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FEATURED TACTIC: WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT

One of the great benefits of practicing at an Indian health program is a predictable work schedule that allows clinicians generous time off for their personal activities. Unlike private practice, where workloads can become overwhelming and medical staff may feel pressured to extend their hours and responsibilities, staffing policies at Indian health programs attempt to spread responsibilities fairly and rationally so that all staff members have a manageable workload while ensuring patients receive optimal care. However, staff turnover, illness, funding limits and other factors might create challenges in the allocation of responsibilities. This may lead to heavy workloads for some staff members that can cause frustration and burnout and eventually discourage retention.

Beyond filling vacancies or adding new positions in the short term, attention to individual clinicians' needs can go a long way toward addressing the burnout that can arise from a crushing workload. Responding to a staff member's concerns about a heavy workload and making an effort to improve the situation can help boost the individual's morale and keep him or her on the job.

Indian health program managers have instituted some successful practices that address the personal needs of clinicians while continuing to provide excellent patient care.

- A policy of fairness: Believing that fairness and equality in work assignments and schedules are important aspects of staff retention, one department director has developed a number of strategies for ensuring that no one clinician or group of clinicians feels overburdened. She regularly rotates staff schedules and work assignments to cut down on boredom and burnout among her staff and equally distributes the end-of-day shifts with their occasional demands for extra hours to help minimize staff conflicts. This way, staff members know that an assignment with a difficult workmate or an arduous schedule will last only a week, after which the clinician will move on to practice elsewhere with other staff. The department director encourages staff members to volunteer for shifts in which they must stay late, allowing them to choose

which days they prefer. This not only provides variety in work hours for clinicians, but also helps accommodate their personal schedules. She plans ahead for holidays and special occasions, asking staff members to volunteer to work certain holidays in exchange for time off on other days or holidays. She sets the tone by her own behavior, including scheduling herself for assignments that are considered boring but necessary, a team-building idea that sends the message that everyone pitches in to cover these chores.

- **Flexibility in scheduling:** Helping clinicians accommodate their personal and educational demands can have an important impact on retention. For example, a nursing administrator at a large Indian health program prevented a nurse from quitting under the pressures of school and work by arranging for the nurse to have more time off to complete her degree. As a general policy, management tries to be as flexible in scheduling as possible by getting input from staff members and responding to requests for time off. Paying attention to the changing demands of specific jobs and to the aspirations of younger generations of clinicians while striving to meet them halfway can help assure clinicians that management cares about their needs.
- **Reorganizing the workplace:** Another possible tactic to help ease workload challenges is to fundamentally reorganize department operations. A pharmacy at a large Indian health facility was faced with a surge in patients requiring pharmacy services, resulting in the need for clinicians to work after closing time night after night. When the clinicians complained of burnout from being overworked, management helped the department to revamp its operations by changing its system from a combination of scheduled appointments and unscheduled walk-ins to a system in which appointments were scheduled all day, thereby spreading patient visits throughout the day and making schedules more predictable and manageable. Management also made arrangements to bring in an additional part-time staff member during especially busy times to relieve pressure on the pharmacy staff.
- **Creative staffing:** Working in a creative manner to accommodate and meld the personal preferences of several staff members is another management strategy that can help in the retention of clinicians. For example, the head of a dental program at a large Indian health facility found an ideal candidate for a dental supervisor position but the individual wanted to work four 10-hour days rather than five eight-hour days. The administrator is now searching for a second dentist to work part time for the fifth day, providing full coverage for the facility. In satisfying the needs of two clinicians, this innovative arrangement will enable the facility to fill the supervisor position.

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Do you have successful retention strategies and your own best practices to share with your colleagues? We value your input, so please send us your success stories or comments. You can also add a colleague to the mailing list or update us with changes in your email address. Contact us at: [CEO Retention Insights](#).



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