

Prioritizing Self-Care for Partnership Health Center Providers and Staff during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Like health care providers across the country, Partnership Health Center (PHC) quickly pivoted operations when the Coronavirus pandemic reached our three county service area in western Montana. Nearly overnight, PHC made a number of operational changes designed to maintain the delivery of excellent health care while keeping providers, staff and patients safe. Of note, PHC was the only provider during the early days of the pandemic, continuing to welcome new patients. Some of the changes implemented over the last three months, include:

- A call center to triage patients to the appropriate resources with a provider – safety and access
- Front door screening for every person who walks through PHC’s front door
- Barriers in high traffic high risk areas
- Multiple daily sweeps of the building by maintenance to disinfect high touch areas
- Mask requirement for all in the building
- Daily self-checks for all staff
- Response to multiple supportive grants
- We identified high risk staff and are keeping them in safer environments, if they so choose
- Work from home options that were not previously available
- Telehealth services for patients whom may need care but cannot be seen in person for their safety or ours, phone and video options available
- Focused screening area for people experiencing symptoms
- Closed and redesigned the pharmacy lobby to facilitate physical distancing among staff and moved all prescriptions to either curbside pick-up or mail order.
- Asymptomatic testing for employees
- A robust dental testing protocol - a negative COVID test prior to a patient’s appointment
- Increased cleaning and distancing protocols in the dental setting consistent with CDC and national dental guidelines.

And this is not an exhaustive list. Not surprisingly, people were (are) a little tired.

To help address fatigue and burnout of PHC providers and staff in time of considerable uncertainty and rapid change PHC leadership prioritized self-care. This was accomplished through numerous small communications and by formalizing self-care activities as part of the everyday routine at PHC. This included:

- Beginning weekly all staff meetings, and daily incident command team meetings with a five minute self-care exercise. These are led by a licensed clinical psychologist and range from breathing exercises, to chair yoga, to creating a daily affirmation.
- Implementing “*Self-Care Connect*,” -- a fifteen-minute, daily exercise in self-care. Every person at PHC has a hold on their calendar for self-care, the time is paid, it is offered at various times of day throughout the week, and staff can drop-in as they chose and find value. *Self-Care Connect* went through two iterations during the early months of the

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Coronavirus pandemic. At first, self-care connect was designed to focus on group processing. Later, after getting staff feedback, it became a “choose your own adventure,” affair with different levels of participation; participants can remain completely anonymous or choose to engage in conversation. Self-care connect is led by a licensed clinical psychologist.

As PHC moves beyond the immediate emergency and continues to respond to the coronavirus pandemic we will continue to focus on the health and wellbeing of our staff and providers. Although a relatively small investment, we believe that structuring self-care into the workday has a positive impact on our workforce and the delivery of health care.