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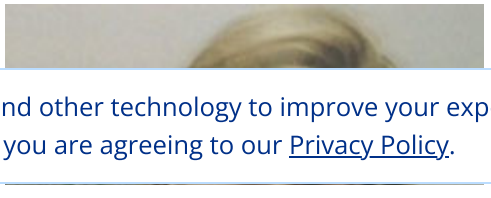
‘An Immediate Impact’

The newly enacted Lorna Breen Act will support programs to address stress, burnout and mental health issues.

BY MELANIE PADGETT POWERS ENA CONNECTION CONTRIBUTOR

President Joe Biden signs the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act into law on March 18



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Lorna Breen, an emergency physician, died by suicide in 2020

Now that the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act has become law, emergency nurse advocates are optimistic it will raise awareness about and help fund programs to address burnout and mental health issues among front-line health care workers.

“We did this work because of what we heard from the health care workforce after [Lorna] died about their concerns about their well-being and that of their colleagues,” Corey Feist, co-founder and president of the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes’ Foundation, said in an interview. “For us to be using Lorna as a beacon of hope for them on the heels of this very significant tragedy that befell our family is the greatest honor of my life to date.”

Breen died by suicide in April 2020 after managing a New York City emergency department during the peak of the city’s COVID-19 pandemic and contracting the virus herself.

ENA advocated strongly for the bill, which was co-sponsored by Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., and Rep. Susan Wild, D-Pa. Feist and other members of the Breen family came to the White House on March 18 for a signing ceremony with President Joe Biden, an experience Feist described as “unbelievable.”

“We had private, very emotional moments with the president of the United States where he acknowledged the pain that we had gone through, as someone himself who had lost three family members in his lifetime,” Feist said.

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tour of Marine One, referring to Feist's 14-year-old daughter as "Madame President," Feist said.

Funding for Programs, Research

The Dr. Lorna Breen Law establishes funding intended to train health care professionals on ways to reduce and prevent suicide, burnout, substance abuse and other mental health conditions. It will also provide grants for employee education, peer support programming and behavioral health treatment, as well as create a national education and awareness campaign to encourage health care workers to seek support and treatment.

"This is huge," declared Danita Mullins, MSN, RN, CEN, emergency department director at Washington Regional Medical Center ED in Arkansas. "What the Lorna Breen law does is [develop] a campaign to get over that stigma" that it's often embarrassing for ED nurses to reach out for mental health care.

The campaign will say "It's OK to have these feelings, it's OK to get past those barriers," she said.

Mullins observed there is scant research available examining how nurses respond to stress — such as rates on alcohol or substance use. She's encouraged that the law will fund research to better understand the problem.

"I think this law is a good start," she said. "Nurses are in a caring profession, so we want to take care of other people before we take care of ourselves. So, it's going to take a lot to get past that. … As emergency nurses we need to get past some of those beliefs that we need to save everyone and we need to be there all the time. I think it's important that we learn to take care of ourselves, and it's really difficult."

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Danita Mullins, MSN, RN

Mark Goldstein, MSN, RN, EMT-P I/C

As a member of ENA's Advocacy Advisory Council in 2020 and 2021, Mullins advocated for the bill and met with staff of her congressional representatives from Arkansas.

Mark Goldstein, MSN, RN, EMT-P I/C, an emergency nurse for Denver Health, advocated on behalf of the bill during Zoom meetings with a couple of legislative aides from Colorado, as well as legislative offices in Michigan, where he used to live. He shared stories about witnessing colleagues struggling with stress and burnout.

"We need to continue the charge of advocacy [and] … we need to continue to be advocates not only for our patients and our communities that we serve but advocates for each other," Goldstein said.

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and area of the hospital called RISE, which stands for “resiliency in stressful events.”

The program offers a 24/7 free hotline offering peer support, as well as virtual, in-person and drop-in counseling to employees.

It also created what Goldstein called an “oasis” where health care workers can go to unwind and unplug, relaxing in massage chairs or bean bags. They can enjoy aromatherapy, music and a station of free snacks.

All In Campaign

The Breen Foundation has co-developed, with #FirstRespondersFirst, a national call to action for every U.S. hospital system. The campaign, called All In: WellBeing First for Healthcare, offers five evidence-based actions health care leaders can take now to support their workforce:

1. Adjusting expectations
2. Shoring up staffing
3. Removing low-value work
4. Designating a well-being executive
5. Going beyond the employee assistance programs

Learn more at **https://www.allinforhealthcare.org/**

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Breen with her sister, Jennifer Feist

Sen. Tim Kaine (center) with members of Breen's family and allies who helped pass the law

“One of my roles is to be a coach, guide and mentor to be able to say to newer staff, ‘You need to take care of yourself to take care of your team,’” Goldstein said. “What that means is you need to self-actualize and do what you need to do to sustain continued operations.”

That might also require leaving the floor a couple of times during a shift to unwind, he explained.

“When you start understanding that, you’ll see other awesome people do the same thing — they unplug, they get away and take a few moments. Now we can change the culture, and I’m very optimistic many organizations will be doing such things, especially with this law enacted,” Goldstein said.

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approved and allocated before the law was even passed. In January, $103 million was given to 45 grantees as part of the American Rescue Plan. The money, distributed by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, supports evidence-based programs that aim to promote mental health and wellbeing among health care professionals.

The money will have an "immediate impact in the lives of emergency nurses in the institutions that receive the grant funding," Feist said. Further, the Breen family foundation will work to share the best practices learned from the grantees, he said.

Robert Kramer, MPA

ENA Advocacy Continues

Although the law has been enacted, the advocacy work is not over. Like many laws passed by Congress, it establishes the program's structure but does not attach any funding to it, explained ENA Director of Government Relations Robert Kramer, MPA. ENA and allied groups will continue to call on Congress to fund the law through the congressional budget process and keep it funded during each appropriations cycle, Kramer said.

"We were thrilled to see it signed into law," Kramer said. "This will go to actively addressing the issue, if it's fully implemented and we can get the funding for it."

ENA advocacy work is under way in preparation for fiscal year 2023, which starts Oct. 1. This will represent the first opportunity for Congress to fund the legislation and help provide the resources to health care workers.

"Right now, a lot of these nurses aren't seeking help; they're suffering in silence," Kramer said.

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The Breen Foundation also plans to continue its efforts, focusing on awareness, advocacy and advancing solutions, Feist said.

In addition, Feist said, “We continue to hear that there are structural barriers to accessing mental health care — that impact nurses and doctors, and prevent them from getting help that they need, at a state level and a local hospital level.”

For example, 22 nursing licensure boards and 32 state medical licensing bodies ask intrusive mental health questions on applications, which Feist believes are a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

“We will work to raise awareness first about the issues at a local hospital level in each state, and then we will help provide advice and counsel on what changes need to be made,” he said.

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