



Federation of State Physician Health Programs

Sample Hospital Policy: Referral and Consultation with Physician or Healthcare Professional Health Program (PHP)

Document Prepared by the Federation of State Physician Health Programs (FSPHP)

This policy template was developed by the FSPHP as a tool to support healthcare organizations in establishing a confidential, compassionate, and standardized pathway for referral to state Physician Health (or Healthcare Professional Health Programs (PHPs)). Its purpose is to promote clinician well-being, protect patient safety, and reduce institutional risk through early intervention.

Purpose of This Template:

- Provide a structured framework for hospitals to refer healthcare professionals experiencing difficulty due to health-related concerns.
- Offer guidance on creating a confidential, supportive process that prioritizes help over discipline.
- Facilitate alignment with FSPHP guidelines and best practices for physician wellness programs.

Instructions for Customization:

- Replace placeholders (e.g., [Hospital Name], [Insert PHP contact], [Policy Number]) with your institution-specific information.
- Ensure that references to committees, departments, and leadership align with your hospital's organizational structure.
- Review and adapt legal and regulatory statements to comply with your state and institutional policies.
- Include any additional local resources or processes relevant to clinician support and PHP engagement.

Disclaimer:

This document is provided for informational and policy development purposes only. It does not constitute legal advice or establish regulatory requirements. Each institution is responsible for reviewing, adapting, and approving policies to ensure compliance with applicable laws, regulations, and organizational governance. The Federation of State Physician Health Programs assumes no liability for the use or implementation of this template.

[Hospital Name] Policy: Referral and Consultation with Physician Health Program (PHP)

Policy Title:

Referral to Physician Health Program (PHP) for Healthcare Professionals Experiencing Difficulty

Policy Number: [Insert]

Effective Date: [Insert]

Department: Medical Staff Office / Human Resources / Clinical Leadership

Approved By: [Insert relevant leadership]

Purpose

This policy establishes a confidential, standardized, and compassionate pathway for referring healthcare professionals experiencing difficulty in the workplace that may be due to a potentially impairing health condition (e.g., mental health, substance use disorder, or medical condition) to their state Physician Health Program (PHP). The goal is to promote clinician well-being, protect patient safety, and reduce institutional risk through early intervention and professional assessment.

Scope

This policy applies to all healthcare professionals working under the privileges or employment of [Hospital Name], including physicians, advanced practice providers, and other licensed clinical staff.

Policy Statement

[Hospital Name] supports a culture of safety, compassion, and accountability. When a healthcare professional exhibits signs of potential impairment or difficulty that may be health-related, referral to the appropriate state Physician Health Program (PHP) is encouraged. The PHP provides confidential, expert evaluation and support, separate from

disciplinary processes, and is designed to protect both the professional and the patients they serve.

A referral to the PHP does **not** constitute disciplinary action. When possible, referrals should be made in collaboration with or through a **hospital-based physician health or wellness peer committee**, which can provide an added layer of confidentiality and protect the clinician from unnecessary exposure to formal peer review or corrective action.

Definitions

- **Physician Health Program (PHP):** Physician Health Programs (PHPs) are confidential, state-run programs that provide therapeutic support to healthcare professionals facing mental health conditions, substance use disorders, and other conditions that could impact safe practice. Serving those in safety-sensitive roles, PHPs are a lifeline offering early intervention, structured health support, accountability, and verification to promote recovery and safe patient care. Core elements of PHP support include regular therapeutic engagement, peer connection, liaison with workplaces, and objective verification measures to ensure health and safety in practice. These measures are delivered in the spirit of wellness, resilience, and sustained recovery – ensuring optimal outcomes that may not always be obtainable in usual care.
- **Impairment:** A health-related condition or behavioral concern that interferes, or may interfere, with the ability to safely carry out professional duties.
- **Referral:** A formal or informal request made to a PHP regarding a healthcare professional who may benefit from evaluation and/or support.
- **Physician Health or Wellness Committee:** A confidential hospital-based peer committee that reviews and responds to health-related concerns among medical staff, often facilitating early, pre-disciplinary PHP referrals.

Indications for Referral or Consultation

Referral or consultation with a PHP may be appropriate in situations including, but not limited to:

- Noticeable decline in clinical performance or reliability.
- Erratic or concerning behavior in the workplace.
- Emotional instability, burnout, or distress affecting professional function.
- Signs of possible substance misuse or intoxication.
- Colleague, patient, or staff concern regarding a professional's well-being.
- Chronic absenteeism or tardiness linked to health concerns.
- Self-disclosure of need for help related to mental health, addiction, or stress.

Referral Process

1. Initial Concern Raised:

- Concerns may be raised by any colleague, supervisor, patient safety committee, or credentialing body.
- Concerns should be documented factually and without diagnostic assumptions.

2. Preliminary Review:

- The Medical Staff Office, Human Resources, or **Physician Health/Wellness Committee** will review concerns to determine if a referral or confidential consultation with the PHP is indicated.
- Referral is not a punitive action, but a step toward support and resolution.

3. Referral Made:

- Referrals may be initiated by medical staff leadership, supervisors, or through a **hospital-based Physician Health or Wellness Peer Committee**.
- **These peer committees offer a non-disciplinary route for early intervention**, protecting confidentiality and avoiding premature involvement of formal peer review mechanisms.
- The referring party will contact the state PHP directly or guide the professional to initiate contact (see: [Insert PHP contact or FSPHP directory link]).
- The PHP will manage all clinical aspects of evaluation, treatment referral, and monitoring.
- The hospital may request verification of fitness-for-duty or compliance, but **will not receive personal health or treatment information** unless authorized and necessary.

4. Confidentiality Maintained:

- All PHP communications will be handled in accordance with state law, PHP policies, and applicable privacy regulations.
- Referral through the PHP is often protected from board reporting, provided no patient harm has occurred.

5. Follow-Up & Workplace Coordination:

- The PHP may provide the hospital with updates on safety to practice and monitoring status as appropriate and with consent.
- The clinician remains responsible for engaging in PHP services and complying with their recommendations.

Responsibilities

- **Leaders/Supervisors:** Recognize early signs of difficulty, act compassionately, and follow referral protocols.

- **Medical Staff Office / HR:** Coordinate referrals and ensure documentation is appropriate and confidential.
 - **Healthcare Professionals:** Engage with the PHP in good faith when referred.
 - **PHP:** Provide expert assessment, monitoring, and communication as agreed with the referred party and institution.
 - **Physician Health Committee (if applicable):** Serve as a peer-led referral and support body, promoting early, confidential intervention.
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Legal and Ethical Considerations

- PHP referral does **not** automatically trigger disciplinary action or board reporting.
 - PHPs often operate under legal protections specific to each state, allowing them to offer services confidentially and without mandatory disclosure unless patient harm has occurred.
 - This policy is aligned with the Federation of State Physician Health Programs (FSPHP) Guidelines and ACP's position on physician rehabilitation and professional accountability.
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Resources

- **Find Your State PHP Directory:** <https://www.fsphp.org/state-member-programs>
- **Federation of Physician Health Programs (FSPHP):** <https://www.fsphp.org>
- **FSPHP PHP Guidelines:** [FSPHP PHP Guidelines](#)
- **Overview of PHPs:** [The Role and Success of Physician and Healthcare Professional Programs](#)
- [Watch A Physician's Story](#) American Conference on Physician Health; Carrie Cunningham, MD, MPH, a surgeon, and Chris Bundy, MD, MPH, a psychiatrist and nationally recognized expert in physician health, shatter stigma and shame by publicly revealing their personal stories of loss and redemption so that others may find hope and healing.
- **[CBS Mornings Plus segment featuring Physician Health Programs](#)**
CBS Mornings Plus featured the vital work of State Physician Health Programs (PHPs), which help doctors recover from substance use and mental health challenges while protecting patient safety. The segment follows surgeon Dr. Courtney Barrows McKeown, who shared her courageous story of recovery and return to practice — showing that with the right structure, support, and accountability, healing is possible. As she put it, “I’m a better surgeon, doctor, wife, daughter, sister — you name it — than I ever was before.” FSPHP Chief Medical Officer Dr. Chris Bundy also reminded viewers: “A monitored physician is a safe

doctor.” These programs have quietly helped thousands of physicians find lasting recovery, reduce stigma, and continue serving patients safely.

- [FSPHP Video: Trusted Help for Healthcare Professionals](#)

This video highlights the critical role of Physician Health Programs (PHPs) and how they support the health and well-being of healthcare professionals. This powerful piece features inspiring stories from PHP program graduates and heartfelt reflections from leaders across the country. Together, they share how PHPs provide hope, healing, and a path forward, providing reassurance of safe practice and promoting workforce sustainability.

Policy Review and Revision

This policy will be reviewed every two years or sooner based on updates in law, regulation, or institutional practice.

Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Signs of Health-Related Concerns in the Workplace

Category	Possible Signs
Behavioral Changes	Mood swings, irritability, paranoia, social withdrawal
Cognitive Impairment	Poor memory, difficulty concentrating, disorganization
Professional Performance	Increased errors, missed deadlines, late documentation
Appearance	Decline in grooming, weight loss/gain, signs of fatigue
Reliability	Frequent absences, tardiness, unexplained disappearances
Substance Concerns	Smell of alcohol, slurred speech, unsteady gait, overly sedated or overly energetic demeanor
Interpersonal Issues	Conflict with colleagues, inappropriate comments, lack of empathy
Burnout Indicators	Cynicism, hopelessness, detachment, depersonalization

Note: These signs do not confirm impairment, but may indicate the need for compassionate support and referral to PHP for evaluation.

Appendix B: FAQ – Referral to Physician Health Program (PHP)

Q1: What is a Physician Health Program (PHP)?

A: A confidential, state-based program that evaluates and supports healthcare professionals with potentially impairing conditions such as mental health or substance use disorders.

Q2: Who can make a referral?

A: A Concerned Colleague, Hospital leaders, the Medical Staff Office, supervisors, or a **hospital-based Physician Health Committee**.

Q3: Does a referral mean the clinician is in trouble?

A: No. Referral is not disciplinary. It's a compassionate, protective step that allows for confidential evaluation and support, often avoiding medical board or employer reporting.

Q4: What if there's no confirmed diagnosis?

A: That's okay. PHPs assess whether concerns are health-related and determine next steps. You don't need proof — only a reasonable concern about health and performance.

Q5: Will the PHP share information back with the hospital?

A: Only verification of safety-to-practice or compliance, with appropriate consent. Clinical details remain confidential, in line with state law and PHP protocol.

Q6: Why refer through a physician health committee?

A: This protects the clinician by avoiding formal peer review or disciplinary action, allowing for a confidential process that prioritizes help over punishment.

Appendix C: Talking to a Colleague About Referral

Opening the Conversation (Example Script): “Dr. [Name], I’ve noticed some changes lately — in your energy, communication, and reliability — that make me concerned about how you’re doing overall. This isn’t about blame or judgment. We want to make sure you’re supported. One of the options we have is reaching out to our state’s Physician Health Program. It’s confidential, it’s not a report, and it’s a resource specifically for clinicians. Would you be open to learning more?”

Tips for Approach:

- Use a private, calm setting.
- Lead with care, not concern for compliance.
- Describe observed behaviors, not assumptions about cause.
- Avoid labels like “impairment” or “addiction” unless disclosed.
- Offer information on PHP, and if needed, offer to help make the first call or connect with the physician health committee.