

Keeping North Carolina's Health Care Workforce Well

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Supporting the wellness needs of North Carolina's health care workforce is crucial for maintaining a robust health care delivery system for all North Carolinians. Organizations and policymakers can provide needed supports to ensure the well-being of health care workers.

Introduction

A robust and healthy health care workforce is the backbone of a thriving health care infrastructure and essential to the overall health of all North Carolinians. Health care organizations know their teams are their most precious resource.

What does wellness mean to the health care workforce? It is both the individual worker's physical and mental wellness, and the overall cultural wellness of an organization's workforce.

There are several areas where organizations and policymakers can direct their focus to make a difference. Employers should continue to focus on employee well-being, including identifying a leader with responsibility for employee wellness and creating a culture of care. Employers should address workplace safety concerns, particularly with regard to workplace violence. Additionally, instruction in in-depth de-escalation techniques is an important component of a robust employee training program. Other supports, including child care, educational loan supports, and housing, as well as traditional supports like encouraging physical fitness, robust time-off policies, and employee assistance programs (EAPs), should continue and be evaluated for efficacy. Regulators and employers should examine the overburden of documentation requirements and administrative tasks. Finally, North Carolina's behavioral health network should be strengthened, not only to support our communities, but to include supporting those who care for their communities—members of the health care workforce.

Creating a Culture of Care

Before the pandemic, rates of burnout for health care workers were high. After two years of COVID-19, the pressures are greater. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) notes that health care workers often experi-

ence "intensely stressful and emotional situations," including human suffering, death, and hazardous conditions, and these things, coupled with a highly regulated work environment, "lead to extraordinary stress" [1]. The North Carolina Nurses Association (NCNA) conducted a survey in early 2022 that found that nurses in the state were experiencing high levels of burnout as COVID-19 pressures and workforce shortages exacerbated already stressed staff [2].

There are many examples of how North Carolina health care organizations are working to create a culture of care for their teams. Involving the community in efforts to create that culture of care creates a larger sense of connection between health care teams and the communities they serve.

Throughout the pandemic, many health care organizations provided hot meals, mental health counseling, and additional child care services to employees. Those efforts continue and are vital for retaining valuable staff. In addition, training in resilience techniques is ongoing from providers and organizations like the North Carolina Board of Nursing, which stresses that resilience training is critical to ensuring patient safety as well as the overall health and well-being of the nursing workforce [3]. As an example of this, Cone Health offers internal classes that teach resilience and tools for building one's capacity to enhance resilience every day. There are also curated courses and videos available on demand, and recommended reading and courses to help guide employees.

At Wayne UNC Health Care, the community has rallied around staff in support. As late as 2021, community members still came to the hospital parking lot to offer prayers every morning. In addition, they show appreciation through meals and care packages for hospital employees as well as events designed to both lower stress for employees and provide local support. Painting lessons for health care workers produce artwork that is then sold to raise money for local charities. In turn, workers form a closer bond with community members in a non-work setting [4].

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A recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* suggests that solutions to burnout include working with clinicians and care teams to ensure that they know when their care is at its best, creating strong supports for them, and helping them relieve the day-to-day stressors. The article states that, “individuals who like what they are doing, are highly connected to their work, are able to see patients as individuals, and believe the organization is doing its utmost to deliver great care for patients are four to six times more likely to stay with the organization” [5].

North Carolina hospitals have also been ensuring accountability for creating a culture of care at the leadership level. For example, at ECU Health, Dr. Christina Bowen was appointed the first Chief Well-being Officer. In this newly created role, part of the goal is to develop, guide, and implement health care workforce wellness initiatives founded on evidence-based best practices and organizational data. In addition, ECU Health intends to use wellness teams to introduce and support new programs that positively influence the population health of the communities they serve. “There is nothing more valuable and contributory to our health care outcomes than the wonderful humans that show up every day to deliver health care and caring to the communities we serve,” Dr. Julie Oehlert, ECU Health Chief Experience Officer, said in a news release announcing the new position [6].

Addressing Workplace Safety

Health care workers are at high risk for experiencing violence in the workplace, particularly in the hospital setting, though assaults may occur in all settings and have numerous root causes [7]. Nearly 75% of workplace assaults happen in health care settings; 70% of emergency room nurses report having been hit or kicked by patients, though only 3% reported pressing charges [8]. It is critical for health care organizations to work with their teams to create environments that value employees’ safety and reduce or eliminate workplace violence.

In North Carolina, it is a Class D felony to assault a health care worker, punishable by up to 13 years in prison. However, this does not prevent assaults from happening in our state, nor does it address the known underreporting of incidents [9].

In recent months, there have been several high-profile incidents in North Carolina hospitals. Records from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department show a total of 45 reported assaults on staff at Atrium Health Carolinas Medical Center (CMC) and Novant Health Presbyterian Hospital in a six-month period between September 2021 and March 2022, and 21 assaults reported at CMC Main, in addition to 24 assaults reported at Novant Presbyterian in that time [9].

Health care organizations are working with their teams to ensure their environments are as safe as possible and that they have the tools, resources, and support they need.

Statements released from North Carolina health systems reflect their commitment to a safe work environment; Novant Health has noted that it has a “zero tolerance policy for workplace violence,” while Atrium Health notes a “Zero Harm – For All” initiative [9].

The North Carolina Healthcare Association also issued a statement after a recent shooting incident at Duke Raleigh Hospital, noting support for the Safety from Violence for Healthcare Workers (SAVE) Act recently introduced in Congress [10].

Some of the strategies health care organizations put into place to address violence include: robust de-escalation technique training to aid frontline staff in reducing tension as incidents unfold; facility hardening techniques like controlled entry points, enhanced security and monitoring, and signage; and enhancing and supporting a culture of incident reporting and post-event worker support.

Preventing loss of workforce due to work stressors as well as ensuring safe working environments will continue to challenge health care organizations.

Addressing the Whole-Person Wellness Needs of our Health Care Workforce

Employee assistance programs are prevalent in health care organizations and have been for many years. Instituting and continuing to strengthen programs where health care workers are offered increased access to mental health care is a vital step that organizations can take to care for their teams. Several recent surveys highlight the broad spectrum of support that employees hope to gain from their organizations. In a Bank of America survey, “family life” and “financial stressors” closely followed “emotional health” as the top three employee assistance programs needed by employees [11].

As an example of emotional and mental health support offered by employers, Atrium Health provides both spiritual and emotional care services to address compassion fatigue and burnout. Atrium Health also created a program called Code Lavender, which provides rapid-response mental health support from behavioral health practitioners to frontline workers [12]. Team members are provided with immediate resources in the form of a hotline staffed by mental health practitioners on staff, as well as access to wraparound services such as training, information, behavioral health benefit packages, and other employee assistance programs.

In addition to traditional mental wellness programs, some hospitals are also recognizing the need to provide support for underlying issues that contribute to overall mental wellness. Bank of America conducted a study in 2020 that found that financial services accounted for 47% of hospital employees, employee assistance plan requests [11]. Health care organizations and policy makers can provide benefits like tuition reimbursement, loan repayment and forgiveness programs, and benefits like transportation and housing cost offsets that provide additional financial relief to employees and their families. In the NC Sentinel Network survey, a lack

of affordable housing was cited as one of the reasons for unfilled vacancies [13].

Conclusion

North Carolina, like most of America, is experiencing workforce shortages in all areas. The current health care-specific workforce challenges are worrisome considering projected nursing shortages. In November of 2021, the North Carolina Area Health Education Centers began to survey health care facilities across the state and found they reported "exceptionally long" vacancies for open positions [13].

What is at stake? Everything. A resilient, healthy health care workforce is crucial to ensuring a health care network for all North Carolinians. Without addressing the stresses facing our workforce, rates of burnout and vacancies will remain high. NCMJ

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