

a VITAL WorkLife article

How to Improve Culture with a Well Being Advocate Program

By Liz Ferron, MSW, LICSW



Coming up in the article:

- *What is a Well Being Advocate Program*
- *The purpose of a Well Being Advocate and how to maximize their potential*
- *Goals every healthcare organization should keep while considering their physicians' well being*
- *Information on how your healthcare organization can get started with the Well Being Advocate Program*

Promoting and supporting physician well being is being acknowledged as a crucial responsibility for healthcare organizations. Making sure physicians are healthy themselves is a moral and ethical imperative, of course; but it's also a bottom-line issue. Physicians who are overstressed and heading for burnout may make medical errors, bring down patient satisfaction scores and contribute to other problems. On the other hand, prioritizing physician well being can increase engagement and retention and serve as a powerful recruiting tool.¹

Formal physician well being programs are a key element in this picture, but as Bryan Bohman, MD, and colleagues point out in the NEJM Catalyst, fostering a culture of well being which permeates and characterizes the organization from top to bottom is foundational. The writers define this culture as, "a set of normative values, attitudes and behaviors that promote self-care, personal and professional growth and compassion for colleagues, patients and self."

When such attitudes are present throughout the organization, physicians feel supported; and as the Catalyst writers assert, "physicians who feel supported by their organizations tend to contribute more to improvement efforts that increase the efficiency of their practices. They are also more likely to attend to their own personal resilience."²

1. Tait Shanafelt, MD et al., "The Business Case for Investing in Physician Well-Being," JAMA Internal Medicine, September 25, 2017.

2. Bryan Bohman, MD, et al., "Physician Well-Being: The Reciprocity of Practice Efficiency, Culture of Wellness, and Personal Resilience," NEJM Catalyst, August 7, 2017



What Is a Well Being Advocate?

Precisely because a culture of well being needs to operate throughout the entire organization, from the ground floor to the C suites, creating one isn't quick or easy. But there is a formally defined program VITAL WorkLife offers that can positively impact an organization's work to create a culture of well being—while at the same time engaging physicians in supporting their colleagues and their own personal well being. The Well Being Advocate Program.

The Well Being Advocate is someone who voluntarily takes a strong interest in the adoption, implementation and success of physician well being resources within the organization. He or she understands the issues and solutions related to physician well being, has a deep understanding of both the internal and external resources available and is also able to make effective referrals to resources.

Kay Roberts, MA, President of VITAL WorkLife and an executive coach, explained further, "A Well Being Advocate is someone who agrees to notice what's going on with his or her colleagues from a holistic perspective," she says, "and is able to approach them with resources that can be helpful—helpful in a whole spectrum of situations, ranging from a crisis to a desire for professional development."

So, while the Advocate watches out for signs colleagues may be suffering from burnout, depression or other problems affecting their well being, he or she is also ready to offer ongoing support in non-crisis situations and to be a "voice of inspiration" supporting well being as a value in the organization.

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Kay Roberts, MA, VITAL WorkLife President



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The Well Being Advocate Program

VITAL WorkLife has developed a Well Being Advocate Program under the umbrella of its [Physician Well Being Resources](#) solution. The Well Being Advocate program includes a thorough and integrated curriculum laying out the requirements of the role and training the Advocate in the knowledge he or she will need to fill the role.

The Advocate is usually a physician or advanced practice provider who has a broad reach within the organization, is mission driven, respected and trusted by colleagues and has shown a dedication to self-care. They might, for example, already serve on an internal well being committee. Once selected by the organization, the Advocate is paired with a VITAL WorkLife coach who takes her or him through the process of onboarding in this highly valued, volunteer position. The curriculum includes onboarding materials, regular assignments and three coaching sessions, followed by two check-ins.

The curriculum covers:

- A detailed overview of the VITAL WorkLife resources available to their organization
- The business case for investing in physician well being and an overview of crucial issues like stress and burnout
- A session dedicated to the Advocate assessing their own well being
- A session dedicated to learning the best ways to approach a colleague who may need their help

There are follow-up sessions at the three and six month mark for Advocates to share their experiences and needs, how their role is evolving and any organizational changes affecting their advocacy.

“The Advocate is not expected to be a counselor,” Roberts emphasizes. “He or she is coached to have empathy to guide the colleague toward help. An Advocate is a compassionate and relatable person who picks up conversational cues: the struggling practitioner is dealing with a toxic colleague or supervisor; the practitioner is feeling hopeless; the practitioner is looking to take the next step in his or her career.”



The Background

VITAL WorkLife embarked on the Advocate Program in the wake of 2017 research the company did in collaboration with Ceyka Search. The Physician and Advanced Practitioner Well Being Solutions Survey³ queried about 600 practitioners and leaders—and uncovered multiple barriers physicians reported in seeking help for well being issues, including a lack of awareness of what works to support well being and what is available, plus a lack of access to such resources. VITAL WorkLife decided to do something about removing those barriers—and the Advocate Program was born.

In the Words of a Well Being Advocate

A Well Being Advocate shared in their six-month check in, “The more I dig into the program the more I am convinced it was meant to be. Being an Advocate is helping me personally. My own well being has gotten better and I realize I can’t do everything perfectly every time. I’ve made a priorities shift. I’ve adjusted where I put my energy. This has been a huge part for me in this work.”

According to Kay Roberts, “An important goal of the coach, is to help the Advocate own and be responsible for their own well being. Our coaches are trained in [a holistic approach to well being](#), and work to help the Advocate take steps toward assessing and improving their well being by learning about and using their well being resources.”

“A common outcome,” says Roberts, “is that while the Advocate is making a mood-elevating, morale-boosting contribution to the good of their colleagues and the organization—they are experiencing a positive transformation to their own state of being.”

³. VITAL WorkLife and Ceyka Search. The Physician and Advanced Practitioner Well Being Solutions Survey. 2017.

Download the Physician & Advanced Practitioner Well Being Solutions Survey to learn how you can help your physicians & advanced practitioners.

DOWNLOAD SURVEY

ABOUT VITAL WORKLIFE

VITAL WorkLife, Inc. is a national behavioral health consulting practice supporting all dimensions of well being. Our healthcare solutions are designed specifically to meet the unique needs of physicians and providers. Our team of licensed master's and doctorate level senior consultants, physician peer coaches, psychiatrists and other specialists have deep experience in issues surrounding physician performance, satisfaction and retention. Our ultimate goal is to proactively help physicians and organizations address issues before they escalate to the point of affecting performance and patient safety.



LIZ FERRON, MSW, LICSW

As our Physician Practice Lead, Liz Ferron manages Physician Well Being Resources for VITAL WorkLife, as well as oversees all solutions of our healthcare clients. Liz provides training, consultation, counseling and coaching to healthcare

administrators and individual practitioners in many areas, including stress management, change management and conflict resolution. Liz is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker and received her MSW degree in clinical social work from the University of Minnesota. She was also a consultant for the Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing at the University of Minnesota. She has served three terms as President of the Minnesota Employee Assistance Program Administrators and Counselors (MEAPAC) and is a former adjunct faculty member at the College of St. Benedict.

Positive Results

What does the organization gain from the Well Being Advocate Program? For many, Roberts says, it's a manageable first step toward a culture that is supportive of physician well being. "The organization may have had a crisis or have done a survey of physician attitudes or problems and decided to set an intention to pay more attention to well being." Selecting advocates—typically, a single one for smaller practices, and two to four for larger organizations—begins a process of commitment to well being in a particularly credible way: physicians see leadership is expressing concern for them in a concrete, one-on-one manner.

As for measurable results, VITAL WorkLife's research shows the presence of advocates can lift physician engagement scores. Across VITAL WorkLife's Physician Well Being Resources client base, typical engagement rates range from 4 to 6 percent. But after just three months, organizations with the Well Being Advocate program saw an average engagement rate of 7.9 percent. In three organizations of similar size *without the program*, the average score was 2.4 percent over a three-month period. The Advocate's close work with individuals can also help the organization discover problems (and positives) in its existing well being programs and communication process.

But ultimately, the issue is its cultural impact, says Sarah Prom, Director of Solution Delivery for VITAL WorkLife. "We believe having Advocates who are embedded within the culture of the organization—practicing physicians or part of the leadership—have a much better chance of impacting the culture than anyone else," she says. "They're seeing what the needs are; they're speaking to the needs of their colleagues. They weave the importance of well being and the existence of well being resources into the fabric of the organization."

For more information on how your organization can get started with a Well Being Advocate Program, [contact us here](#).

Sources:

1. [Jait Shanafelt, MD et al., "The Business Case for Investing in Physician Well-Being," JAMA Internal Medicine, September 25, 2017.](#)
2. [Bryan Bohman, MD, et al., "Physician Well-Being: The Reciprocity of Practice Efficiency, Culture of Wellness, and Personal Resilience," NEJM Catalyst, August 7, 2017](#)
3. [VITAL WorkLife and Ceyka Search, The Physician and Advanced Practitioner Well Being Solutions Survey, 2017.](#)

