

# Case Study: Community Health Network Partners with VITAL WorkLife to Develop Award-Winning Physician Well-Being Program



## Executive Summary

Ranked among the nation's most integrated healthcare systems, Indianapolis-based Community Health Network is respected as an innovative leader in providing convenient access to exceptional healthcare services across Central Indiana.

As a non-profit health system with more than 17,000 employees and 200 sites of care, Community integrates hundreds of physicians and advanced practice professionals (APPs), specialty and acute care hospitals, surgery centers, home care services, urgent care, behavioral health and employer health services.

Community Physician Network is the system's network of healthcare providers—including primary care doctors, specialists, surgeons and APPs—offering comprehensive services across various specialties. The network's 1,000+ employed primary and specialty care providers and an additional 1,200 independent physicians focus on integrating exceptional primary and specialty care to provide holistic care to patients.

By embracing collaboration with all levels of Community's leadership, this physician-led practice makes it a priority to ensure the voices of physicians and APPs are heard and valued across the organization. Clinicians are well supported not only by each other, but also by facilities, technologies and a culture that addresses their patients' needs at every step.



## Case Study Highlights:

- Community reduced its physician burnout rate from 43% in 2017 to 33% in 2023
- More than 33% of Community physicians and APPs engage with VITAL WorkLife's Physician Well-Being Resources annually
- Community's physician and APP turnover rate is approximately 4%—considerably lower than the national average of 7.6%

## Challenge

Community Health Network established its employee assistance program (EAP) decades ago and has continually evolved its offerings to meet changing needs.

In recent years, as medical practices evolved, the stress of practicing medicine has increased. Recognizing the impact this had on delivering exceptional patient care, Community leadership launched a formal initiative to understand and reduce physician stress. Although its initial focus was on physicians, the system's work evolved with initiatives that positively impacted the work environment for all caregivers and their families.

"In 2017, our physician burnout rate exceeded 40%. Recognizing the direct correlation between burnout and suicide rates, I asked my colleagues, 'What's the consequence if we do nothing?'" said Kevin Coss, MD, Community's Chief Wellness Officer (retired 2024). "What additional challenges might we face in the future concerning patient safety, patient satisfaction and increased clinician turnover?"

After two-plus years of planning and offering some programming, a multidisciplinary team in 2017 recommended and secured funding for a clinician support structure, now named the [Center for Physician Well-Being and Professional Development](#).

Using the mantra "Live Well. Lead Well.," the Center provides an infrastructure to support physicians and APPs as whole-person individuals—while also empowering them to explore and embrace new approaches to improve care processes. Rather than being an extension of the health system's existing EAP and corporate wellness programs, the Center is independently supported and funded by Community.

Its two primary area of focus: Reducing burnout and promoting career fulfillment.

"Our 'all-in' approach was quite forward-thinking in 2017, but I advised that establishing a culture of well-being must be a strategic, system-wide priority if we were to vet out our mission," explained Dr. Coss. "Fortunately, we had visionary leaders who moved this forward."

## What are the goals of Community Health Network's Center for Physician Well-Being and Professional Development?

1. To reduce and alleviate the stress of practicing medicine
2. To improve work-life balance
3. To bring joy to the practice of medicine
4. To develop, coach and mentor physicians and APPs in leadership at every stage of their career, embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion

In ramping up the formal development of the center, Dr. Coss invited Dike Drummond, MD, a respected author and coach specializing in physician burnout reduction, to present to Community leadership, physicians and APPs. Recognizing the importance of family, the town hall event was also opened to spouses and life partners. Dr. Drummond also presented an education session for senior leaders and members of the IT team.

"The implementation of new and rapidly changing technologies including the EHR significantly impacted daily work life for physicians," Dr. Coss said. "Early on, we identified IT as a pivotal stakeholder. We didn't want them to simply show up and help solve one-off problems. Instead, we adopted the ideology of them being an extension of clinical practitioners. Their leadership and teams were all-in early on, as were marketing, HR and others."

While Community had established a vision for improving physician well-being, the system's leaders knew they needed a partner to help address the root causes of burnout.

“You cannot educate people about burnout and then not give them a place to go,” said Ann Ostrom, MSML, director of Community’s Center for Physician Well-Being and Professional Development. “We knew that doctors don’t use an internal EAP. Ours is very good, but doctors don’t use it. There are too many barriers.”

EAPs designed for broad employee populations typically don’t address the unique needs of physicians and APPs because:

- Their medical training and work environments often value stoicism and sacrifice rather than a focus on self care.
- Heavy workloads impact their decisions to prioritize time for EAP services.
- Many have concerns about confidentiality, self-perception and self-bias.
- Licensing and career implications are also cited as reasons to not engage with a traditional EAP.

According to Dr. Coss, Community’s internal data showed that over a period of seven years, only a handful utilized Community Health Network’s EAP.

To help match clinicians with mental health and well-being resources, Community engaged VITAL WorkLife soon after meeting the company’s CEO Mitchell Best at an event for the Federation of State Physician Health Programs (FSPHP). Dr. Coss instantly knew Mitch and his team were a good fit based on the company’s breadth and depth of services.

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**“The fact that VITAL WorkLife provided not only counseling but also coaching was critical. Also, with their 24/7 support line, our physicians and APPs could literally call and talk to a professional for in-the-moment support.”**

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“This was all very early in the days of healthcare organizations focusing on clinician well-being,” Ostrom added. “We thought Mitch had a crystal ball.”

Dr. Coss set out to ensure that VITAL WorkLife became fully immersed within their Center for Physician Well-Being and Professional Development. “We saw a unique opportunity to explore how to fill some of the gaps we had in our program. VITAL WorkLife’s engagement infused us with energy—and did so in a very meaningful and productive way,” he stated.

## Solution

VITAL WorkLife is one of the nation’s foremost authorities in planning, developing, delivering and evaluating the use of mental health and well-being support services for healthcare organizations and their workforces. With a focus on clinician and caregiver well-being and organizational productivity, the company offers a range of innovative, empathetic solutions for managing professional burnout, life challenges and the stigma often associated with seeking help.

When Community initially engaged with VITAL WorkLife, they focused on employed physicians and APPs and later added the system’s independent medical staff members. Expanding services to this population was important for the organization to more holistically impact its culture.

Ostrom highlighted COVID-19’s impact on worsening burnout.

“Early in the pandemic, our chief medical officer approached me about making the services available to non-employed medical staff members. VITAL WorkLife engaged quickly, even before revised contract signatures,” she said. “They saw our need and helped us respond.”

One of many VITAL WorkLife solutions, its Physician Well-Being Resources encompass a wide range of services delivered by seasoned professionals and healthcare experts who bring strength, empathy and innovation to every aspect of clinician well-being.



The mantra of VITAL WorkLife's Physician Well-Being Resources program is "helping clinicians and healthcare professionals become their best selves." This is accomplished via well-being programs specifically designed for physicians, APPs and residents. The goal is to alleviate stress and enhance job satisfaction to positively impact patient care and organizational outcomes with a focus on:

- recruitment and retention
- care team relationships
- patient satisfaction scores
- quality and patient safety
- physician engagement
- the organization's bottom line

Community Health Network's full implementation and adoption of VITAL WorkLife's resources serves as a significant step in raising awareness around mental health and suicide prevention. This is especially important given the troubling [prevalence of this tragedy within the healthcare community](#). By integrating its resources with an on-call psychiatrist and crisis team, VITAL WorkLife provides essential support and actively fosters a culture that prioritizes mental health awareness.

#### **Ostrom highlights some of the initiatives derived from Community's partnership with VITAL WorkLife:**

- **Introductory educational sessions**

"In 2023 we worked with VITAL WorkLife to plan and provide a session titled Introduction to Stress and Burnout. More than 70 members of our medical staff attended and engaged in the Q&A session. We provided information about resources available to help team members struggling with stress. You can't educate a population about a challenge then not provide resources to address their needs,"

- **Resident-focused offerings**

Soon after, VITAL WorkLife organized a session titled Career Stages Related to Burnout. "We designed it specifically for our residents and had incredibly positive feedback," Ostrom stated, adding that spouses/life partners were invited to both sessions.

- **Physician Peer Coaching**

Via VITAL WorkLife's Peer Coaching services, physicians are uniquely paired with qualified peer coaches who have firsthand experience with the medical profession's unique challenges. The collaborative, partnership-centric program focuses on meeting personal and professional goals, enhancing well-being, and navigating work-life balance challenges. VITAL WorkLife physician peer coaches are certified professional coaches, with the vast majority credentialed through the International Coach Federation or an affiliated body. They hold certifications in a variety of specialty areas and are passionate about helping colleagues achieve personal and professional goals.

Some areas of focus are: Finding Joy, Meaning & Purpose in Medicine, Communication & Conflict Resolution, Stress & Burnout, Work/Life Integration, Identifying Limits & Setting Boundaries, Establishing Healthy Habits and Leadership Development.

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- **Assistance with physician and APP exit interviews**

“It can be very difficult to get exit interviews with physicians ... And even when they happen, many generic third-party vendor surveys lack the knowledge to identify physician-centric subtleties and to probe into these areas. VITAL WorkLife provides an external, anonymous source who understands key issues and trends across a wide population of physicians and brings deep experience in conducting exit interviews. Their gathering and sharing of insights bring significant value to us as we plan, monitor and evaluate our programming.”

- **Black Provider Resource Group engagement**

“The president of our employed physician group identified that some of their Black physicians had concerns about their voices being heard,” Ostrom stated. “We asked VITAL WorkLife if they had other clients facing similar challenges and connected our Black Provider Resource

Group with them. Very quickly, they provided the bios of five of their peer coaches who have a focus on diversity in their backgrounds. We were able to share those bios at the next Black Provider Resource Group meeting.”

VITAL WorkLife is exploring the concept of adding an ombudsman role, with a focus on listening to the concerns of this population and serving as an arbitrator, if needed.

- **Career transition focus**

Physicians and APPs face unique challenges in contemplating and planning for retirement. “We worked with VITAL WorkLife to create an offering specifically for clinicians to navigate this aspect of their career journey. It’s been very popular, and it’s even resulted in some staying involved with our Center and with VITAL WorkLife as an organization,” Ostrom said. “We hope to expand this resource to address flexibility at all career stages.”

- **Custom consulting**

According to Ostrom, postpartum employees, including physicians and APPs, expressed concerns about the availability of convenient spaces for breast pumping and inconsistencies with enforcing policies for time away from work to pump. “VITAL WorkLife queried their customer base, made recommendations on best practices and aligned us with individuals at their customer sites who helped us revise our offerings,” she said.

- **Leadership development**

Community Health Network aims to increase the confidence and competence of physician and APP leaders and offers a 12-month Physician Leadership Academy. Comprised of 12 courses created internally, this program provides interactive cohort learning, relevant readings, and real-healthcare-world applicability over the 12-month curriculum.

Ostrom dubs the program a “mini-MBA” and says that, to date, more than 250 physicians and APP leaders have graduated from the academy. As an important tool in the program, participants are educated about VITAL WorkLife services and programs and are encouraged to download the mobile APP and seek out a peer coach.

Ostrom not only praised VITAL WorkLife for the breadth, depth and rigor of its programs but also for exceptional customer service. “It’s nice to be able to pick up the phone whenever we have a need, and especially if one of our clinicians has an urgent need,” she said. “It’s a relief to always know that their needs will be taken care of promptly and professionally.”

## Results

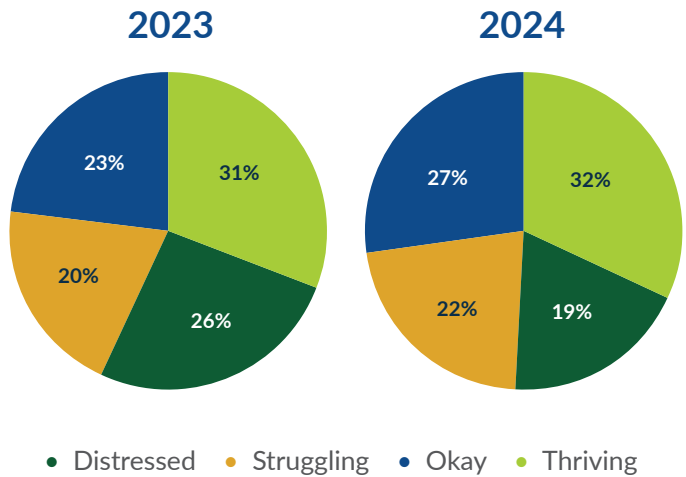
Using a calculator from the American Medical Association (AMA), Dr. Coss reports an organization can estimate the cost of physician burnout. The cost varies according to specialty and is estimated to be two to three times a physician’s annual salary.

In 2017, when Community Health Network made physician well-being a key strategic priority, the risk of moderate to severe burnout was 43%. Research done in 2024 showed that the physician burnout rate decreased from 41% in 2022 to 33% in 2023 and that the APP burnout rate decreased from 23% in 2022 to 20% in 2023.

Ostrom reports that data from the health system’s annual Well-Being Index assessment shows that the mean distress score has generally been below the national average and, more recently, shows a significant downward trend (see graphic.)



Data also shows that in comparing 2023 to 2024, an increasing number of physicians are thriving while a decreasing number are distressed (see graphic.) The team also uses hotspot analytics to identify specific sites, clinics and units with high distress levels.



In 2023/24, more than 33% of the physician and APP population engaged with VITAL WorkLife’s Physician Well-Being Resources with positive engagement trending seen across many specific program offerings (see graphic.) From 2023 to 2024, 549 individuals registered for the VITAL WorkLife’s mobile app, and 646 individuals logged into its member website.

According to Dr. Coss, Community Health Network’s physician and APP turnover rate is approximately 4%—considerably lower than the national average of 7.6% (Healthcare Dive October 20, 2023). This, he believes, is directly tied to the work of his team to address clinician stress and well-being.

## Physician and APP Turnover

Community Health Network:

**4%**

National Average:

**7.6%**

“We’re fortunate that our organization invested in this early and in a big way,” he said. “With VITAL WorkLife as a partner, we’ve helped Community Health Network embrace physician and APP well-being as part of our culture.”

Community is consistently cited as one of Indiana’s top employers. Some of this, Ostrom and Dr. Coss believe, can be attributed to the work of the center. “It’s important to note that we focus not only on our employees but on their families as well. VITAL WorkLife helps us reinforce the importance of this.”

Two awards recognize the accomplishments of Dr. Coss, Ostrom and their colleagues.

In 2023, [the Indianapolis Business Journal honored Dr. Coss and his team with a Health Care Hero award.](#) And in 2024, [Community earned bronze level recognition from the American Medical Association as a Joy in Medicine™ health organization.](#)

According to the AMA, this prestigious distinction is granted to organizations that meet the rigorous criteria of the [Joy in Medicine Health System Recognition Program](#) and acknowledges the nation’s leaders in prioritizing proven efforts to enhance the well-being and professional fulfillment of physicians.

“Delivering exceptional care begins with nurturing the passion and purpose that brought our physicians into medicine,” said Dr. Coss. “By investing in our providers’ personal and professional growth, we empower them to lead meaningful improvements across our network. Supporting those who deliver care is our commitment to providing patients with a seamless, compassionate experience.”



In 2023, the Indianapolis Business Journal named the Community Health Network’s Center for Physician Well-Being and Professional Development a Top Honoree for Innovations in Healthcare, a category of its Health Care Hero awards program. Community’s team from left, Dr. Kevin Coss; Dr. Tricia Hern; Ann Ostrom; Annie Echelbarger and Taylor Wildauer (IBJ photo/Eric Learned)

## Conclusion

VITAL WorkLife stands out as an essential strategic partner in developing and sustaining award-winning physician well-being initiatives. Through their collaboration, VITAL WorkLife helps healthcare organizations reach new levels in supporting clinicians.

“I’m incredibly proud of our team and our organization for creating and expanding a physician, APP and resident wellness program that’s now heads and tails ahead of other health systems, even the country’s largest,” Ostrom stated. “VITAL WorkLife has been truly integral in helping us achieve success. We push them and they push us. It’s been a mutually rewarding relationship.”

Moreover, VITAL WorkLife’s influence has reshaped organizational culture around clinician support, establishing a trusted environment.

“The biggest thing we’ve done is to change the culture, and VITAL WorkLife is always a part of that conversation,” Dr. Coss stated. “I don’t know that any other organization can touch the culture we have. People say they feel safe and supported when addressing practice challenges, exploring leadership opportunities, and life challenges. Our clinicians are confident that they can come to us and that we will responsibly and empathetically help them.”

Dr. Coss retired from his role as Chief Wellness Officer in 2024. His successor, Noah Kersey, MD, is continuing the work begun by the Center and is poised to take it to the next level.

Through these efforts, VITAL WorkLife has proven to be a critical and transformative partner in building a supportive, resilient healthcare environment.

To learn more about how to foster a culture of well-being at your organization, visit [VITALWorkLife.com](https://VITALWorkLife.com) or call 877.731.3949



Scan the QR Code to  
schedule a free consultation.

### ABOUT VITAL WORKLIFE

VITAL WorkLife partners with healthcare organizations to measurably improve the mental health and well-being of their workforce. With an exclusive healthcare focus – and an experienced network of physician peer coaches and behavioral health consultants – we match clinicians and caregivers with tailored solutions to enhance well-being, career longevity and satisfaction.