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MODEL PRACTICES FOR PUBLIC HEALTH LABORATORY Wellness and Wellbeing

Public Health Laboratories operate in high-paced, high-pressure environments to protect the health and safety of the communities they serve. These laboratories support robust and diverse testing menus critical to managing disease outbreaks and assisting public officials during natural disasters.

Given these demands, a strong focus on employee wellness and wellbeing is essential to sustaining a healthy, resilient and high-performing workforce. Supporting employee morale, satisfaction, engagement and retention while strengthening recruitment efforts requires intentional investment in the physical, mental and emotional health of laboratory staff. Public health laboratories can use this guide to develop and implement wellness and wellbeing resources and establish model practices.

Employee wellness and wellbeing initiatives improve overall staff health, reduce absenteeism, prevent injuries, improve work-life balance and foster a more positive workplace culture. Comprehensive wellness and wellbeing programs engage, support and promote employee wellbeing by:

- Demonstrating leadership commitment
- Supporting core wellness and wellbeing pillars
- Establishing a wellness committee and champions
- Planning and evaluating programs
- Sustaining a wellness and wellbeing-focused culture.

For the purposes of this guide, “wellness” refers to the pursuit of overall better physical health to prevent illness (e.g. physical exercise, nutrition and sleep habits), while “wellbeing” encompasses a more holistic approach that integrates physical health with social, emotional and spiritual health (e.g. happiness, satisfaction and social activity).

Be Aware of Policy or Funding Restrictions

Before implementing any of the recommended activities, please consult your organization’s policies and guidelines to ensure that any events under consideration are permissible.

Model Practices in Action

Visit the APHL Member-developed Resource Center (MRC) at aphl.org/MRC to see examples of wellness and wellbeing resources used within the community, including flyers and agenda, by searching for the words “wellness” and/or “wellbeing.”

Please note that some items within the MRC are restricted to APHL Members, and you must be signed in to the website to access these resources.



“Wellness is a process,
not a one-time initiative.”

Leadership Commitment

Visible leadership support and direct participation encourage staff to feel comfortable participating in wellness and wellbeing activities. When leadership models healthy behaviors and champions wellbeing, it shifts from “nice to have” to a company priority. When leadership prioritizes employee wellbeing, they cultivate a positive workplace culture that attracts and retains top talent.

A strong wellness program signifies a deeper commitment to the laboratory team, ensuring that safety, health and wellbeing are prioritized as much as work performance. Collaboration with Occupational Health and Safety or other departments plays a critical role in ensuring the workplace is an environment that promotes safety, injury prevention and staff comfort.

Leadership can support wellness and wellbeing by developing policies and procedures, establishing a top-down approach to ensure buy-in at all levels. Regular meetings with laboratory managers and supervisors are essential to the success of wellness and wellbeing programs. Leadership models participation by emphasizing team culture and mutual support, approving events, encouraging breaks, promoting flexible working arrangements and encouraging staff to utilize paid time off, allowing staff time to participate, being inclusive in decision-making, and securing institutional support and funding for wellness spaces and activities. Managers and supervisors can also help facilitate participation by coordinating staff schedules. Leadership also supports continuous quality improvement by tracking and monitoring key performance measures, such as workplace injuries, safety audit findings and absenteeism trends.

Finally, leadership must emphasize the importance of authentic communication, transparency, and recognizing the value and contribution of a healthy workforce to achieving the mission, vision and values.

Core Wellness and Wellbeing Pillars

Below is a list of pillars and accompanying examples to help develop a balanced program framework. Consideration should be given to both in-person and virtual resources and activities. These should be offered to ensure all staff can participate regardless of work shifts. Consideration should include scheduling activities during appropriate times in the workday to limit workflow disruptions, and an organizational-wide calendar should be used to promote and support reminders.

Wellness and Wellbeing Pillars	Examples	
<p>Physical Wellness & Preventive Care <i>(i.e., physical health)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ergonomics and injury prevention (assessments) and furniture (anti-fatigue mats, work stations, chairs) and messaging (posture, hydration, safe techniques, and movement reminders) • Health screenings • Health fairs/clinics (flu, vaccine, blood drive, etc) • Exercise classes (yoga, walks, etc.) • Movement/fitness challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition education • Desk exercises • Sports events/activities • Physical wellness space • 24/7 access to employee gym • Permanent wellness room • Chair massages • Cross-training and bench rotations to alleviate high stress positions

Wellness and Wellbeing Pillars	Examples	
Mental & Emotional Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for confidential counseling and mental health support services • Yoga • Employee wellbeing solutions (practicing self-care) • Puzzles for mental breaks • Therapy dog visits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily affirmations • Stress management and mindfulness tips • Mental health awareness themes • Self-care prompts • Access to gym and wellness programs • Cross-training and bench rotations to alleviate high stress positions
Social Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social clubs (book, craft, etc.) • Social gatherings/celebrations • Potlucks • Group walks • Team-building activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community engagement (outreach volunteer, etc.) • Networking events • Volunteering opportunities
Intellectual & Professional Wellbeing <i>(i.e., satisfaction, engagement and productivity)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clubs (book, craft, etc.) • Problem-solving workshops • Professional development courses • Tuition assistance • Continuing education opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasizing career pathways • Peer-to-peer opportunities • Mentorship program • Recognition activities • Speaker series
Environmental Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor activities • Recycling/waste reduction efforts • Gardening/composting • Cleanliness • Healthy habits • Monitoring weather and air quality indexes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water safety • LEED Certification and energy conservation and carbon footprint reduction • Emergency preparedness • Protective clothing
Financial Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tuition assistance and employee assistance programs • Health care/childcare (FSA/HSA spending accounts) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial information/guidance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Retirement planning ○ Budgeting and debt management
Spiritual Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meditation and quiet spaces • Walking trails • Recognition of significant holidays 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affirmations • Breathing exercises • Journaling
Vocational Wellbeing <i>(i.e., personal fulfillment)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal growth opportunities • Volunteer activities • Networking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clubs • Speaker series

“Wellness does not have to be expensive or complicated to be effective. As long as you’re consistent, positive and genuinely care, it goes a long way.”



Wellness Committees and Champions

Wellness and wellbeing initiatives are best managed through an employee-led committee endorsed by leadership. To establish a wellness committee, it is recommended to draft a charter approved by leadership. The charter outlines the committee’s scope, ground rules, procedures, governance and composition, onboarding plan, roles and responsibilities, key activities, communication strategies, planning and evaluation, budget and expense tracking, a centralized, shared document library for agendas and minutes, and staff resources.

It is recommended that committee members be on a staggered rotational basis to sustain institutional knowledge. Ideally, a cross-section of employees from all levels of the organization serves on the committee to represent the organization’s different areas. Members should be enthusiastic about the committee’s work, ready to spread the word about committee initiatives, be hands-on and willing to serve as champions.

Communication is a critical function of the committee. It is essential that the committee maintains strong cross-departmental communication and ongoing support with leadership. Collaboration with leadership is essential to help build a culture of participation. Model practices include providing information upfront to new employees during the onboarding process, reinforcing it during regular staff meetings and town halls, and through informal real-time check-ins, such as walking the floors.

Communication strategies include developing a calendar and messaging in partnership with the laboratory’s communications. Email announcements and calendar invitations should be used for events and activities. Printed flyers and visual postings should be placed in common areas. Representatives (EAP, Occupational Health, Staff Association, etc.) should be invited to speak on-site, with email reminders to staff about available resources.

To engage staff, consistent event scheduling is needed. Participation should increase as employees become more familiar with initiatives. Interactive activities and games that bring together employees from different teams offer opportunities for shared social engagement. Daily affirmations, in particular, can provide an easy, low-cost approach to engaging staff. **Overall, engagement is strongest when initiatives are simple, easy to understand and easy to participate in during the workday.**

Planning and Evaluation

To implement a sustainable, evolving wellness and wellbeing program, planning and evaluation are crucial to its success. Steps that need to be developed to support planning and evaluation include the following:

- Establish short-term and long-term outcomes using SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely).
- Identify the baseline, targets and related data-collection methods, including measures such as event participation, resource utilization, staff satisfaction levels and absenteeism rates.
- Use feedback mechanisms such as surveys, polls and focus groups to gather staff input, identify barriers to participation and opportunities for improvement.
- Monitor trends and regularly evaluate findings against outcomes and targets.
- Use lessons learned to implement improvements to the program.

Sustaining Wellness Culture

Sustaining a robust and comprehensive wellness and wellbeing culture requires strong staff buy-in, shared recognition of benefits, keeping initiatives simple and practical, and maintaining team-based accountability. Collaboration with leadership and staff on initiatives is critical to embedding programs and activities into the organization's culture. Ongoing communication, promotion, easy access to events and resources, and continuous quality improvement also support sustainability. The organization should consider simple, cost-effective solutions, avoid overly complex or high-cost interventions and focus on practical, easy-to-implement strategies, while accounting for time constraints, staff workloads and compatibility with work schedules as potential barriers to participation.

Conclusion

Wellness and wellbeing efforts are most effective when **supported and prioritized by leadership, valued by the workforce and integrated into the organizational culture**. An ongoing commitment and evaluation help ensure that wellness initiatives promote physical health and psychological safety, remain meaningful and responsive to workforce needs and support overall resilience.

A healthy, engaged workforce strengthens laboratory performance and is essential to sustaining readiness and protecting the communities they serve.

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