

BoardBrief

Knowledge Resources for Governing Effectiveness

Staff Retention: Creative Ideas for Management and the Board

For years, the news has been rife with stories of burnout and stress among health care providers. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated what was already very challenging and complex work for clinicians and support staff, as well as their leaders. A confused and inadequate response to the pandemic and early vaccination efforts led to further frustration for those working on the front line, both taking care of COVID-19 patients and trying to remain healthy to help those needing care. The lessons we are already learning from the pandemic will shape the future of health care, and provide invaluable lessons learned for hospital and health system leaders.

This BoardBrief is intended as a creative resource for both boards and management teams in any health care setting. While some of these ideas require financial resources, others are quick, simple and relatively easy tactics to demonstrate appreciation to those caring for patients, residents, and the broader community.

Workforce Burnout

Recruiting and retaining competent staff and physicians has never been easy. Regional shortages of nurses, physicians, therapists and others have plagued rural and public health care settings for many years. As COVID-19 pandemic surges plagued long-term care and acute care hospitals, individual organizations fiercely competed for regular and supplemental staff.

Caring for patients during the pandemic, while trying to keep themselves and their families safe, has been acknowledged as the biggest lifetime challenge for many health care professionals.

Research suggests that there are eight dimensions which drive burnout among physicians and nurses:² workload, efficiency, control and flexibility, work-life integration, finding meaning in work, fairness and equity, collegiality, and values alignment with the organization.

While challenges in these dimensions vary by organization, the pandemic exacerbated what was already a complex retention situation. Board and leadership actions to address concerns from staff and physicians go a long way to ensuring that caregivers feel safe and cared about by their leadership.

To adequately care for patients during the pandemic, health care providers in particular need both tangible actions as well as psychological support from leaders. When California's Santa Clara County became a COVID hot spot, Stanford Medicine leaders made that shift.³ They started by identifying the at-risk populations: the elderly/immunocompromised, and the health care workforce. Leaders then implemented a

The Impact of Burnout

The National Academy of Science, Engineering and Medicine has identified seven areas governing boards should know about burnout and professional fulfillment in clinicians:⁴

1. Burnout is prevalent among health care professionals
2. The well-being of health care professionals affects the quality of care delivered
3. Health care professionals' distress costs organizations significant money (lost productivity, turnover, safety errors)
4. Greater personal resilience alone is not a reasonable solution
5. Different occupations, settings and disciplines have unique needs
6. Evidence-based tactics are available to address the problem
7. Interventions can work, if customized, and when recipients feel that their feedback and opinions matter

strategy to care for the workforce, beginning with activating the hospital emergency incident control system. The approach focused both on practical matters as well as psychological safety concerns and meeting the basic needs of faculty and staff.

Retaining Staff and Physicians: A Sample of Ideas

Management, physicians and staff should have frank discussions of what ideas might work for their own organization. Some ideas, such as front-line staff bonuses, may or may not be affordable for all organizations.^{5, 6}

When offering financial incentives for retention, leadership questions for consideration may include:

- What is the long-term financial impact on the organization's financial health?
- Does this set a precedent that will need to be managed? Is this likely to be a one-time circumstance or may it need to be repeated in the future? The term "hazard pay" has some connotations which could mirror other problems (e.g., clinical or geographic areas experiencing high violence incidents).
- Should all staff receive a bonus or just front-line workers?
- How does this fit within union contract provisions?

Of course, examining and keeping pace with what other health care organizations in the market are offering as retention incentives—both financial and non-financial—is important.

The Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) surveyed staff in long-term care facilities, which were especially impacted during the pandemic. A summary of ideas based on the IHI's findings are outlined below.⁷

Ensure Staff are Safe

- Obtain sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) and make it readily accessible. This includes having equipment at the point of care. If PPE is visible, abundant, and available, staff members will be reminded to wear all necessary pieces.
- Consider making PPE available for home use for families of health care workers.
- Establish back-up processes for critical or emotionally challenging situations.
- Keep staff continually informed about changes using newsletters, bulletin boards, huddles, stand-up and stand-down meetings, and information while rounding.
- Help staff members to take precautions at home and to teach their household members about safety.

Provide Employee Assistance Programs and Other Support

- Offer mental health services virtually or in person.
- Make debriefing discussions available (but optional) before staff members head home from their shifts.
- Connect with a local hospice care provider to offer grief and bereavement counseling.
- Designate a quiet room that staff can visit for privacy and stress relief during a shift.

Offer Staff Appreciation and Enjoyable Diversions

- Use “positive gossip” to spread good news by word of mouth so leaders can celebrate staff members who perform beyond expectations.
- Recognize staff for a job well done verbally, through events (such as

luncheons, snacks), or in writing (such as thank you cards).

- Provide staff a basket of ingredients for a nice meal at home.
- Provide healthy, energy-boosting treats.
- On special occasions (such as holidays), hold regular prize drawings throughout the day.
- Celebrate successes by handing out tokens that can be redeemed at an on-site store.
- Encourage and make it easy for families to identify staff who have earned special recognition.

Make Mandatory COVID-19 Testing More Convenient

- Combine testing with mandatory education or other activities.
- Offer testing on weekends or on patient care units.
- Utilize rapid testing, with potential to confirm as needed with PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction, which is considered more reliable than a rapid test).
- Hire a contractor for regular testing to reduce burden on other staff members and improve process reliability.

Strengthen Communication and Build Knowledge

- **Huddle daily.** Consider starting each huddle with positive messages to set the tone. Listen to the staff on what’s not working. Be flexible! Consider trying a quick process improvement project on the spot to test a change immediately.
- **Communicate often.** Use mass communication tactics to get messages to

Questions for Board Discussion

- What are our current retention statistics for key staff and physicians? Have they changed over the course of the pandemic?
- What does our staff satisfaction and physician satisfaction data tell us about the current situation? How has this changed in the past year?
- Have we learned anything different from our staff and physicians about intent to stay and any dissatisfiers that are controllable? What are these issues and how have we thought about addressing them?
- What creative ideas have we implemented to help our staff and physicians 'stay the course' with our organization? Have we budgeted additional funds for key initiatives (monetary and/or non-monetary) to retain our best performers?
- Are there ways the board can help support management's efforts to strengthen recruitment and retention?

staff and physicians quickly and consistently. Invest in keeping policies and treatment guidelines current with technology enablers.

- **Provide professional development.** Offer financial support for continuing education and cross-training for staff; this can help reduce future staffing shortages and demonstrate the organization's investment in the staff long-term.
- **Involve chaplains or other spiritual counselors** in facilitating connections to help support families, rather than leaving this responsibility solely to nursing staff.
- **Listen to staff.** It is critically important to ask staff and physicians at the point of care what they need and what barriers make it hard to comply with care guidelines.

Offer Practical Assistance

Other pragmatic ideas to help retain staff and physicians during the pandemic include:⁸

- Consider transportation to and from work for staff who need assistance (e.g., hospital vans, Uber or Lyft, etc.).
- Offer loans and/or salary advances to those whose spouses have lost their jobs.
- Work with community resources to help with child and elder care assistance.
- Evaluate what tasks can be delegated to non-clinical persons (e.g., administrative, clerical, etc.) to help relieve clinical staff of some of the workload.
- Work with local grocery stores to get deliveries of scarce items staff need—provide home delivery or special accommodations for front-line staff unable to shop during hours stores are open.

Sample Creative Ideas

One of the bright spots in the COVID-19 pandemic is the way communities have come together to support front-line caregivers. Below are a few examples.

1. One hospital executive ran from Bartlesville to Tulsa, Oklahoma to honor COVID-19 nurses ([see the story here.](#))
2. A family in Wallingford, Connecticut sold homemade lawn signs (red hearts with “thank you” in white paint) to raise money for health care workers to receive free coffee from a gourmet coffee truck ([see the story here.](#))
3. Many communities have organized efforts to bring food to nurses, doctors and first responders throughout the pandemic ([see some examples here.](#))
4. People across the country have posted signs in their windows and yards to thank health care workers during the pandemic. There have been community-wide displays as well, including beautiful painted murals, 8-foot thank you signs on fences, sand art, chalk drawings, flower bouquets and more ([see some examples here.](#))
5. Organizations have established emergency relief funds for health care workers, helping with basics such as day care costs, mental health services and hardship assistance ([see an example here at UC Health in Colorado](#))
6. Hospitals and health systems have created a process to organize community support, using websites and other communication channels to provide a list of ways that community members can donate support, ranging from food, supplies, financial donations, blood, thank you notes and more ([see an example at UChicago Medicine.](#))
7. The United Way created a virtual portal for individuals to send a virtual thank you note to a health care worker ([see an example here.](#))
8. Google, the American Hospital Association and others have created videos highlighting the “health care heroes” and raising money to combat the pandemic ([click here for the Google video](#))

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