

Stop the Stigma: An Action Toolkit to Remove Mental Health History Reporting in State Licensure Applications and Credentialing

Updated March 2024

Stigma for seeking mental health treatment as a healthcare provider remains high, despite increased efforts to destigmatize seeking care in the general population. According to The Physicians Foundation's 2023 Survey of America's Current and Future Physicians, almost eight in 10 physicians agree there is a stigma around mental health and seeking mental health care among physicians.¹ Stigma is driven largely by a fear of ostracization amongst peers. Concerns regarding the loss of medical license or other practice privileges represent another significant barrier to seeking mental health treatment. Four in ten physicians report they were either afraid themselves or knew of someone who was fearful of seeking mental health care due to the questions asked in medical licensure, credentialing, and insurance applications.²

Invasive questions regarding one's mental health can be found on state licensure, hospital credentialing, and insurance applications. In recent years, several states have adopted changes to their applications. As of September 2023, 25 state medical boards have made changes to their licensure applications to remove intrusive language and 11 states are in the process of making these changes.³ While that is phenomenal progress, that still leaves 11 states with invasive questions and language remaining on their licensure applications. Questions limited to current impairment may be well-intentioned and designed to create a patient-safety guardrail without requiring extensive medical disclosures. In practice, however, these questions often lack clear definitions or explanations, which often leaves physicians confused about what they are and are not required to disclose. While some physicians may interpret current impairment as related to significant mental health challenges, such as severe brain fog from major depressive disorder or mania with delusions, others may be concerned that a recent week or two of feeling down, burnt out, or not like themselves may require disclosure.

¹ The Physicians Foundation. (2022). Understanding the state of physicians' wellbeing and assessing solutions to address it. The Physicians Foundation. <https://physiciansfoundation.org/research/the-physicians-foundation-2022-physician-survey-part-2/>

² American Hospital Association. (2022). Suicide prevention: evidence-informed interventions for the health care workforce. American Hospital Association. <https://www.aha.org/suicideprevention/health-care-workforce/suicide-prevention-guide>

³ Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation. (2023). Remove intrusive mental health questions from licensure and credentialing applications. Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation. <https://drlornabreenheroes.spoketraining.com/learn#/journey/welcome/110409>

While questions surrounding impairment and mental health may have been intended as a guardrail to protect patients, there is no data supporting claims that invasive mental health questions benefit patient care. On the other hand, we do know these questions create a significant barrier to mental health treatment. As the country experiences a mental health crisis and also as burnout rates amongst physicians rise to a record high for a third year in a row,⁴ it is imperative, now more than ever, that we work to remove mental health-related questions from medical licensure applications to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health care among medical professionals.

Included in this toolkit are email scripts and phone call templates you can use to contact your state medical board or medical institution. Help us end the stigma and create an environment where all clinicians and physicians have the freedom to seek the mental health care they need and deserve.

Take Action to Advocate for Change to Medical Licensure Applications

As a hospitalist, your voice matters! As a healthcare professional, you should not be afraid to seek the mental health care that YOU need and deserve. You understand first-hand the burnout, stress, and mental health challenges that can accompany working in the hospital. Your experience, both as a clinician and as an individual in a high-burnout field, uniquely positions you to be an effective advocate and educator about physician mental health.

Mental health disclosures on state licensure applications can be intrusive and stigmatizing. They often prevent or delay physicians from seeking necessary mental health care - and we need to advocate for a licensure process that does not stigmatize mental health treatment. We have developed this toolkit with easy-to-follow steps that you can use to advocate for this important cause!

Step 1: Audit Your State

Learn about the licensure requirements in your state. You can review [this helpful resource](#) from the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation to learn whether your state requires invasive mental health history on licensure applications and renewals.

Invasive questions can include:

- Questions about historical mental health challenges or treatment. If licensure applications ask about current impairment, impairment must be clearly defined. Otherwise, it can further contribute to stigma and confusion.
- Questions about "breaks in practice."
- Questions or statements that discuss mental health in a non-supportive manner.

Step 2: Find Your Board's Contact Information

If your state requires mental health disclosures, look up your state's medical board. You can find this information on the [Federation of State Medical Boards' website](#).

⁴ The Physicians Foundation. (2022). Understanding the state of physicians' wellbeing and assessing solutions to address it. The Physicians Foundation. <https://physiciansfoundation.org/research/the-physicians-foundation-2022-physician-survey-part-2/>

Step 3: Contact Your State Board

You can either call or email the board. Included below are sample scripts, but feel free to customize and personalize. This is just a guide - be yourself.

Phone Script:

Hello - my name is [name] and I am a hospitalist at [institution].

I wanted to call to implore you to remove intrusive mental health questions from licensure and credentialing applications. Questions about mental health create stigma and barriers to mental health care.

Many healthcare workers are afraid to seek treatment because they are concerned about the loss or suspension of their licensure.¹ According to the American Hospital Association, fear regarding loss of licensure is a leading driver of physician suicide.²

[Do you have any personal stories or anecdotes you wish to share? Consider discussing anonymized stories of yourself or your peers. Connecting personal experience with policy helps strengthen your impact as an advocate.]

Hospitalists spend a decade or more completing their education and training - and the fear of losing their license prevents many physicians from seeking the mental health care they need and deserve.

Hospitalists encourage and support their patients' mental health treatment - and the [state] medical board needs to do the same for physicians.

Please remove intrusive and invasive mental health questions from licensure application requirements, and please add a statement of support for receiving mental health care if needed.

Thank you.

¹ The Physicians Foundation. (2022). Understanding the state of physicians' wellbeing and assessing solutions to address it. The Physicians Foundation. <https://physiciansfoundation.org/research/the-physicians-foundation-2022-physician-survey-part-2/>

² American Hospital Association. (2022). Suicide prevention: evidence-informed interventions for the health care workforce. American Hospital Association. <https://www.aha.org/suicideprevention/health-care-workforce/suicide-prevention-guide>

Email Script:

Dear [name/state board title],

My name is [name] and I am a hospitalist at [institution]. I am reaching out to implore you to remove intrusive mental health questions from licensure and credential applications. Questions beyond the ability to practice professionally, competently, and ethically can be overly intrusive and create stigma and barriers to mental health care.

To better support the mental health of hospitalists, please consider amending licensure renewal requirements utilizing the following guidelines:

- Refrain from asking probing questions about applicant's health altogether.
- Ask a single question about ability to do their job in an ethical, competent, and professional manner, rather than a history of mental health treatment - without additional fine print. Be sure to clearly define current impairment.
- Implement an attestation model where the applicants attest to their professional, competent, and ethical practice, that uses supportive language around mental health and offers "safe haven" non-reporting options to physicians who are receiving care.

Many healthcare workers are afraid to seek treatment because they are concerned about the loss or suspension of their licensure.¹ According to the American Hospital Association, fear regarding loss of licensure is a leading driver of physician suicide.² Hospitalists have reported significantly high levels of burnout, depression, and other mental health struggles - all of which have increased following the beginning of COVID-19. We must amend the licensure application process to ensure physicians do not avoid seeking care out of fear of professional retribution.

[Do you have any personal stories or anecdotes you wish to share? Consider discussing anonymized stories of yourself or your peers. Connecting personal experience with policy helps strengthen your impact as an advocate.]

Hospitalists spend a decade or more completing their education and training - and the fear of losing their license prevents many physicians from seeking the mental health care they need and deserve.

Hospitalists encourage and support their patients' mental health treatment - and the [state] medical board needs to do the same for physicians.

Please remove intrusive and invasive mental health questions from licensure application requirements. If you have more questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,

[name]

¹ The Physicians Foundation. (2022). Understanding the state of physicians' wellbeing and assessing solutions to address it. The Physicians Foundation. <https://physiciansfoundation.org/research/the-physicians-foundation-2022-physician-survey-part-2/>

² American Hospital Association. (2022). Suicide prevention: evidence-informed interventions for the health care workforce. American Hospital Association. <https://www.aha.org/suicideprevention/health-care-workforce/suicide-prevention-guide>

Step 4: Be Persistent; Change Takes Time

Follow-up with the board or within your organization. Just as with the rest of our professional lives, it is unusual for one email to be sufficient to affect change, so your follow-up is essential. Consider sharing the topic with your colleagues and inviting them to also engage with this advocacy.

Step 5: BONUS (Bring your advocacy local!)

Many health systems ask invasive questions for credentialing and privileging employees. State-level advocacy is important - but local advocacy is just as valuable.

Audit your health system's applications with the checklist you used when reviewing your state licensure application. If your health system includes invasive mental health questions, consider sending them an email urging them to amend their processes. Note: if you are unsure how to contact your organization's credentialing office, this letter can be addressed to the Chief Medical Officer.

Email script:

Dear [Credentialing Officer],

As an employee of [health system], I am writing to urge us to amend our credentialing questions regarding mental health diagnoses and a history of treatment. Currently, our credentialing requirement includes probing and invasive questions. I encourage you to remove asking invasive questions about applicant's health altogether. Questions like these can create stigma and barriers to mental health care.

To better support the mental health of hospitalists, please consider amending licensure renewal requirements utilizing the following guidelines:

- Refrain from asking probing questions about applicant's health altogether.
- Ask a single question about current ability to practice professionally, competently, and ethically - without fine print. Be sure to clearly define current impairment.
- Implement an attestation model where applicants attest to their professional, competent, and ethical practice that uses supportive language around mental health and offers "safe haven" non-reporting options to physicians who are receiving care.

Many healthcare workers are afraid to seek treatment because they are concerned about the loss or suspension of their licensure.¹ According to the American Hospital Association, fear regarding loss of licensure is a leading driver of physician suicide.² To foster a supportive environment that encourages the mental well-being of your employees, please consider amending our current questioning around mental health history and treatment.

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Best,
[name]

¹ The Physicians Foundation. (2022). Understanding the state of physicians' wellbeing and assessing solutions to address it. The Physicians Foundation. <https://physiciansfoundation.org/research/the-physicians-foundation-2022-physician-survey-part-2/>

² American Hospital Association. (2022). Suicide prevention: evidence-informed interventions for the health care workforce. American Hospital Association. <https://www.aha.org/suicideprevention/health-care-workforce/suicide-prevention-guide>

SHM's Previous Wellness Work

SHM remains committed to advocating for and creating resources about physician wellness and burnout. Included below is a brief overview of some previous wellness work.

- **[Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act](#)**: This SHM supported legislation established grants that support training in strategies to reduce and prevent suicide, burnout, behavioral health conditions, and substance use disorders among healthcare professionals. It also provided funding for programs to educate and promote mental and behavioral health in the healthcare workforce.
- **[Physician Suicide Awareness Resolution](#)**: SHM supported a Congressional resolution that established September 17th as National Physician Suicide Awareness Day.
- **[Federation of State Medical Boards Letter](#)**: SHM supported the FSMB's policy on Physician Wellness and Burnout. Included in this policy is a recommendation for the elimination of questions that ask about the history of mental health challenges. Questions should instead focus on current impairment.
- **[Hospitalist Well-Being Advocates Toolkit](#)**: This toolkit, developed by SHM's Well-Being Task Force, is designed to equip hospitalists with tools and recommendations to advance well-being at their institution.

Stay up to date with SHM's wellness work by following our Hospitalist Well-Being Special Interest Group.