

APPENDIX



Federation of State Physician Health Programs

PHYSICIAN WELLNESS PROGRAMS AND PHYSICIAN HEALTH PROGRAMS – A POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP

Chris Bundy, MD, MPH, Chief Medical Officer, Federation of State Physician Health Programs & Executive Medical Director, Washington Physician Health Program

Physician Health Programs (PHPs) have been providing support and advocacy for health professionals for nearly forty years. Most were developed by state medical societies in the 1980s that recognized a need for a therapeutic alternative to discipline for physicians who were suffering from health conditions that could impair their ability to safely practice. In the early years, PHPs mostly helped physicians with substance use disorders. Today, almost all PHPs provide assistance with a broad range of conditions that may impact safe practice including mental health, substance, and non-psychiatric health conditions.

The increasing prevalence of burnout in healthcare, superimposed on the relentless demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, has created an unprecedented need for emotional and psychological support for the healing professions. Today, this need has resulted in an ever-expanding universe of individuals and organizations offering services in the physician wellness space. Ironically, this sometimes makes finding the right help confusing. As partners that both sprang out of organized medicine, PHPs and Physician Wellness Programs (PWP) can complement and support one another's work.

When to refer to a PHP:

Physicians are trained to take care of others. It is not uncommon for physicians to minimize their own health concerns and seek services at a lower intensity than may be effective for the severity of their condition. Along with this tendency is fear, stigma, time constraints, overreliance on

self-diagnosis, financial constraints, and other barriers. As such, PWP will encounter physicians with health conditions of sufficient severity to pose a risk of impairment and need to know their clinical and legal obligations under those circumstances. Consulting with the state's PHP is without cost and can help PWP understand how to identify when it may be appropriate to refer to a PHP. This should be considered when a physician is showing signs of mental health illness, substance use disorder, or other health conditions which could pose a risk to safe medical practice. The state PHP can also assist a PWP in understanding any reporting requirements that may exist when assisting health professionals who are experiencing potentially impairing conditions.

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Early Referral to a PHP Saves Careers and Increases Patient Safety:

Early referral to a PHP can allow for consideration of a much-needed medical leave, peer support, and treatment with demonstrated successful outcomes while minimizing risk to patient safety. PHPs are also available to consult with PWP anonymously regarding individual cases and assist with recommendations. PHPs are not the state medical board but are authorized to confidentially receive referrals in lieu of a mandatory report to the medical board when concerns of impairment arise. PHP participants have exceptionally strong confidentiality protections, and their identity is not disclosed to the medical board unless there is a threat to patient safety. All PHPs encourage voluntary self-referrals and accept referrals from colleagues that can remain confidential. The ultimate goal of a PHP is for early intervention, before there are adverse professional consequences or a complaint is made to the medical board. PHPs provide verification of health status and safety to practice when required by an employer, credentialing entity, or licensing board. In short, early referral to a PHP by a PWP can prevent negative consequences to a physician's career, while providing a

higher level of care when the PWP encounters health issues beyond its scope of services.

To incentivize confidential help-seeking, many state licensing boards are revising their health questions by eliminating invasive questions. In many states, safe-haven language exists such that participants of PHPs can answer “no” to questions asking about health conditions if they are compliant with their state PHP. For example, “Are you currently suffering from any condition for which you are not being appropriately treated that impairs your judgment or that would otherwise adversely affect your ability to practice medicine in a competent, ethical, and professional manner? (Yes/No)” You may answer “no” if you are a participant in good standing with the state-recognized physician health program (PHP).”

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When Counseling and Professional Coaching is Sufficient:

Conversely, PHPs will encounter physicians who are not at risk for impairment and would benefit from a service and support offered by the PWP. PHPs can refer such individuals to a PWP and provide referral information for the PWP to healthcare organizations, employers, and supervisors who are reaching out to the PHP for physician wellness resources such as counseling and professional coaching. Many PHPs engage their healthcare communities through education and outreach events and can use those venues to help raise awareness of PWP services. PHPs and PWPs can co-sponsor educational events, promote one another on their websites and on social media, and join forces on important advocacy issues such as licensure and credentialing question reforms, confidentiality protections, reducing stigma and discrimination, and other issues impacting physician wellness and impairment.

PHPs and PWPs were both born out of organized medicine’s efforts to address unmet health and wellness needs in the physician workforce. Together we can ensure that there is

no wrong door for physicians seeking help. Together we can change the lives of physicians for the better. Together we can advocate most effectively for the health and wellbeing of the profession while promoting high-quality care.

..... **What is involved in referring myself or a colleague to a PHP:**

When someone is referred to a PHP it typically means they are a physician or a healthcare professional, and there are concerns about their health or well-being. Here's what you can generally expect when a health professional contacts a PHP:

- **Assessment:** The PHP will conduct an assessment to determine the nature and extent of the healthcare professional's issues. This assessment may include a comprehensive evaluation of their physical and mental health, as well as an assessment of any potential mental health concerns including substance use disorder. Often there will be a need to use evaluators with special expertise in the assessment and unique needs of health professionals.
- **Treatment Recommendations:** Based on the assessment, a treatment plan tailored to the individual's specific needs will be recommended. This plan may include counseling, medical care, professional coaching, or other interventions.
- **Health Support and Advocacy:** If a serious health condition is diagnosed, the PHP will typically engage the participant in a program to ensure wrap-around care and document health status to advocate and support continuation or return to practice. This can involve peer support groups, toxicology testing, meetings with healthcare providers, and ongoing support.
- **Confidentiality:** PHPs often emphasize confidentiality to encourage healthcare professionals to seek help without fear of professional repercussions. The level of confidentiality may vary depending on state laws

and the specific circumstances of the referral, so we encourage each person to seek out clarity upon contacting their PHP.

- **Reporting to Licensing Boards:** PHPs may have obligations to report program or health support agreement violations to the state medical board as delineated in the contract, statute, or regulation. Ideally, a PHP should only be required to report situations in which a participant poses a risk to patient safety and is uncooperative with efforts to mitigate that risk. In many states, a majority of PHP participants are never known to their licensing board, and that is the goal.
- **Ongoing Support:** PHPs may provide ongoing support to healthcare professionals after they complete their initial health support agreement through continuing care agreements, annual reunions, and other activities to maintain long-term health and wellbeing.

The specific processes and services offered by PHPs can vary from one state to another, but they generally follow a similar framework. It's important to engage with the PHP and follow their recommendations to address the underlying issues and continue or regain the ability to practice medicine safely and ethically.

Considerations for When to Refer to a PHP: A Summary

Sooner or later, those who aim to assist physicians will encounter a concern for impairment and need to respond accordingly. As such, mental health providers and wellness professionals who serve physicians and other health professionals outside of the purview of a PHP should:

1. Thoughtfully appraise their ability to ensure safety to practice for professionals in their care and understand the legal and ethical requirements for protecting public safety within the context of the therapeutic relationship.

2. Understand the circumstances in which involvement with a PHP might offer a benefit such as the need for advocacy in employment, credentialing, or licensing matters.
3. Utilize the added layer of confidentiality protection that PHPs offer when a reportable concern for impairment arises.
4. Familiarize themselves with their state's PHP and consult (anonymously if needed) if concerns of impairment arise.

Proactive collaboration and relationship-building with the PHP can help facilitate an excellent outcome when one is faced with a health professional in distress.

All but three states have a Physician Health Program that meets FSPHP criteria for membership. Three states that do not currently have a program are Nebraska, California, and Wisconsin. Efforts are underway to develop a PHP in these states. A complete directory of [PHPs is here](https://www.fsphp.org/state-programs).
<https://www.fsphp.org/state-programs>

For more information:

Contact FSPHP at lbresnahan@fsphp.org and visit <https://www.fsphp.org/>

To contact your state PHP: <https://www.fsphp.org/state-programs>

Videos about PHPs: <https://www.fsphp.org/state-program-videos>

Stories from Participants: <https://www.fsphp.org/php-participant-stories>

More resources: <https://www.fsphp.org/resources>