

PILLAR OF SUPPORT

Employee Assistance Programs Create Stronger Workplace Foundations

By John McCormack

Beverly Parnell, CMA (AAMA), shares that the practice where she works faces little staff turnover. She attributes employee longevity to the unwavering support the physicians and practice owners provide staff.

“Our employees always know that if they have an issue of any kind, they can come to us, and we’ll try to work through it and help them out in any way we can,” says Parnell, practice manager at the Family Physicians of Evans in Georgia, where she has worked for over 25 years.

If employees have car troubles or financial difficulties, they can talk with Parnell, and she will work with the physicians to get them a loan from the practice. Employees who experience mental health issues can access counseling and other services through an employee assistance program (EAP) or confer with Parnell, who will guide them to the proper assistance through the EAP.

The practice uses its EAP as all organizations should: to help employees get the assistance they need and keep them engaged with their work.

An EAP is a set of professional services specifically designed to improve and maintain productivity and healthy functioning within the workplace.¹ Additionally, those

services address an organization’s particular business needs through the application of specialized knowledge and expertise about human behavior and mental health, according to the International Employee Assistance Professionals Association.¹

More specifically, an EAP can help employees identify and resolve personal concerns—including health, familial, financial, substance use, legal, emotional, or other personal issues—that could affect job performance.¹

When employees voluntarily enroll in EAPs, their participation in the program is confidential by law. However, when employers request that employees receive services as a condition of employment (e.g., after a positive drug test or behavior issues), then employers can receive updates about the employees’ participation in counseling or other services.²

Notably, EAPs started as drug and substance use programs and advanced into offering more comprehensive mental health services. “Now, there are many other aspects to EAPs,” says Julie Stich, CEBS, vice president of content at the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans in Brookfield, Wisconsin. “The programs offer a wide range of services, [such as] financial



counseling, will preparation, estate planning, [and] helping employees with [familial] problems.”

HOW ARE YOU HOLDING UP?

These programs can be especially valuable for health care organizations in which staff members have always dealt with a demanding workplace and must now further contend with the unrelenting pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Offering an [EAP] is important for every organization but might be even more [crucial] in medical organizations, where so many stressors [transpire] every day that [affect] the employees,” says Stich.

While EAPs are typically provided and administered by third parties, practice managers often become involved in selecting and promoting these programs.

Practice managers can help ensure that employees know exactly how EAPs might help them—a long-standing challenge. Managers will often discuss EAPs when employees are hired but may not continue promoting the programs.

“If employees don’t need the services [immediately], they will forget about the benefit. So, when they are [amid] a personal crisis—their home has had a fire or their child is dropping out of school, they don’t remember that they have these services available to them,” says Stich. “Whether [it’s a human resources] department or a practice manager, [someone must] continue to remind employees that the EAP is there for them, remind them of the broad range of services it offers, and show them how easy it is to connect with the EAP.”

A TOWER OF STRENGTH

Practice managers must remember that getting employees involved in EAP programs can also help the organization. For example, EAPs can improve employee retention and save organizations money, because replacing an employee can cost one-half to two times

BETTER BY DESIGN

Not every EAP is created equal. To assess EAPs, practice managers and other organizational leaders should ask EAP providers the following questions, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration⁵:

- Does your staff belong to a professional EAP association?
- Does the staff who would be assigned to my practice hold the Certified Employee Assistance Professional credential?
- What is the education level of each member of your professional staff?
- Do you have references we can contact?
- Do you provide on-site employee education and supervisor training services?
- What fee programs do you offer?
- Will you do on-site visits and conduct a needs assessment of our practice?
- What types of counseling services and how many sessions are available to employees?
- How easy is it for employees to use the EAP?
- Where and how often is the EAP available to employees?
- Which programs and services do you refer employees to, and why?
- Does the EAP have a system for evaluating the program’s effectiveness?

the employee’s annual salary.³

In addition to improving retention, EAPs can help enhance employees’ overall work performance. For example, EAPs can lead to reduced absentee rates.⁴

Perhaps just as crucial, EAPs can help avoid circumstances in which employees are present in the workplace but are not fully functioning due to illness, emotional distress, or other personal distractions.⁴

“When employees come to work thinking about the collection letters they are receiving or how their [older] parent is coping, they can’t be as productive,” observes Stich.

Even more, if employees are distracted, they could make costly mistakes. Such missteps could lead to workplace accidents and even patient harm in medical settings, warns Stich.

When employees are engaged and productive, health care leaders can rest assured that they foster an environment that makes patients feel comfortable and welcome.

“When your employees are happy, it shows on their faces. I’ve been in practices where employees are [unhappy], and that bothers me,” concludes Parnell. “But when employees are happy, they will care for each other, care for the physicians, and *definitely* care for the patients.” ♦

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