

Bayhealth Working to Bring Joy Back to Medical Staff

Spotlight: Bayhealth and The Joy in Medicine™ Health System Recognition Program

"If you're at dinner with four other physicians, two of them don't want to go to work the next day. They will sit in their car in the parking lot thinking, 'Do I really have to go in? I just dread going to work.'" According to Thomas E. Vaughan, MD, this is what physician burnout feels like, and it was all too common within his health system, Bayhealth.

Like many health care systems, preventing burnout hasn't always been a priority for Bayhealth, a nonprofit health system with more than 4,000 employees and 400 physicians in central and southern Delaware. For physicians experiencing burnout, days felt never-ending as workloads increased, patient care grew more complex, and time to refresh and regroup was sparse. All of this led to low levels of professional fulfillment, low physician engagement scores, and contentious interactions between physicians and administrators. Through feedback surveys and the American Medical Association (AMA) Mini Z burnout assessment, Bayhealth recognized a need for improvement.

Enter Dr. Vaughan, now chief wellness officer, veteran radiologist, and former chairperson and president of Kent Diagnostic Radiology at Bayhealth. In 2015, he worked on an initiative to improve the patient experience across Bayhealth. Soon after formation, Dr. Vaughan and his team realized that physician well-being would be an essential component in creating a positive patient experience. Physician well-being quickly became a key area of focus for Bayhealth.

Dr. Vaughan and a team of 15 volunteer physician leaders from various specialties charted a course of incremental changes to improve physician well-being. First, the group developed a communication skills training program to improve communication between medical staff and patients. Next came the "Phyxit line" to address the small nuisances that build up and weigh on medical staff. Representatives from the Phyxit line resolved troublesome technology issues, provided food in staff lounges, and moved the storage of medical items to more convenient locations. These simple yet meaningful early improvements generated the momentum and desire for even greater change. The next challenge was securing institutional support and resources.

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"Our team started with a group of doctors that said, 'Let's see what we can do!' Even small things or a single initiative can make a big change."

– THOMAS E. VAUGHAN, MD

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In 2019, Bayhealth adopted the AMA Joy in Medicine Health System Recognition Program as its strategic roadmap to structure wellness initiatives and track successes based on the program's specific criteria,

framework, and milestones. This well-vetted framework, along with personal stories from physicians, was integral to winning support from the hospital board to invest deeper in and more clearly elevate issues around physician well-being.

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“We included local stories of people from our medical staff and the issues they’ve been having.... There was really no choice other than to go down this path [of addressing physician burnout.]”

– THOMAS E. VAUGHAN, MD

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Upon board approval, additional resources were provided for the newly named Medical Staff Wellness Committee and Dr. Vaughan became the chief wellness officer. Several successful programs were launched including the Confidential Coaching and Counseling Program, increased senior administration visits with physicians, and Open Forums, which help enhance communication amongst Bayhealth administration and increase involvement of medical staff in decision-making processes. With the rise of COVID-19 and the pressing need to support physician emotional and mental health, these efforts have been particularly valuable. The Medical Staff Wellness Committee, comprised of approximately 15 physicians and advanced practice clinicians across a spectrum of specialties and practice types, meets monthly to discuss key issues impacting physician well-being and guide the overall well-being strategy for the organization. In 2021, Bayhealth was formally acknowledged by the Joy in Medicine Health System Recognition Program, a public reflection of the challenging yet necessary work happening every day to support physicians.

Bayhealth is in the process of expanding its well-being offerings, which will include the development of an Ambassadors of Wellness Initiative and peer support program. Chosen applicants for the Ambassadors of Wellness Initiative will receive financial compensation to meet monthly for educational meetings and

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“The culture of the organization is enhanced by the fact medical staff know there are many people who are passionately trying to do things that will help them. And I think when people see that, they think, ‘Thank goodness they’re doing something.’”

– THOMAS E. VAUGHAN, MD

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develop initiatives to improve professional fulfillment within their specific specialties. Guided by the AMA Steps Forward™ “Getting Rid of Stupid Stuff” toolkit, Bayhealth also has begun to launch an initiative aimed at reducing unnecessary administrative burdens and tasks for physicians.

Physician dinner discussions now look a bit different than those of past years. These meals still include robust and honest discussions about pain points, but they are also livelier, more vibrant reflections of the joys of practicing medicine.



OPEN FORUM FOR MEMBERS OF THE BAYHEALTH MEDICAL STAFF INCLUDING PHYSICIANS AND ADVANCED PRACTICE CLINICIANS