



Empowered by Choice: WPHP's Voluntary Model

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The Washington Physicians Health Program (WPHP) is an independent, physician-led, nonprofit organization providing early intervention, assessment, treatment referral, and post-treatment health support for health professionals in need. WPHP is contracted by the Washington State Department of Health to serve as the authorized physician health program serving allopathic, osteopathic, and podiatric physicians, physician assistants, dentists, veterinarians, as well as students and residents of these professions.

WPHP has a dual purpose to protect patient safety and support health professionals. We serve as a voluntary, confidential resource for medical professionals with impairing health conditions that include mental health, non-psychiatric medical conditions, and substance use disorders. Every day, we navigate complex situations where the health of medical professionals and the safety of patients are both at stake. Our role is to provide confidential health support while making thoughtful, evidence-based decisions that uphold our responsibilities to participants, the medical community, and the public, contributing to a stronger and safer healthcare system overall.

Participation in WPHP is voluntary. WPHP cannot compel a physician or PA to enter or remain in the program. Because voluntariness is foundational to our mission, and to the boundaries of our responsibility and accountability, it warrants explication here.

Let us begin by acknowledging that many who are referred to WPHP face real external pressure to participate: an employer, credentialing entity, or regulator may attach consequences to the individual's decision, whether as a condition of continued employment, privileging, or licensure. In this sense, participation is often more externally than internally motivated, at least at the outset. But external motivation does not render a choice involuntary. In our view, a prospective participant always retains the choice to enter WPHP or not and retains, in full, the right to contest any employment, credentialing, or regulatory decision through the appropriate channels.

That choice is a real one. An individual may decline to participate or later withdraw, and WPHP imposes no penalty for that choice. Where WPHP is monitoring a participant, it may report a withdrawal or noncompliance to the referring or regulatory entity—not as a penalty, but as part of the disclosed monitoring and reporting function agreed to at the outset. And where an individual declines or does not follow WPHP recommendations and poses a risk to patient safety, WPHP has a legal obligation to notify the Washington Medical Commission (RCW

18.130.175). Any consequence that follows is imposed by the third party exercising its own independent responsibilities. WPHP, in short, is not the source of the pressure a participant may feel. And while an individual's participation (or non-participation) may inform the decisions of employers, credentialing bodies, and regulators, it does not make WPHP responsible or accountable for them.

A second dimension of WPHP's voluntariness is informed consent. For a decision to participate to be genuinely voluntary, prospective participants must be fully informed of the risks, benefits, and alternatives of program participation, including the implications of choosing not to participate. Washington law reinforces this: WPHP is required by statute to inform participants of the program's procedures, the responsibilities of participation, and the possible consequences of noncompliance (RCW 18.71.320(5)). We make every effort to ensure that anyone contemplating participation has the information needed to make an informed decision, including detailed information available on our website and a structured, two-part informed consent process at program entry. By making the process transparent from the outset, we help ensure that the decision to participate is a deliberate and informed one.

Fear, shame, stigma and denial are powerful impediments to recognizing and addressing concerns of impairment proactively. Prior to the development of PHPs, an ill physician was often out of options once a career or life ending event occurred. WPHP offers physicians and PAs an opportunity to address concerns for impairment in a manner that preserves career, reputation, health, and safe practice. This opportunity has always been a choice.

For 40 years, WPHP has been committed to our mission of supporting the health and well-being of medical professionals and protecting patient safety. WPHP delivers trusted, credible, and timely advocacy when participants need it most. In fact, 88 percent of program participants report needing and benefiting from WPHP advocacy.² WPHP also continues to make tremendous strides locally and nationally in advocating license and credentialing question reforms and addressing other systemic barriers to mental health and well-being.

To learn more about WPHP, or if you or a colleague need help, please visit our [website](#) or call 800-552-7236. Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) for the latest insights and resources in physician health.

References:

1. AMA Code of Medical Ethics Opinion 9.3.1 and 9.3.2: <https://code-medical-ethics.ama-assn.org/chapters/professional-self-regulation>
2. Washington Physicians Health Program 2025 Annual Report: https://wphp.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/wphp_annual_report_2025_final.pdf