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Support for the Front Line

In Face of Pandemic, Facilities Expand Mental Health, Wellness Programs

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Kerie Seelenbrandt, BSN, RN

When COVID-19 hit the United States hard in March 2020, Kerie Seelenbrandt, BSN, RN, had been an emergency department nurse for 12 years. And, although she works in a small community hospital in Rhode Island, she was not immune to the virus risk or the fear and anxiety that came with the pandemic.

"In the beginning, it was scary," she said. "It was the unknown."

The first COVID-19 patients at Seelenbrandt's hospital were all critical cases because in the early days of lockdown, those with milder cases stayed home, she said.

Her hospital was short on personal protective equipment, including N95 masks. They didn't have masks available in everyone's size, so some staff chose to wear powered air-purifying respirators. The hospital became short-staffed as some ED nurses quit for less-stressful positions, she explained.

To become better educated about COVID-19 and manage the accompanying stress, Seelenbrandt took part in a new educational course from the University of South Florida College of Nursing that aims to educate and empower nurses during the pandemic, which, in turn, could help stave off stress and burnout. It's just one example of how some institutions expanded staff mental health programs during the pandemic.

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— Rayna Letourneau, PhD, RN



At a Northwell press event unveiling a new center to help their staff, environmental services worker Carlos Rivera (left) discusses the toll COVID-19 has taken on his family

The course helped Seelenbrandt feel better prepared for work and increased her focus on her own mental wellness.

"I love the emergency room; I love working here," she said. "I feel pretty good now. We have so much more knowledge, and we have an abundance of PPE here, so I feel safer — much better than I did a year ago."

Burnout and mental health issues are nothing new in emergency nursing. But COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated the challenges nurses face, said Rayna Letourneau, PhD, RN, assistant professor at USF Health College of Nursing.

Last year, the school's faculty and staff recognized front-line nurses and health care workers

They were working much longer hours than anyone had anticipated, and the pandemic was lasting much longer than anybody had anticipated," she said.

To support their workers, the USF team developed a four-part webinar series, "Frontline Nursing During COVID-19: A New Paradigm." The online program, available through February, offers four continuing education units to nurses across the country. The program is free, thanks to support from Florida philanthropists David Kotok and Christine Schlesinger.

"Our goal for the program was to offer nurses on the front line the tools and resources they would need to keep themselves safe while they were caring for patients during the pandemic," said Letourneau, who serves as the Frontline Nursing program director. "We wanted to give the nurses resources that would empower them and so they would know ... how they could advocate for themselves to their employer and to their institutions."

The series begins with two videos about understanding COVID-19 and how to stay healthy in the pandemic. The third video, titled "No, a Garbage Bag Won't Do: How to Navigate Difficult Situations as a Result of COVID-19" dives into more specifics.

The fourth video is tailored for the experience level of the viewer. Nurses with more than a year in practice watch "Experience Does Not Equal Experience: The New COVID-19 Paradigm for the Seasoned Nurse." Novice nurses will watch a video titled "Welcome to Nursing, Report to the Front Line: Transition to Practice Strategies for the Novice Nurse Confronting COVID-19."

The course remained helpful to nurses even as COVID-19 cases began to decrease and vaccines became more widely available in the spring, Letourneau noted.

"Some nurses are starting to feel a little bit of that relief, that there is a light at the end of the tunnel," she said. "However, a lot of the issues that we address in the webinar remain. If we really look at nursing and our workforce, a lot of these issues were very relevant before the pandemic."



Mayer Bellehsen, PhD

The pandemic put a spotlight on some pre-existing nursing profession problems, particularly with working conditions and the health and wellness of nurses, she said.

It's well known that nurses often put the needs of patients and others ahead of their own.

"If we are not healthy and well and taking care of ourselves, it's going to lead to problems in which we're not able to come into the workforce," Letourneau said. "We're going to be sick. We're going to be run down. We're going to be burned out. And I think you see a lot of that right now being talked about."

Another institution focusing on mental wellness for health care workers is Northwell Health, New York state's largest health care provider. In March, Northwell Health officially opened its Center for Traumatic Stress, Resilience and Recovery, although some of its programs were launched at the beginning of the pandemic, said Mayer Bellehsen, PhD, the center's director.

"At its heart, the center is focused on identifying and addressing the needs around traumatic stress, both to build resilience in the wake of traumatic stress, as well as to provide services to help people recover when traumatic stress has led to mental health difficulties like PTSD, depression and anxiety," Bellehsen explained.

Early in the pandemic, New York resembled a war zone, Bellehsen related.

"There were significant amounts of death and dying, confusion as to how to proceed and what to do, and significant acute stress in reaction to all of what was happening."

Northwell Health was challenged because of its size — there are 76,000 employees and 23 hospitals. The institution needed to "coordinate and integrate" its behavioral health response across the entire system, he said.

Before the center officially opened this year, programs were already underway. Last year, a large group of staff volunteered to support mental health needs through programs such as educational sessions, debriefings and one-to-one interventions.

The services were designed to help people build in protective practices and learn how to deal

clinical support, linking them with behavioral health services. To do that, CTSRR worked with partner groups, including Northwell Health's behavioral health service line, human resources and Department of Occupational Medicine, Epidemiology and Prevention.

While Northwell launched the center during the pandemic, Bellehsen remarked that its programs also respond to a range of non-COVID-related trauma and stress.

"Health care work can create experiences of stress, burnout, and critical incidents that occur in the course of doing work such as deaths of children or suicides," he said. "In addition to supporting the long-term needs of those impacted by COVID, there is a value to having this for general medical work overall."

In addition, CTSRR plans to branch out into the community in the future to support area residents, he said.

Included in the center's programs is an existing disaster response intervention called Psychological First Aid, and the center has helped develop Northwell Health's own resilience coaching service. This program enables employees to meet individually with a behavioral services staff member for up to three sessions to target their stressors and connect with further mental health care if needed. Team resilience coaching is also available, offering small-group peer support.

A program called Stress First Aid focuses on the value of peer support, training Northwell employees to identify stress in themselves and their co-workers, and then how to support their peers.

Now the acute stress of COVID-19 has decreased, some health care workers are recognizing other mental health challenges.

"The tail of disasters is a lot longer than the acute moments," Bellehsen said, pointing to 9/11 and Hurricane Sandy, which led to some people seeking mental health services, years later, for the first time.

"Most people will recover," he said. "Most people will be resilient and come to a place where they are adjusting, but there are a number of individuals who will need support, and they can enhance their recovery with that support."

