

Medical Professionals Health Program Makes a Difference in WV

by P. Bradley Hall, MD

The West Virginia Medical Professionals Health Program (WVMPHP) is in its eighth year of protecting the public by providing a mechanism for the successful rehabilitation of impaired physicians and their return to the safe, monitored practice of medicine.

The WVMPHP is the only physician health program recognized by both the West Virginia Board of Medicine and the West Virginia Board of Osteopathic Medicine. Now in the second year of five-year agreements with the boards, our vision is, "improving the health of West Virginians through promoting the well-being of West Virginia physicians, podiatrists, physician assistants and other licensed health care professionals."

The program has helped nearly 170 signed participants to date, of whom 80 continue under an agreement impacting 32 hospitals/medical schools and many other areas of medicine. The WVMPHP also has served more than 100 others who have sought assistance and guidance, but were not formally engaged with the program. Less than one-third of signed participants were referred by their licensure board formally through consent order or informally through direct contact. The vast majority have voluntarily sought assistance and guidance.

Of those who have completed the initial phase of treatment and are under contract, 90 percent have remained abstinent, licensed and are practicing safely. These participants represent 24 specialties; the most frequently represented include family practice, emergency medicine, internal medicine and Ob/Gyn. Sixty percent of current participants had previous issues and recurrence of their chronic medical condition, further supporting the need of our physician health program and long-term guidance, assistance and monitoring. Twenty-two percent of current participants are medical students and/or residents, reflecting on the effectiveness of



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early intervention in salvaging careers.

During initial evaluation, some were found to have some type of impairment (physical or on initial neuro-cognitive testing), most of which resolved with treatment. A few remain impaired and are disabled because of physical disorders

detected or persistence of cognitive impairment. Many detected impairments were unrelated to the original issues leading to participation. A few individuals have residual impairment because of the "qualifying condition of participation" (mental illness or substance use disorder) or other unrelated physical disorders. These initial and permanent impairments may not have been detected had they not sought the assistance and guidance of, or had they not been referred to, the WVMPHP.

The WVMPHP has served WV well beyond services to physicians, podiatrists and physician assistants. We have a direct involvement in the Governor's Advisory Council on Substance Abuse (GACSA), providing input to legislation (Senate Bill 437, March 29, 2012) that enhances regulation, monitoring and enforcement to prevent doctor shopping and increases accountability for those prescribing and dispensing prescription drugs. The WVMPHP continues to be actively involved in the implementation process.

The WVMPHP also collaborates with other state organizations to provide assistance and guidance in a multitude of ways.

The WVMPHP, in collaboration with WVU Healthcare and the state Department of Health and Human Resources (supported by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration grant funds administered through the Bureau for

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