

# Five Key Strategies to Help Health Centers Protect Against Staff Burnout



The nature of work in community health often puts health center employees at risk for burnout. Also, confronting the challenges that vulnerable patient populations face, while experiencing your own challenges and stressors, can be emotional and draining. Responding to the COVID 19 pandemic, health centers faced increased staffing shortages<sup>1</sup> and more acute stress on the mental health of their staff. This resource, prepared with input from health center staff, will provide information about burnout, how it impacts the mental health of health center employees and offers strategies to prevent it by promoting employee wellness and creating healthy work environments.

## What is Staff Burnout?

Burnout is a serious health risk that can, in severe cases, lead to clinical depression, physical illness and even suicide.<sup>2</sup> Individuals experiencing burnout may also suffer anxiety, distress, low motivation, poor decision making, shortened attention span, and other mental health impacts.<sup>3</sup> Employers, including health centers, should watch for these key indicators amongst their staff:

- Exposure to prolonged stressful conditions, such as excessive work hours or work safety concerns.
- Signs of exhaustion (i.e. fatigue, physical pain, or frequent illness).<sup>4</sup>
- Discouragement about progress towards the mission or their own future with the company.
- A negative attitude toward their effectiveness.<sup>5</sup>

Health center employees who experience burnout usually have concerns about the following:

- Work overload – *Can I keep up with so many increasing demands on me?*
- Lack of control – *Do I have enough flexibility in how I complete my tasks?*
- Insufficient Reward – *Is this job really worth it if I get sick?*
- Sense of teamwork and belonging – *Do I feel supported in this work environment?*
- Absence of fairness – *My job has changed, am I getting the right salary?*
- Values conflict – *Will I get sick? Is my work conflicting with the needs of my family?*<sup>6</sup>

Health centers benefit in promoting employee wellness and creating a resilient workforce<sup>7</sup> to avoid burnout and its impact. By being proactive, health centers may reduce employee turnover, increase productivity, improve employee safety, health, and work satisfaction, and are able to build stronger relationships with their staff.

# Top 5 Strategies to Support Employee Mental Health and Well Being



## 1. Implement a Company-Wide Wellness Mindset

Recognizing the importance of positive mental health and employee self-care at the organizational level creates collective responsibility and systems of support.<sup>8</sup>

Employers should:

- Promote understanding and empathy as part of an organizational commitment to protect the health of employees. Consider creating a “Wellness Statement” or “Self-care Commitment” that includes input from staff and leadership.<sup>9</sup> [Click to view sample organizational statements.](#)<sup>11</sup>
- Recognize the risk of burnout, the serious consequences it can have, and provide training to leaders, managers, and staff on ways to identify its symptoms. Use brochures, website pages and other resources to amplify the message.
- Develop and/or update personnel policies and provide information about employee assistance programs available to staff.



## 2. Create Solutions at the Organizational Level

When leaders address employee concerns proactively, they improve organizational communication and build a healthy work environment. Employers should:

- Conduct annual employee surveys – find a survey partner that specializes in the health center community to evaluate employee satisfaction, departmental turnover, attendance, and compensation structures.
- Welcome employee feedback – provide an effective channel of communication for employees to voice their concerns and needs to leadership.
- Recognize and award employee performance.
- Keep job descriptions up to date and ensure compensation aligns with job duties.
- Offer opportunities for workforce development – provide training and offer coaching to help employees grow and build their capacity.



## 3. Create Sustainable Workloads

The daily struggle to meet needs with limited resources is a top concern reported by employees. To create sustainable workloads, employers should:

- Use temporary staffing to alleviate workloads.
- Negotiate scheduling or allow staff to provide feedback on their preferences.
- Empower staff to take personal time off to balance work and home life.



## 4. Fix Inefficiencies

Broken workflows, red tape and wasted resources can be very frustrating to the workforce. Employers should address any areas that interrupt service delivery and impact employee performance and workflow:

- Use effective planning to ensure improvement projects do not stall.
- Recognize that team-based care and managing patient load can be effective tools for protecting against provider burnout.<sup>10</sup>
- Staff can be part of the solution to identify and address issues that disrupt health center operations.



## 5. Incorporate Self-Care Practices and Provide Support

Engaging staff in self-care practices fosters a community of support and helps maintain a healthy work/life balance. Employers should:

- Engage teams to find creative solutions to encourage self-care and list their solutions in a public space. Model positive self-care and encourage these practices daily.
- Offer workshops and staff trainings on communication, empathy, cultural humility, stress reduction, resilience, mindfulness, and other wellness and mental health related topics.
- Develop wellness programs, events, and/or provide incentives to gym or recreational center memberships for staff to access outlets that promote wellness.



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<sup>1</sup>Corallo B, Tolbert J, Rice, C, Dingel H. Most Common Challenge for Community Health centers Has Shifted from Vaccine Supply to Staffing Needed to Meet Demand. Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/slide/most-common-challenge-for-community-health-centers-has-shifted-from-vaccine-supply-to-staffing-needed-to-meet-demand/>. Published April 22, 2021. Accessed February 3, 2022.

<sup>2</sup>Maslach, Christina. Understanding Job Burnout presented at: Devops Enterprise Summit. Las Vegas, NV. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRPBkCW0R5E>. Published October 24, 2018. Accessed February 3, 2022.

<sup>3</sup>WebMD.com. (Medically reviewed by Dan Brennan, MD). What to Know About Work Burnout. <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/what-to-know-about-work-burnout#091e9c5e82154f9e-1-4>. Published October 25, 2021. Accessed February 2, 2022.

<sup>4</sup>WebMD.com. (Medically reviewed by Dan Brennan, MD) Burnout Symptoms and Signs. <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/burnout-symptoms-signs#091e9c5e82154f9e-1-4>. Published December 3, 2020. Accessed February 2, 2022.

<sup>5</sup>Maslach, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRPBkCW0R5E>

<sup>6</sup>Maslach, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRPBkCW0R5E>

<sup>7</sup>Miller L, Carrillo, G. A Renewed Mind at Work. Presented at: Wellness Institute: National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start. November 4, 2021. New Orleans, LA.

<sup>8</sup>Health Outreach Partners. Organizational Self-Care: Addressing the Collective Responsibility of Your Employees Wellbeing. <https://outreach-partners.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/HOP-Organizational-Self-care-Resource.pdf>. Published June 21, 2021. Accessed February 3, 2022.

<sup>9</sup>Health Outreach Partners; <https://outreach-partners.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/HOP-Organizational-Self-care-Resource.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup>Smith C, Balatbat C, Corbridge, S, et. al. Implementing Optimal Team-Based Care to Reduce Clinician Burnout. National Academy of Medicine. <https://nam.edu/implementing-optimal-team-based-care-to-reduce-clinician-burnout>. Published September 17, 2018. Accessed Feb 3, 2022.

<sup>11</sup>Tompkins County, New York; Creating Healthy Places: Tompkins County Worksites. <https://tompkinscountyny.gov/wellness/healthyplaces>. Accessed: May, 2022.