

BROADCAST- Distress among Health Care Providers Surges

The Christmas and New Year's holiday a year ago was a time when hospitalizations peaked, and despite vaccines and boosters now, the Omicron variant threatens to further test the limits of health care workers at OSF HealthCare and across the country. In Illinois, Omicron infections are doubling every two or three days and in Michigan where OSF HealthCare operates a hospital and medical clinic, they are preparing for a storm of infections.

Dr. Sam Sears, director of Behavioral Health Physician Services says the stress of making difficult daily decisions, coupled with longer hours and concerns about personal health, have made for challenges beyond what many envisioned when they chose their career.

“Being asked to legitimately put their own health and safety and those of their loved ones on the line every day to try and help others out, that is ultimately as health care providers what we signed up to do. But I don't know that most individuals had really ever dealt with the impact directly and personally in the same manner as they're having to see it every single day.” (:24)

Dr. Sears says burnout has prompted 1 in 5 health care providers to leave the field. He points out, burnout manifests differently in health workers than in other professions.

“Burnout is really more trauma, clinical depression and anxiety features than just pure fatigue and being run down and difficulty motivating one's self, into realms that it really does approach ‘we need to have this person clinically addressed to help this person recover their resiliency and their ability to function.’” (:26)

Dr. Sears says it can be excruciatingly hard for health care workers, who feel like every day nobody's listening, nobody's following the rules, nothing's changed and the numbers are going in the wrong direction.

“Our health care workers are not robots. These are real human beings dealing with their own emotional stresses and struggles that you're compounding with the emotional stress and struggles of what they're doing day in, day out – making many, many life and death decisions for individuals and that becomes very challenging and stressful.” (:22)

Dr. Sears admits some health care workers see taking care of themselves and getting behavioral health support as just one more thing they don't have time to do. However, he frames the need to make sure they are physically and mentally fit as part of their job.

“It really is an ethical directive at the end of the day for people to take of themselves when they are caring for others because, otherwise, they're not going to be able to sustain that; keep that up to sustain the level of care that others need.” (:15)

OSF Silver Cloud is a free online mental health tool available 24/7 for community members but there is a special section tailored specifically for health care workers. But, Sears says the pandemic has highlighted for the public, flaws in the mental health infrastructure across the country, especially for health care workers themselves.

“As both a health care system and as the greater United States, we're really going to have to think about how do we really meet these needs across the country and locally to help the people who have been helping us get through all of this?” (:15)

Dr. Sears suggests gestures of kindness from the community like sending food to hospital ICUs and even 'thank you' cards go a long way in providing emotional support for health care workers.

With only 61% of the U.S. population fully vaccinated, medical care providers are frustrated and disheartened by people who refuse to get vaccinated. Those individuals represent a bulk of people filling up ICU beds and flooding hospital emergency departments. Sears suggests without enough behavioral health providers, people need to be an emotional support for those they know – even those who are not within their tightest circle.

“Everyone's going to be conscripted into kind of being some level of behavioral health support for people because there's not enough therapists, psychiatrists, APNs, primary care doctors to go around for the need that's really going to be there, so we'll lean on each other as we just march through and keep as many people going as we can.” (:24)

Calling 2-1-1 can also provide direct help for a variety of needs, including mental health crisis support. Immediate help is also available through the National Suicide Prevention hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).