

Issue Brief

Leading Through Crisis: Supporting Workforce Resilience

April 27, 2020

Overview

Health department staff are right in the center of COVID-19 response efforts. In addition to their regular roles, many have taken on additional responsibilities such as contact tracing, establishing alternative care sites, administering testing, and risk communications, while also reacting to changes in their personal lives. Agency leadership must therefore work to maintain staff morale and ensure that health department staff are mentally and physically equipped to play their roles in the public health response.

Leaders are now prioritizing workforce resiliency to eliminate or decrease employee stress, burnout, job dissatisfaction, or an inability to sustain mission-critical public health activities. Therefore, health agency leaders should prioritize maintaining or improving organizational culture and workforce resilience infrastructure to ensure staff are poised to respond during this and any future emergency.

Recommendations

Agency leaders set the tone for their staff, particularly during times of crisis. Use the following recommendations to help maintain the equilibrium of the agency and provide staff stability and support throughout the COVID-19 response and recovery effort.

- **Assess to understand your employees**
 - While you may not have time for a rigorous risk assessment, consider hosting a series of virtual staff huddles or regularly conducting short surveys (three to five questions) to take the pulse of your agency and learn which work-related stressors are impacting employees most. Topics may include internal communication, productivity levels, IT needs, or any additional workplace supports.
 - Be empathetic to staff who may be experiencing simultaneous changes in work assignments, dependent care, and personal health.
 - If not already part of your emergency response, assign a rotating safety officer who supports and monitors staff stress levels and is trained in psychological first aid. Consider someone from your worker safety committee for this role.

10 Ways ASTHO is Supporting its Workforce

1. 30-minute mindfulness Monday's, alternating between:
 - Guided meditations
 - Staff-led yoga sessions
2. Weekly virtual coffees
3. Virtual story time for staff and their children
4. Virtual happy hour
5. Weekly staff newsletter
6. Weekly all-staff meetings:
 - Limited to 30 minutes
 - Incorporate a fun theme
 - Brief get-to-know-you games
 - Critical updates
7. Weekly wellness digest
8. Daily 'meeting free' zone (12-1 p.m.)
9. No/few meetings on Friday's
10. Soft end time to the workday

- **Engage your leadership team to model resilience**
 - Staff are more likely to respond to resilience programs when they see their leadership teams participating in and applying resilience and [self-care techniques](#).
 - Leadership teams are key to establishing priorities and allocating resources; they should include recognition of the human capital working within your agencies.
- **Look for ways to improve the work environment through workplace policies**
 - Be reasonable with expectations while managing for accountability on results.
 - Allow flexible schedules while providing opportunity for routine (e.g., opt-in informal team huddles, frequent and brief all-staff meetings).
 - Provide access to services for maintaining physical and mental health and highlight your Employee Assistance Program.
 - Allow autonomy in work where appropriate.
 - Empower staff to support one another by creating a buddy system or using shared forums for peer support. Give staff opportunities to implement their own recommendations for improving the workspace.
- **Use [crisis and emergency risk communication principles](#) internally as well as externally**
 - The agency’s leaders are credible subject matter experts who have their staff’s interests at heart, and staff will appreciate hearing from them first.

RESOURCES

- Blog. APA’s Center for Workplace Mental Health: <http://workplacementalhealth.org/Mental-Health-Topics/Resilience>
- Blog. Mental Health First Aid: <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2019/02/10-tips-for-building-a-resilient-workforce/>
- Training. CERC – Crisis + Emergency Risk Communication: <https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/training/index.asp>

“Morale for your team is crucial; they are looking for clues from you. Small gestures of kindness and appreciation are very important to calm fears.”

- David Lakey, MD (ASTHO Alum)

Former Commissioner of the Texas Department of State Health Services