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The Physicians Foundation, Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation and #FirstRespondersFirst Call on Health Organizations to Implement Solutions Physicians Deserve for Their Mental Health and Wellbeing

The Physicians Foundation's New Survey Unveils Disconnect Between What Physicians Want and What the Support System Around Them Provides

September 17, 2022

In recognition of National Physician Suicide Awareness Day (September 17, 2022), [The Physicians Foundation](#), [Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation](#) and [#FirstRespondersFirst](#) have come together to accelerate systems change so physicians' burnout does not become a mental health emergency. Through [Vital Signs: The Campaign to Prevent Physician Suicide](#), the organizations are galvanizing others to take action on the system level so that each physician feels supported on an individual level.

“Unsurprisingly, our [2022 Survey of America's Physicians](#) uncovered that there has not been any change in physician burnout in the past year, and it remains significantly higher (62%) than pre-pandemic times (40% in 2018),” said Gary Price, M.D., president of The Physicians Foundation. “Physician burnout has not gone unnoticed by our profession or by society, and yet there is still stigma surrounding mental health care, underlying system barriers and a lack of solutions in action to address them.”

Understandably, the past two and a half years of the COVID-19 pandemic have taken a toll on physicians' mental health. However, eight in 10 physicians (80%) reported that there is stigma surrounding mental health and seeking mental health care among physicians.



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non-physicians.

“It is time that we start paying attention to signs of burnout in ourselves and our colleagues and do something about it,” said Dr. Capparelli.

The steps to better support physicians are not a secret—physicians have identified who and what supports their mental health and wellbeing most. Confidential therapy, counseling or support phone lines (65%) and peer-to-peer support groups (57%) were rated as the most helpful resources among physicians who had experience with the resource. Additionally, nine workplace solutions were identified as helpful by most physicians (70–89%), including removing low-value work, ensuring adequate mental health care outside of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and giving physicians more flexibility and autonomy.

In addition, firearm accessibility is a significant risk factor for death by suicide among adults.⁶ Improving access to mental health treatment and early intervention remain ongoing goals to reduce the incidence of gun violence and suicide. Physicians are also uniquely positioned to mitigate risk through screening and counseling patients regarding firearm safety, just as they do for other health-related behaviors such as healthy diet, physical activity, and injury prevention.

“With physicians having one of the highest suicide rates of any profession, we must do more to get the mental health resources in their hands and wellbeing workforce solutions implemented in every practice environment,” said Shekhar Saxena, professor of the Practice of Global Mental Health, Department of Global Health and Population at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and mental health subject matter expert for #FirstRespondersFirst. “That’s why we have curated [evidenced-based physician suicide prevention resources](#) and developed the [Healthcare Workforce Rescue Package](#) that can build a foundation for a long-term wellbeing strategy for any health system. There is no excuse for not acting on this critical issue.”

A lasting change will result when everyone works to break down stigma and health leaders take systemwide action. Unfortunately, only about one-third (36%) of physicians agree that their workplace culture prioritizes physician wellbeing. Additionally, most physicians



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mental health care because of questions asked in medical licensure, credentialing or insurance applications,” said Corey Feist, co-founder and president of the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes’ Foundation. “My sister-in-law Dr. Lorna Breen, who died by suicide in April 2020, was also one of these physicians. She was convinced that if she received mental health care, she would lose her medical license or face ostracism from colleagues. Sadly, we have heard from a number of families who lost physicians to suicide and their loved ones who expressed nearly identical concerns to Lorna.”

Many medical boards have audited and changed the intrusive language from their licensure applications. As of August 24, 2022, 17 states, including California, Hawaii, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Texas, Utah and Washington, have aligned their applications to either:

- Ask one question consistent with the Federation of State Medical Board’s recommended language that addresses all mental and physical health conditions as one, with no added explanations, asterisks or fine print
- Refrain from asking probing questions about an applicant’s health altogether
- Implement an Attestation Model that uses supportive language around mental health and offers “safe haven” non-reporting options to physicians who are receiving care

“With creating the first-of-its kind map that recognizes the states who are all in for changing their medical licensure applications, we hope to see more medical boards make this life-saving change and hospitals and health systems to follow suit with their credentialing applications,” continues Feist.

“It is undeniable that physicians need and deserve better. Investing in physician wellbeing solutions not only benefits physicians, but it also improves the health of our entire country. By prioritizing physician wellbeing, patient outcomes will improve, because to care for others, physicians must first be cared for themselves,” concludes Dr. Price.

Read the full survey results and methodology [here](#). Learn more and access the resources and solutions mentioned at [NPSADay.org](https://www.npsaday.org).