

March 20, 2020

Open letter to EAPs/PAPs with health care clients in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania,

On behalf of our state's physicians, the Foundation of the Pennsylvania Medical Society (Foundation) and Pennsylvania Medical Society Medical Association (PAMED) is grateful for the critical psychological support you provide physicians and all members of the health care team. It is especially critical during the COVID-19 crisis.

Our state's physicians and health care teams will be under intense strain for months to come. We know this will be a marathon, not a sprint. To ensure a strong workforce for the long-haul, we call on you to address the concerns outlined below. We also encourage you to share your own innovative strategies with your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and Physician Assistance Program (PAP) colleagues across the state and country and with our Foundation. This unprecedented situation requires an unprecedented response.

The barriers

The reality is that many physicians harbor long-standing skepticism and reluctance to use the EAP services available through their employer. Unfounded or not, this is rooted in a fear of retaliation, perceived lack of confidentiality, and risk of losing their job and/or medical license if they access EAP. Physicians repeatedly express concerns about the opening notifications indicating that the call is being recorded.

Reluctance to access EAP/PAP is also rooted in many physicians' preference to receive care from a PhD level psychologist. They want assurances that the person they reach can adequately support them through significant moral, ethical and emotional challenges.

Logistically, there is limited time for frontline clinicians to take advantage of mental health services during a crisis. Although providing in-person services isn't recommended, clinicians need easy, low-barrier ways to access just-in-time care during and immediately after an intense shift.

Proposed solutions

Our goal is to ensure our state's physicians and advanced practitioners receive the psychological support they need, ideally using existing resources. To pave the way for them to successfully access their PAP, we call on you to consider the following actions:

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Pennsylvania
MEDICAL SOCIETY

ADVOCATE. EDUCATE. NAVIGATE.

- Change the pre-recorded greeting message on the 1-800 number to clearly communicate that all calls are confidential and HIPAA compliant.
- Establish a triage system at entry that allows people to identify themselves as clinicians at the frontline of the COVID-19 response. Deploy your most highly trained and skilled staff to support this population, including the provision of cognitive behavioral therapy.
- Develop custom communication materials targeted to clinicians at the frontline of the COVID-19 response that clearly explain that your mental health care professionals are equipped to help them navigate the COVID-19 crisis and that the services are completely confidential.
- Work with each of your clients to provide just-in-time group and 1:1 sessions to frontline clinicians while protecting the health of your staff. For example, use telehealth technology to plant multiple virtual mental health professionals inside the most impacted hospitals and/or at health care provider quarantine facilities for easy on-demand access.
- Ensure your organizations' emergency response plan includes strategies to adequately handle a surge in requests for services.

We also remind you that the Foundation of the Pennsylvania Medical Society is a resource to you. Our caseworkers are able to link those seeking mental health services with confidential providers who are trained in working with physicians. We are here as a partner and resource.

We appreciate your partnership in responding to the COVID-19 crisis and welcome the opportunity to work with you to communicate the value of the services you provide. Please contact Tiffany Booher MA, LPC, CAADC, CIP, CCSM, our Physician's Health Program Director, at tbooher@pamedsoc.org or 717-558-7819 if we can be a resource to you.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Virginia E. Hall MD".

Virginia E. Hall, MD, FACOG, FACP
Chair, Foundation of PAMED

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lawrence R. John, M.D.". The "M.D." is written in a smaller, more formal font.

Lawrence John, MD
President, PAMED