



Testimony: House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services

Overview of Ohio Professionals Health Program (OhioPHP)

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Good afternoon Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Committee. My name is Kelley Long and I serve as the Executive Director for the Ohio Professionals Health Program (OhioPHP). OhioPHP is a nonprofit organization that provides a compassionate, supportive, and safe environment for healthcare professionals in Ohio to receive confidential services to improve their health and well-being. Our goal is to inspire healthcare professionals to seek treatment and monitoring for their illnesses to ensure patient care and safety. OhioPHP believes that the health and well-being of every healthcare professional is essential and we strive to implement therapeutic interventions that serve as a gateway to improved health. OhioPHP supports the use of confidential services whenever possible in lieu of regulatory awareness in order to eliminate fear of punishment, disciplinary action, embarrassment, or professional isolation. OhioPHP believes that early detection, evaluation, and treatment of healthcare professionals with substance-related and addictive disorders, psychiatric illness, or other illnesses is paramount to protect the public. Confidential monitoring and oversight of professionals with these conditions will ultimately enhance the health of the provider and preserve quality patient care.

Like many who have testified before this Committee, we see an increased need for mental health and addiction services, as well as an overall awareness of the burnout rate and stressors that were present in medical professionals before the COVID-19 pandemic, but have been exceedingly magnified as the responsibilities and expectations of healthcare workers were stretched to their limit during the height of the pandemic.

In October of 2020, OhioPHP conducted a statewide assessment of lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic as it related to the impact that the pandemic had on the health and well-being of healthcare professionals. The

survey, administered statewide between July 7 and August 20, 2021, was **sent to the licensees of thirteen (13) Ohio healthcare licensing boards and collected data from 13,532 respondents**. The full report, titled *Ohio Physicians Health Program COVID-19 Wellbeing Survey: A look into the mental health and wellbeing of Ohio's healthcare professionals*, summarizes data of all the responses and was released in December 2021. You have been provided with a copy of the report.

What did we find? Survey data indicated that healthcare providers are exhausted both physically and mentally. They are stressed both at work and home. Survey respondents indicated an increase in depression and hopelessness during the pandemic as well an increase in thoughts of suicide and they are more concerned about their own substance use. **Yet only 1 in 5 (20.98%) sought emotional or mental health support.** As expected, overall well-being worsened during the pandemic. But data shows that many healthcare professionals were already experiencing significant health and well-being challenges prior to the pandemic. We hope these findings can be used to find ways to support and improve the lives of healthcare providers during both pandemic and non-pandemic times.

While OhioPHP has served as the State Medical Board of Ohio's Monitoring Organization for several years administering the board's confidential one-bite program, over the last two years we started working with other health care regulatory boards in Ohio to create "safe haven" programs for their licensees. These programs offer a clearly defined confidential path for individuals to seek help for burnout, mental health or substance use disorders, a safe space for early intervention before patient safety becomes a concern, access to quality clinical screening/evaluation, treatment, long-term monitoring and support, and a therapeutic alternative to disciplinary action.

The safe haven program helps remove the stigma of mental health disorders and substance use disorders, eliminates the fear of losing a professional license, and licensees feel safe and comfortable asking for and receiving help from OhioPHP. Bottom line, it allows a healthcare professional to get help *before* an illness becomes a possible patient safety concern that may require discipline from their licensing board. Early intervention minimizes complaints against practitioners and the potential need for any disciplinary action. When a

healthcare professional enters the safe haven program, OhioPHP is there to offer support and encouragement through every step of the recovery process.

National data shows that, while sustained recovery for the general population is below 50% during the first year following treatment, 80-90% of healthcare professionals who are monitored for five years following the completion of treatment achieve sustained recovery. **OhioPHP data shows that over 90% of healthcare professionals who have completed our treatment monitoring and advocacy program have remained in sustained recovery with no relapse.** We are proud of that statistic!

Many of Ohio's impairment rules and laws have not been updated for several years and we are on a mission to modernize the way regulatory agencies treat healthcare professionals who are struggling with substance use disorders or a mental health diagnosis. As I mentioned earlier, OhioPHP is a non-profit organization that does not charge healthcare professionals or the regulatory boards a fee to utilize our services. We can offer free services through donations, state and national grants, and state funding. Up until 2021, we had to charge participants a small fee to utilize our services. Through state budget funding in the last biennium budget, facilitated by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, we were able to eliminate participant program fees and began expanding our services to all of Ohio's healthcare regulatory boards. We hope to be able to carry out our mission of expanding our services to all of Ohio's healthcare professionals without ever having to worry about adequate funding.

We are currently working with five regulatory boards who have either already activated safe haven programs or have started the development and rule drafting process. We work with these boards by assisting them in rule and statute review, attending board meetings to provide education about our organization and programs, and once a program has been developed, we work with the board, and related associations, to promote the safe haven program through education and awareness campaigns related to mental health conditions, substance abuse disorders, and the safe haven program rules. These five new boards we are working with represent about 67,000 licensees. 67,000 Ohio healthcare workers who now have a place to turn when they need help without fear that their licensing board will act against their license for seeking that help.

We have already started discussions with several other regulatory boards and the State Medical Board of Ohio and the Ohio Board of Nursing are both currently working towards amending their statutes and rules to allow their licensees to take part in our confidential monitoring program. Currently, there are about 640,00 licensed healthcare professionals in the state of Ohio under twelve different regulatory boards. OhioPHP envisions a space where every licensed healthcare worker in Ohio knows about the services we offer and feels comfortable contacting us when they, or a colleague, needs help for a mental health condition or a substance use disorder.

To accommodate the licensees that we are already serving, and in anticipation of the additional boards and licensees that we will soon be working with, OhioPHP's staff has recently grown to accommodate the increase in utilization of the services we provide. We have a full-time Medical Director on staff, two Associate Medical Directors, several clinical and compliance staff members who work directly with the licensees in the program, and a small administrative staff who works with the boards to help implement the programs, provide resources, and format educational programming specific to that board's licensees.

Our organization has been given the amazing opportunity to grow and, through that growth, support more of Ohio's licensed healthcare professionals. We have enjoyed cooperative and productive working relationships with the boards that we are currently engaged with. Additionally, throughout the rule promulgation process, we have experienced overwhelming support for the safe haven programs and the substance use disorder and mental health education programs that we provide.

In closing, I would like to thank the members of this Committee for thoughtfully listening to the testimony I presented. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

Thank you.

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Executive Director

Ohio Professionals Health Program