

Health Care Leaders Unite to Improve Worker Safety

The Joint Commission continues its long tradition of focus on health care worker safety in its accreditation standards and offers additional resources to protect health care workers on its [Workplace Violence Prevention Resources](#) and its [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Resources](#) portals. In addition, The Joint Commission and Joint Commission Resources have held a long-standing partnership with the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration through an [alliance](#) designed to address health care worker safety. As concern for the safety and well-being of health care workers continues to grow with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, efforts to develop and implement programs to protect workers are gaining momentum across the health care industry.

In early 2021, leaders from hospitals and health systems across the United States convened to address the safety and trust of health care workers at all levels within their organizations. A review of the data, interviews, and multiple meetings led these leaders to join together in a national movement to take action to protect the overall well-being of all health care team members. To drive meaningful actions that advance health care worker safety and well-being, the [CEO Coalition](#), cofounded by 10 health system CEOs, embarked on a mission to implement systems, tools, technologies, and resources to help health care workers feel safe at work. This article looks at the driving forces behind the CEO Coalition and its efforts to effect lasting change.

The Inspiration

The inspiration for the CEO Coalition came during the first surge of COVID-19 after the safety of frontline health care worker was put at risk due to factors such as limited personal protective equipment (PPE), ongoing patient surges, overwhelming death rates, and little to no rest. Realizing an immediate need for improvement, founding partners Brent Lang, CEO and Chair of Vocera; Bridget Duffy, MD, Chief Medical Officer, of Vocera; and Kedar Mate, MD, President and CEO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), launched a national campaign for health care improvement and invited other health care leaders to join. After watching colleagues and communities suffer, Duffy felt a sense of urgency to do more to protect the physical, psychological, and emotional safety of the nation's health care workforce. With support from leadership at Vocera, Duffy started a movement to galvanize others around this issue.

Duffy reached out to other health care system CEOs who validated that there was, in fact, a looming worker safety crisis. From there, a diverse group of leaders representing clinical and operational backgrounds; a mix of genders, races, and ethnicities; organizations that include academic medical centers, public safety institutions, for-profit and nonprofit entities; and systems from both urban and rural areas came together for change.

The Data

Although the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a need for meaningful change, it simply exacerbated many existing issues, such as workplace violence, psychological and emotional trauma, systemic inequities, and racial injustice—all of which have an adverse effect on the well-being of health care workers. The following data sources highlight a few of the issues made worse or brought on by the pandemic, as well as disparities that have existed for decades:

- A [Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#) conducted in the spring of 2021 revealed that 55% of US health care workers report feeling burned out and that 29% considered leaving health care altogether.
- Death by suicide among female nurses is twice that of women in the general population, according to a study published in the American Medical Association journal [JAMA Psychiatry](#).
- A 2019 [survey](#) by the American College of Emergency Physicians found that almost half of emergency physicians reported being physically assaulted at work, while about 70% of emergency nurses reported being hit and kicked while on the job.
- A [Washington Post](#) article reported a rise in racist incidents against Asian American health care workers since the pandemic began.
- A [National Nurses United](#) survey revealed that a year into the pandemic about 22% of nurses reported increased workplace violence, attributed to decreased staffing, changes in patient population, and ongoing visitor restrictions.
- In 2020 [Mental Health American \(MHA\)](#) gathered information on the experiences of health care workers during COVID-19 to create better resources and help support their mental health as they continue to provide care. Responses from more than 1,100 health care workers revealed the following feelings:
 - Stressed out and stretched too thin
 - Worried about exposing loved ones
 - Emotionally and physically exhausted
 - Not getting enough emotional support
 - Struggling with parenting
- A recent [UCLA Health study](#) shows the proportion of Black physicians in the US has increased by only 4% over the past 120 years, and the share of physicians who are Black men remains unchanged since 1940. The research also spotlights a significant income gap between White and Black male physicians.

The Declaration of Principles

Coalition leaders believed a new definition of safety was needed to better protect the nation's health care workers. Susan Ehrlich, MD, MPP, CEO, Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center, says she joined the Coalition

because the pandemic shined a brighter spotlight on the courage, dedication, and professionalism of her team. “COVID-19 also put into stark relief a darker set of truths: anxiety, violence in the workplace, and inequities in our delivery of care. Addressing these issues directly is an absolute necessity moving forward,” says Ehrlich.

The coalition set out to restore health care worker trust, recruit and retain health care workers, ensure that care is provided by workers with skill and humanity, and support the safety and well-being of all health care workers. The foundation for change was built on three pillars: safeguarding psychological and emotional safety, promoting health justice, and ensuring physical safety. Based on research and firsthand experience of the CEOs and senior executives, all agreed that promoting health justice was missing from the traditional definition of safety.

According to Duffy, “The CEO Coalition works to drive meaningful action to protect the emotional, psychological, and physical well-being of health care team members while explicitly acknowledging that health justice is a critical component of safety. The Coalition also understands that focusing on the safety and well-being of staff members is essential to retaining and recruiting staff to support a functioning health system that is able to provide high-quality, safe, and compassionate care to patients and their loved ones.”

From in-depth interviews with executive partners, whose roles included frontline caregivers, as well as executives from quality, human resources, technology, team-member experience groups, and others responsible for well-being, the Coalition built on the three-pillar foundation to develop the key tenets of the initiative. Taken together, this forms the [Heart of Safety: Declaration of Principles](#). These principles, which are illustrated in the figure below, serve as a road map for implementing lasting organizational change.

Actions for Lasting Change



To create lasting change, Coalition founders vow that these principles will not sit on a shelf. In partnership with IHI, members and thought leaders identified evidence-based and emerging best practices to support the six principles and have partnered with key institutions to advance this work.

Each of the founding members has efforts underway across the three pillars to support team member safety and well-being within their organizations. The Coalition recently launched a learning community to help members share emerging practices, identify opportunities for data sharing, foster collaboration to accelerate innovation and adoption of new practices, and identify opportunities for collective advocacy.

To date, participating organizations have implemented actions that include, for example, hazard pay and raising minimum wage, assessing and providing access to mental health resources, updating processes and technologies, and building awareness for diversity and inclusion.

In an ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ehrlich and her team have broadened communication with staff through daily updates on data, procedures, and policies; monthly virtual town halls; executive rounding; and team huddles. They have worked to improve employee and patient satisfaction, equity, campus security, and more. Teams use the Declaration of Principles as a foundation for this work.

Another Coalition founder, Laura S. Kaiser, FACHE, President and CEO, SSM Health, says her organization has placed caregiver safety at the forefront of its operations, with daily huddles focused solely on safety incidents involving team members. Incidents are escalated to senior leadership, so that they can respond quickly to any threats. “We’ve also adopted organizational goals around increasing workforce diversity and health equity,” says Kaiser.

SSM Health monitors and manages its diversity and equity goals as part of its core performance and is investing in innovative and holistic resources to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at every level. In addition, SSM Health partners with racially and ethnically diverse professional organizations and academic institutions to develop fellowship and training programs, host job fairs, and provide educational opportunities in health care to prioritize focus on the next generation of health care providers.

Getting Involved

The Coalition works toward continuous improvement in communication, staff safety and security, and health justice through the pandemic and beyond. “Our call to action is that every hospital or health system CEO in the country signs on and invests in processes, resources, and technologies that protect team members and helps us influence policy to drive enduring change,” says Duffy. Hospital and health system leaders interested in joining this movement can visit the Coalition’s website for more information and for a list of member organizations: <https://www.ceocoalition.com/>. 