

Wellbeing First Champion — A More Inclusive Path for Credentialing

Maggie Fuchs, CPMSM, CPCS

Regional Director Medical Staff Services – WI Region
SSM Health/St. Mary's Hospital
President, Wisconsin Association of Medical Staff Services (WAMSS)



Many of us who worked in healthcare during the 2020–2023 COVID-19 pandemic can attest that both clinical and non-clinical roles experienced extreme physical and mental challenges. The impact of these longer-than-normal workdays took its toll on so many people in the healthcare community. Unfortunately, it also led to widespread burnout and the [highest ever combined rate of deaths](#) due to alcohol and drug abuse and suicide.

The [Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation](#) was created in honor of the late Dr. Lorna Breen, who tragically took her own life during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was afraid to ask for mental health help based on her perception that it would affect her credential status with the hospital or negatively impact her position on the medical staff. Unfortunately, many providers feel this way, so they answer “no” to the overly invasive credentialing and recredentialing questions asking about their past and current mental health. In fact, [The Physicians Foundation 2023 Survey of America’s Current and Future Physicians](#) found that “4 in 10 physicians were either afraid or knew another physician fearful of seeking mental health care, given questions asked in medical licensure/credentialing/insurance applications.”

The [Wellbeing First Champion Challenge](#) is an initiative by the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation that recognizes health organizations and state licensing boards that update credentialing applications to remove intrusive mental health questions. It aims to eliminate stigma, encouraging health workers to seek mental health care without fear of career repercussions.

My journey as a Wellbeing First Champion started over a year ago when I was first contacted by Dr. Heather Schmidt, Sisters of St. Mary (SSM) Health’s system medical director of employee well-being. Dr. Schmidt was very excited to share the great work that the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation was working on, including their recent release of the [Impact Wellbeing Guide™](#) for organizations. She was directed to me by my SSM Health leader as someone who may be able to help move this initiative forward. Our first meeting lasted over an hour, and when we were finished, I was not only excited but re-energized. Dr. Schmidt shared with me the fundamental concepts behind this work, and I immediately loved the fact that as a credentialing department, we could have an impact on our practitioners’ mental health.

Fortunately for our SSM Health Wisconsin (WI) practitioners, Dr. Schmidt and I were committed to making a change. We thoroughly reviewed the great work that the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation was doing and their partnerships with state licensing bureaus and national leaders like NAMSS, AMA, NCQA, FSMB, and Joint Commission. I then spent time looking into our application documents, disclosure questions, and reference requests. I quickly identified that our current language was intrusive and worded in a way that practitioners would be inclined to answer dishonestly.

With Dr. Schmidt's support, I submitted our current language to our contact at the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation for review. Our contact was able to help us revise our questions to make them less invasive, but we wanted to do more. We added an additional question to allow our applicants to request confidential contact from someone on SSM Health's internal Care for Caregivers program. The three goals of our Care for Caregivers program are to:

1. Minimize the human impact when unanticipated adverse or stressful events occur.
2. Provide a "safe zone" for caregivers to receive support and mitigate the impact of the event or situation.
3. Develop an internal rapid response process providing emotional first aid for staff and an empathetic culture.

We also needed to make sure that we had support from our Wisconsin medical staff credentialing and executive committees. We attended over 20 committee meetings at ministries throughout Wisconsin to share our message and the "why" behind it. The overall impression was one of gratitude and appreciation for building awareness of the underlying research and recommendations. This initiative is one of many things that has a potential for positive impact, showing how supportive SSM Health is and its commitment to removing barriers where possible. Coupled with the Care for Caregivers program and increasing knowledge of the work and resources available was important to show advocacy and validation of the ongoing challenges of working in healthcare. These discussions also allowed us to address potential concerns about missing a new or existing provider who may be at risk.

With support from our medical staff leaders, the next step was to update our application process. The initial and reappointment credentialing application language, disclosure questions, and peer reference form health questions all had to be changed. This was a time-consuming process, as we currently have three different application processes throughout the state. Once all documents had been updated, I submitted our application to the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation for review. After a few back-and-forth discussions regarding changes that were made and some nail-biting weeks waiting, I am

happy to report that SSM Health WI received the Wellbeing First Champion designation in January 2026!

However, the journey doesn't end there; it's only just begun. I am working closely with the other SSM Health regions in Illinois, Missouri, and Oklahoma to make changes toward obtaining this designation for their regions. We are also working closely with our Wisconsin marketing team to share our designation with others and promote our commitment to well-being.

Dr. Schmidt and I currently serve on the Caring for Wisconsin's Caregivers Steering Committee, a five-year, statewide initiative to advance the well-being of Wisconsin's healthcare workforce. This committee brings together champions from across the state, creating opportunities for connection, shared purpose, and collaboration to foster statewide engagement and alignment around common priorities that support lasting system-level change.

I was very excited to hear that SSM Health WI had our first internal Care for Caregivers referral this month. I like to think that with the help of our stigma-free credentialing questions, we were able to get this practitioner the help they needed and deserved. Maybe we even saved a life!

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