Tip Sheet for Supervisors:
Discussing Referral to the Washington Physicians Health Program (WPHP)

Why These Conversations Matter

Support the Clinician
Connect clinicians with confidential assessment and support

Protect Patients
Address concerns before harm occurs

Preserve Careers
Reduce avoidable disciplinary or employment consequences

Supervisors Should Expect

- Anxiety before the conversation
- Emotional reactions from clinician
- Concerns about confidentiality and career impact
- The need for clear, compassionate support

Before the Conversation

1 Clarify the Concern

Focus on:
✓ Observable behaviors
✓ Performance or reliability concerns
✓ Safety or professionalism issues
✓ Changes in mood, communication, or functioning

🚫 **Avoid:**
✘ Speculation about diagnosis
✘ Overreliance on hearsay
✘ Character judgments

🗨️ **Helpful:**
"There have been repeated late arrivals for procedural responsibilities over the last month."

2 Know Policies & Responsibilities

Before Meeting:
- Review HR and medical staff procedures
- Understand WPHP referral process
- Decide if the risk to safe practice warrants medical leave pending further evaluation. If unsure, consult WPHP.

📌 **Key Question:** *Is the referral recommended or required?*

3 Coordinate Internally

Consider Involving:
- Clinician Leadership
- Human Resources
- Risk Management
- Legal Counsel
- Medical Staff Services
- Graduate Medical Education Leadership

💡 *Whenever possible, do not manage these situations alone.*

Align On:
- Meeting purpose
- Expectations
- Next steps
- Operational plans
- Available supports

4 Choose the Right Setting

✓ Meet in a private setting
✓ Allow uninterrupted time
✓ Ensure support resources are available afterward

🚫 **Avoid:**
✘ Rushed conversations in public spaces or end-of-week meetings when support may be limited

5 Educate Yourself on WPHP

Negative and misleading stories about PHPs discourage help-seeking.
Familiarize yourself with these resources to address potential concerns from the referred clinician:
📊 WPHP Annual Report | 🔄 WPHP Process | 🏆 WPHP Participant Success Stories | 📰 WPHP in the News

Having the Conversation

1 Initiating the Dialogue

⚠️ Acknowledge Difficulty
✓ *"We need to address this responsibly."*
✘ *"This is just a formality."*

❤️ Express Concern, Not Accusation
✓ *"I would like to discuss concerns about your well-being and current functioning."*
✘ *"Several people have mentioned... [shortcomings]."*

🤝 Emphasize Shared Goals
✓ *"Our goal is to support you while ensuring patient safety through early intervention."*
✘ *"We both want the same thing."*

🛠️ Introduce WPHP as a Resource
✓ *"We want to connect you with WPHP so we can move from problem to solution."*
✘ *"This is in your best interest."*

2 Keep the Discussion Grounded

Focus on Objective Facts:
✓ Use specific examples
✓ Describe patterns or incidents
✓ Reference firsthand observations
✓ Use neutral language

🗨️ **Helpful:**
"There have been repeated concerns about concentration, communication, and reliability that we cannot ignore."

🚫 **Avoid:**
✘ Arguing about intent, labels, or diagnoses
✘ Excessive efforts to persuade: skeptical clinicians tend to respond better to a straightforward message

💡 *Recognizing that the conversation is challenging for both parties and empathizing with the clinician can be reassuring.*

3 Explain the Role of WPHP

WPHP Can Help:
🧭 Recommend appropriate support or treatment
🤝 Coordinate with the workplace appropriately
🔒 Protect confidentiality when possible
📈 Support safe return to practice pathways

🗨️ **Helpful:** *"WPHP's role is to help determine what support or intervention may be appropriate."*

4 Expect Emotional Reactions

Common Reactions:
- Fear
- Anger
- Shame
- Denial
- Withdrawal
- Bargaining

Helpful Responses:
✓ Stay calm
✓ Allow silence
✓ Acknowledge emotions
✓ Re-center on safety and responsibilities
✓ Maintain respectful boundaries

Special Situations

🗨️ Situation	💬 Supervisor Response
Clinician becomes defensive	Stay calm, return to objective facts
Immediate safety concerns	Remove from clinical duties if needed and follow emergency procedures
Requests confidentiality	Explain privacy protections honestly without promising absolute confidentiality; refer to WPHP Confidentiality page for provisions and limitations
Refuses referral	Follow policy, document objectively, prioritize safety

Safety Considerations

- Knowing that this conversation can be distressing, familiarize yourself with **institutional procedures** for addressing safety issues and anticipate needed resources, especially for those in rural or underresourced areas.
- For impaired or acutely impaired clinicians, arrange appropriate **medical care** and/or **safe transport home**.
- If the clinician expresses suicidal ideation, **do not leave them alone** until a definitive care plan is arranged. Involve public safety or law enforcement as needed.

Sample Conversation Flow

Opening: *"I appreciate you meeting with us. We need to discuss concerns that have been brought forward regarding your well-being and current professional functioning."*

Observations: *"There have been repeated incidents involving missed responsibilities, communication difficulties, and concerns raised by staff about your ability to function safely under current conditions."*

Shared Goals: *"Our responsibility is both to support you and to ensure patient safety. We are approaching this as a health and safety issue, not as a punishment."*

WPHP Referral: *"We believe an evaluation through WPHP is the most appropriate next step. WPHP specializes in helping clinicians assess concerns, obtain appropriate support, and determine safe pathways forward."*

Expectations: *"We are asking that you contact WPHP within the next 48 hours and cooperate with the assessment process."*

Support: *"We recognize this is stressful. We want to work with you constructively and support you through this process."*

After the Conversation

1 Document Carefully

Include:

- Date and participants
- Objective concerns discussed
- Recommendations made
- Clinician response
- Agreed-upon next steps
- Immediate safety actions

🚫 **Avoid:**

✘ Stigmatizing or speculative language

2 Maintain Professionalism

✓ Limit discussion to those with operational need-to-know
✓ Reinforce recovery-oriented expectations
✓ Coordinate appropriately with WPHP and leadership

💡 *Set clear expectations and hold firm limits regarding the consequences of non-participation.*

Key Principles to Remember

⏱️ Early intervention helps
🤝 Respect and dignity matter
📝 Clear expectations reduce anxiety
👩‍💼 Focus on observable behaviors
⚖️ Support and accountability can coexist
🧑‍🤝‍🧑 Supervisors should seek institutional support — do not manage these situations alone

Final Message for Supervisors

These conversations are challenging because they involve compassion for a colleague, responsibility to patients, organizational safety, and uncertainty about outcomes. WPHP can help prepare you for the discussion.

A thoughtful, respectful, and well-prepared approach can:

✓ Reduce harm
✓ Preserve dignity
✓ Improve engagement
✓ Protect careers and lives
✓ Promote safer patient care