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Cover Page Footnote

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Leveraging the power of peer support: The story and impact of Team Lavender

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Abstract

As the world continues to take inventory of the wake left by the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare organizations and leaders remain steadfast on recovery. At Northwell Health, the largest health system in New York State, employee emotional wellness remains a constant priority. Team Lavender (TL) is an interdisciplinary group of professionals dedicated to supporting colleagues during times of stress and/or hardship. Emergent and proactive TL peer support responses/activations provide a moment of pause, reflection, teamwork, and peer support. Particularly during COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent variant surges, this innovative budget-neutral approach was recognized and leveraged to promote resiliency, humanism and holistic well-being.

Keywords

Peer support; well-being; Team Lavender; resiliency

Just take a breath. Right now, we are living in a world full of chaos and noise. Healthcare professionals are hurting, exhausted and numb as they have witnessed true human suffering and loss. Images of morgue trucks, sounds of patients gasping for air and the deep imprints of n95 masks on their face, are very much present in their minds and hearts. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent variants, hospitals have been challenged. Patients and family caregivers are entering the healthcare environment with a tsunami of challenging emotions. It's come to the point where even taking a few seconds for yourself feels impossible most days.

Breathe. Two years later, as I take a reflective moment, I remain in-awe of what the healthcare industry has endured. I recall that during the initial COVID-19 wave, media dubbed healthcare workers as "Heroes." Communities came together to clap at 7pm and children drew pictures of doctors and nurses donned in capes, standing strong with fistful hands resting on their hips. Pictures of rainbows were taped to windows and inspirational quotes were drawn with colorful chalk onto sidewalks. Two years later... and there's no more clapping, pictures have faded or torn, and chalk have been washed away as seasons came and gone. Yes, the heartfelt sentiment and outpouring of support were appreciated. Yes, glowing accolades helped raise spirits. However, significant time has passed, and our frontline leaders and teams are still fighting every single day. They are very much human, and they need the time and space to heal.

Inhale in. In November 2014, a post-partum unit at Long Island Jewish Medical Center (LIJMC), a Northwell Health tertiary academic medical center located in New Hyde

Park, New York, experienced a series of crises within a span of days. A team accustomed to welcoming life into the world, was suddenly grappling to cope after two unsuccessful maternal codes within days of one another. Although leaders and colleagues quickly came together to offer support and respite, it sparked a realization that a more consistent and organized approach was needed. After performing a review of literature and searching for best practice, myself and a small LIJMC team dreamed, created, and implemented Team Lavender (TL), a unique program grounded in peer support. TL offers a moment of pause, reflection, and teamwork during times of crisis and/or distress. This forum also can bridge individuals to additional resources such as Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services and/or the Northwell Health Center for Traumatic Stress Resilience and Recovery, if appropriate.

We specifically chose on the word "Team" when building this program because it aligned with our prioritization of teamwork, having each other's back. The term "Lavender" was then selected because the flower and color symbolizes calmness, serenity, and grace which were overarching goals of this program. The power of TL is that this dedicated group of Responders are not outsiders to the organization and team members. They are trusted colleagues that work hand-in-hand with those they support. They are there to celebrate engagements and pot-luck lunches and they are there when the unimaginable happens like the death of a beloved patient or devastating terminal diagnosis of a coworker. TL Responders participate voluntarily and do not get compensated for their role, instead citing a sense of honor and professional purpose to do this meaningful work. Having a diverse group of Responders representing disciplines such as Social Work, Patient Experience,

Chaplaincy, Nursing, Medicine, Holistic Integrative Therapists, Behavioral Health, etc. provides a robust toolbox of skills, experiences, and perspectives. TL came from the innate need of individuals who want to truly care for each other's well-being and subsequently has taken on this major ripple effect across our organization.

What started at one hospital quickly spread throughout the organization. And the truth is, there was no master strategic plan or communication campaign driving program expansion. Leaders and teams at other sites learned about TL through word-of-mouth and through hearing stories of friends and colleagues who had meaningful interactions. I've been in healthcare for over 35 years and having witnessed this organic spread has been nothing short of inspiring. In early 2015, I had transitioned from an operations-based leadership role at LJMC to the newly formed system Northwell Health Office of Patient & Customer Experience (OPCE). As the Vice President of Patient & Customer Experience for our large, integrated health system, I oversee strategic pillars of culture, patient-centered care delivery, hospitality, and accountability. Team Lavender naturally followed me to this corporate role and to this day, remains within my leadership purview. My team and I vowed to continue supporting Team Lavender sustainment because we whole-heartedly see the connection to patient experience. Like the old adage goes, *'you can't pour from an empty cup.'* If our healthcare professionals are not caring for themselves, how can we expect them to properly care for patients and families?

Interestingly enough, at a majority of our sites, Team Lavender Site Leads, the remarkable individuals who oversee the day-to-day operations and execution of TL at their respective site, tend to be Patient Experience leaders. Like myself, they are called to this type of work. Caring deeply for others is something they are drawn to, are naturally sought after and in doing so, *their* cups are filled. What I love most about TL is how no two responses are the same. We have emergent or reactive activations where peer support is needed due to a timely incident or event. Over the years, however, we have seen a major increase in proactive TL offerings, where support is offered outside times of crisis. Responders have time to craft meaningful peer support and frontline participants can voluntarily join either individually or as a team unit. In speaking with our site-based leaders, they appreciate TL because it's a tool to begin the conversation and awareness around resiliency and self-care.

Having this peer support program in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be extremely beneficial. Northwell Health is the largest healthcare organization in New York, which was the initial epicenter for the COVID-19 wave in Spring 2020. Overnight our world was turned upside down. As New Yorkers, we have been through terrorist attacks and natural disasters, but nothing

could have prepared for what we collectively experienced. Patient volume, acuity, and mortality were at an all-time high and at our peak, we had upwards of 3,400 COVID-positive patients admitted to our facilities. To date, we have cared for more than 300,000 COVID-patients which is a staggering number to wrap my head around. At the helm are our team members. They were and continue to be physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted. Compassion fatigue, burnout, stress, and anxiety are like the flame of a candle. As long as there is a wick (work) and oxygen (COVID), it will continue to blaze. How wonderful would it be if we can collectively close our eyes, make a wish, and blow that flame out for a while.

Exhale out. Out of the darkness came light and during COVID peaks and subsequent variants, our teams rallied around Team Lavender as something safe, familiar, and meaningful. Responders started wearing lavender scrubs as a visual cue to their colleagues that they are there for them. Unused conference rooms were designed as Lavender Lounges, offering a healing sanctuary. At our quaternary hospital, North Shore University Hospital, their Lavender Lounge redesign was featured on the NBC television show, "George to the Rescue." I've been to that space and what strikes me most is how there are always staff inside. Whether they are meditating, relaxing on the massage chair, strumming an acoustic guitar, or simply journaling, in my opinion, every hospital needs a sacred space for this type of self-care. TL offerings were regularly held during change-of-shift times to provide either a sense of grounding and/or help transition from work to home. Also, since team members were unable to come off their unit due to patient census, TL was brought to them by creative modalities such as "Roadside Reiki," gratitude team huddles and "1-minute mindfulness."

To provide a sense of scope, Northwell currently has 23 sites with Team Lavender programs inclusive of hospitals, post-acute and ambulatory facilities and at our centralizing Core Laboratory. There are 32 TL Site Leads and 300+ Responders who are utilized as needed at their site. In 2020, approximately 2,500 Team Lavender offerings were provided, and that number increased to approximately 2,900 in 2021. As much as we capture that data, it's not about the numbers. As long as we are caring for our team members and providing value-added support, TL is substantiated. Our OPCE created a 'TL Implementation and Sustainment Toolkit' and coordinates quarterly Team Lavender Collaboratives where TL Site Leads meet to hear organizational updates, share best practices, network, and discuss barriers and/or innovative ideas. They create yearly strategic plans in an ongoing effort to sustain and elevate the program. To support Responder wellness and professional development, the OPCE partnered with the Northwell Health Center for Wellness and Integrative Medicine to offer courses exclusively for TL Site Leads and Responders. In 2021 and 2022, the courses focused on

holistic modalities such as meditation, mindfulness, guided imagery, Reiki, Tai Chi Easy and reflexology. This year, we are also offering this dedicated group an opportunity to participate in a 7-week virtual Resiliency series. This initial cohort will not only learn transferable skills to apply during TL activations but also provide time for them to focus on their personal well-being.

Sit in silence. Very early on in the pandemic, Northwell recognized the importance and necessity of caring for our team members. Team Lavender was not the only program but one of many wellness programs and offerings available. I was part of numerous workstreams focused on emotional support and Stress First Aid being spearheaded by our behavioral health service line and Employee Assistance Program and recognition efforts with our Employee Engagement colleagues. As an organization, we created Tranquility Spaces outside employee entrances to provide resources, regularly scheduled virtual Town Halls to share timely information, rolled-out complimentary wellness apps and launched the Center for Traumatic Stress, Resilience and Recovery which will be essential moving forward. The diversity of offerings has been robust, and this is necessary when meeting people where they are.

Moving forward. There is no better time to be in healthcare but it is up to us to provide the needed peer support and resiliency efforts so our team members can best care for patients and families. Reflecting on the past, I am proud of how Team Lavender started and where it is today. Particularly in healthcare, the power of peer support is so important. Going home to family and friends, they may listen and empathize, but they perhaps cannot fully understand, to no fault of their own. We are humans, caring for humans and there is something really unique, hard, and beautiful about that responsibility. I have seen TL bloom over the years because of its simplicity. There are no algorithms, checklists, or metrics. At the core of TL, it's having a colleague truly see you, hear you and be still with you for a moment of time. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us a lot and has forever changed our lives, personally and professionally. I hope that by sharing the story and impact of our Team Lavender, that we shine light on peer support when caring for our workforce. Be positive... we can do this together. *Namaste.*