that physicians are reluctant to seek help when they feel they are struggling with their own mental health. While confidential support from a physician health program (PHP) helps doctors in Virginia and across the U.S., physicians seeking care sometimes may benefit more from an in-the-moment resource.

In addition to fearing they'll be stigmatized and judged harshly by their colleagues, many physicians worry they will face repercussions from the medical board or their employers if they seek help. Many also are concerned that their mental health records could become discoverable in a lawsuit.

Executives from the Medical Society of Virginia (MSV) heard those concerns from hundreds of physicians and other clinicians across their state when they embarked on a journey to build a program that offers low-barrier access to mental health care and wellness-related services. MSV was not looking to supplant the state PHP, but rather to offer complementary, confidential services.

MSV’s journey ultimately led to state lawmakers unanimously passing a first-of-its-kind law in 2020 that created a confidential resource called SafeHaven. That is an MSV-administered program in which physicians can seek confidential help 24 hours a day, seven days a week to address career fatigue or mental health issues. The law also guarantees that information that originates in SafeHaven is privileged.

**Landmark accomplishment**

Doctors can access counseling services or peer-to-peer support.

“This is one of the most important things the medical society has ever accomplished, and it is making a real difference for our physicians and their teams,” said Melina Davis, the medical society’s
executive vice president and CEO. “We really believe having the two parts—the protection and confidentiality, and very experienced health care clinicians on the service side—is really important.”

The program has been such a success that the Virginia legislature expanded SafeHaven in 2021 to include medical students, physician-assistant students, nurses, nurse practitioners, nursing students, pharmacists and pharmacy students.

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.

The AMA recently updated its issue brief, “Confidential care to support physician health and wellness” (PDF), which provides model legislative language and other recommended policy actions for states as well as new resources for physicians and state medical associations.

New provisions from Arizona’s recently passed law to support physician well-being are among the updates. They augment laws passed in Virginia, South Dakota and Indiana that are specifically intended to protect physicians seeking help with career fatigue and wellness.

“Supporting physicians’ and medical students’ mental health and wellness is essential to supporting our nation's health,” said AMA President Jack Resneck Jr., MD.

Overwhelming response

Virginia’s SafeHaven program shows that guaranteeing confidentiality and preventing professional repercussions is filling a gap for struggling physicians and other clinicians and students, Davis said. “We strongly support our state PHP, but we also recognized a need to offer multiple, open doors to confidential care. SafeHaven fits that perfectly.”

There are now more than 5,500 physicians and other clinicians involved in the program.
Typically, just 1% of physicians nationally will use physician wellness resources available to them. About 3% to 4% of nurses use them and about 6% to 7% of the general public will use the resources.

“Our utilization is 48% among all of the groups. It is incredible,” Davis said.

Learn how states can help physicians get the confidential care they deserve.

It “saved my career”

A number of physicians have told MSV leaders that they are grateful to have someone looking out for them, Davis said.

For one Virginia doctor, being able to have a 30-minute, confidential peer-to-peer phone call with a doctor in Atlanta helped her stay in medicine.

The physician had several unvaccinated patients die of COVID-19 complications in a two-week period. She had been urging those patients to get vaccinated before they fell ill.

“It was crushing her professionally,” Davis said. But “that coach, she said, helped her shift her thinking around how she was serving and the ways in which she did help the families and the ways in which she did help the patients. She called us back to say, ‘I spent 30 minutes on the telephone with this coach and I believe it saved my career. I can keep practicing.’”

MSV executives are exploring other services they may add to SafeHaven to support physicians, such as one focusing on financial stress. Also, they are working with hospital executives to earn their concrete commitment to help alleviate burnout. They are also working to ensure language tied to state licensure questions does not prevent physicians from saying they sought help.