

Employee Wellness Programs (EWPs)

A Guide for Agency Leaders



This guide was prepared in accordance with the law (5 U.S. C. 7901), and contains information on best practices and recommendations for designing, implementing, and executing Federal Employee Wellness Programs.

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Section 1: Introduction

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management is committed to providing guidance which prioritizes and highlights the well-being of all federal employees. Employee Wellness Programs, or EWPs, are at the forefront of upholding and protecting employee well-being as they are designed to foster the mental, emotional, and physical prosperity of federal employees through assisting tools and resources which can optimize both employee and organizational success. These programs include all services and supports provided under a traditional Employee Assistance Program, in addition to any augmenting resources or programs which can assist employees in achieving both healthier professional and personal lives. Several [legislative initiatives](#) have shaped guidance and implementation of Employee Wellness Programs in the Federal Government, including [Title 5 U.S.C. 7901, Public Law 79-658](#), which enables each agency to establish a health service program to promote and maintain the physical and mental fitness of employees and [E.O. 12564](#), which mandates the establishment of a drug-free Federal workplace program, including an EAP as an essential element in achieving a drug-free workforce. The Office of Personnel Management is charged through these legislative initiatives to provide overall guidance to Federal agencies, creating baseline expectations for agency programs and helping agencies implement those programs as effectively as possible.

Purpose

The purpose of this guidance is to establish parameters for Employee Wellness Programs, to provide [agency leaders](#) with resources for themselves, as well as resources to share with their [coordinators and supervisors](#), and [employees](#), and to equip agency leaders with the information needed to ensure their employees are aware of and have access to the appropriate resources and aids needed to support them. Agencies are responsible for overseeing EWPs, and ensuring employees have access to all appropriate resources.

Targeted Areas of Impact for Employee Wellness Programs

- 1) Increasing Federal Employees' awareness and knowledge of the full scope of Employee Wellness services and resources available to them;
- 2) Minimizing and eliminating negative stigmas associated with seeking mental and behavioral health treatment;

- 3) Ensuring greater equity in standards of care and services rendered across Federal EWPs;
- 4) Facilitating and increasing ease of access to and engagement with EWP resources for Federal Employees;
- 5) Increasing communication and collaboration across agency EWP and Work Life coordinators; and
- 6) Supporting and fostering psychologically safe workplaces and increased cultural competency of professional Employee Wellness service providers across all agencies.

Section 2: Employee Wellness Program Structure

Employee Wellness Programs are designed to be comprehensive aids which can assist Federal Employees in developing and increasing their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. EWPs include all services and supports provided under a traditional Employee Assistance Program, in addition to any augmenting resources, classes, services, and activities offered by a Federal Agency. Agency Leaders should ensure their EWPs include the proper goals and components to optimize program success and utilization.

Core Employee Assistance Program Services

Federal EAP's are the first component of an Employee Wellness Program and should be designed to support and uplift the 8 Dimensions of Wellness¹, which include emotional, physical, occupational, intellectual, financial, social, environmental, and spiritual aspects. Prioritizing each dimension based on employees' individualized needs can lead to a healthier and more positive lifestyle and state of mind. While Federal EAPs can include a variety of resources, supports, trainings, and services for individuals, managers, and agencies, the services outlined below should be standard in any Federal EAP.

¹ Adapted from Swarbrick, M. (2006). A Wellness Approach. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 29(4), 311-314.

Cultural Competency Services

Cultural competency services are designed to increase the ability of individuals to understand and respect values, attitudes, and beliefs which may differ from one's own views or culture and can be instrumental in supporting and fostering diverse workplaces and healthy interactions. These services should include resources and supports for [underserved communities](#), and incorporate training programs in the areas of cultural and ethnic awareness, workplace microaggressions, and gender inclusivity. In accordance with [E.O. 14035](#), these resources should also include referrals and access to external resources for transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary employees including but not limited to resources to assist employees in navigating workplace and social transitions, and related education for family members of transitioning employees.

Mental Health Counseling Services

Counseling services offer employees the opportunity to speak to a licensed clinician or counselor 24/7 regarding a variety of professional or personal topics which may impact the employee's well-being and should also include mindfulness assistance and supports. Providers should ensure to work with employees to provide referrals to in-network support for long-term assistance. Agency leaders should regularly remind employees that private, confidential support is always available to assist them in navigating changes and challenges, and to support their mental health and overall well-being.

Financial and Legal Services

Financial and legal services can provide resources and assistance in areas such as drafting a living will and health care power of attorney, housing or real estate matters, estate planning, education funding, family budgeting, retirement planning, investment strategies and many more. These services should also provide referrals to employees to professional assistance for additional or more complex legal and financial matters.

Dependent Care Services

Dependent Care services are designed to equip employees with a variety of helpful aids which can assist them in caring for their families. These services should include assistance locating quality care within an employee's locality for

children, elders, and other dependents, resources and supports for employees in various stages of parenting, access to worksite lactation support for nursing employees (to include accommodations for pumping, and appropriate storage of breast milk), as well as educational tools to facilitate a smooth integration of an employee's professional and family responsibilities.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Services

Workplace Conflict Resolution services provide employees, managers, and supervisors with assistance in navigating workplace tensions and challenging dynamics, and helpful communication methods to overcome past, current, and future barriers in professional relationships. These services should offer both group and one on one mediation sessions, as well as resources, trainings, and supports to assist employees and managers in learning and practicing healthy communication strategies and conflict resolution techniques.

Substance Use Treatment Services

Substance Use Treatment services offer referrals to employees who may be using illegal, prescription, or over-the-counter drugs or alcohol for purposes other than what they are intended. EAPs can help promote workplaces that encourage and support employees to pursue recovery from mental health and/or substance use conditions. This includes developing workplace policies and practices that facilitate a psychologically safe work environment where issues of stigma are overcome, and employees are encouraged and comfortable to seek needed supports. These services can also provide resources, education, and training to assist employees in recognizing possible signs and symptoms of substance use.

Crisis Intervention Services

Crisis intervention services provide immediate and short-term emergency response to sudden traumatic events which can negatively impact an employee's mental, emotional, or physical state. These services should offer traumatic incident response, violence prevention, and crisis management training, resources, and counseling for individuals and organizations.

Supplementary Employee Wellness Program Enhancements

While the services noted above should be offered equitably across all Federal Agencies, there are several additional resources and tools which agency leaders should consider utilizing to augment the services offered through a traditional EAP. These tools can expand the scope of Federal Employee Wellness by benefiting and supporting employees' physical, mental, and emotional health, as well as by offering employees private and on-demand assistance in areas not typically provided through an EAP. Examples of these resources are offered below.

Wellness Digital Applications

The terminology “wellness application” encompasses any type of digital health tool users can either download to their personal smartphones, or access via an online website which can assist them in cultivating mental, physical, or emotional wellness. Wellness applications can offer users autonomy over their well-being by providing immediate assistance on topics such as mindfulness, meditation, guided breathing, stress, anxiety, burnout, self-awareness, creating healthy sleep routines, and many more. Some wellness applications include structured programs to encourage participants to track their minutes of physical activity or daily steps taken and can provide methods for employees to encourage and support each other in fitness activities. These self-management tools can be provided to employees at the agency level to encourage healthy mindsets and lifestyles and can support and expand upon other wellness services. Agency leaders should be diligent in seeking evidence-based applications for employees.

Fitness Classes

Fitness classes create an option for employees to elevate their physical health by participating in professionally led courses in areas such as yoga, aerobics, Zumba, strength training, and many more, and can be offered both in person or virtually to ensure remote workers and teleworkers are able to access the courses equitably. Agencies should consider offering both pre-recorded and live classes to ensure employees in various time zones are able to access them during appropriate hours. Each department or agency has [discretion](#) to excuse employees from their duties without loss of pay or charge to leave when participating in fitness activities.

Health and Wellness Seminars and Webinars

Health and Wellness seminars and webinars enable employees to remain up to date on the most current and relevant information regarding health topics which could impact employees and their families. These events may be live or recorded and may cover a range of topics such as strategies to remain safe during cold and flu season, age related health risks, cardiovascular health, and public health safety, amongst many others. Live health and wellness webinars and seminars also create an opportunity for employees to ask licensed healthcare professionals questions relevant to each webinar topic in real time to ensure they remain aware of the most current information.

Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Trainings

In addition to the trainings offered through traditional EAPs, Agency Leaders may consider programs which can further equip Federal Employees with the tools and resources needed to recognize potentially harmful behaviors. The [Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training](#) (ASIST) is an initiative aimed to provide a culture of psychological safety in the pursuit of preventing suicide and other harmful behaviors. ASIST teaches Federal Employee volunteers, or Champions, to “provide a skilled intervention and develop a collaborative safety plan to keep someone safe and alive” (LivingWorks, 2022). This program is considered the world’s leading suicide intervention model and provides agencies an opportunity to influence a culture which prioritizes well-being by offering peer-support for individuals who experience mental health concerns and/or suicidal thoughts and ideations. Additional options include resources such as [QPR \(Question, Persuade, Refer\) Suicide Prevention Training](#), a suicide prevention training for participants to be able to recognize the warning signs of suicide and question, persuade, and refer people at risk for suicide for help, and [Mental Health First Aid](#), a skills-based training course that teaches participants about mental health and substance-use issues.

Peer Support Programs

Peer support programs can present employees with a confidential and informal opportunity to speak to a fellow employee regarding stresses and concerns, or to attain emotional support, encouragement, and learn various coping strategies. While peer support programs are voluntary and can be executed following several methodologies, effective programs often include employees who have

received strategic training from a licensed professional and are able to recognize and help others understand the effects of stress. Although peer support programs can serve as a complement and adjunct to formal treatment methods, they are not a substitute for professional assistance and should not be utilized to replace any professional services or to provide formal guidance under any circumstances.

Emergency Back-Up Care

Emergency Backup Care assist employees in locating quality dependent care when extenuating circumstances impede their regular dependent care routines. By providing temporary care when employees' child or adult care arrangements are disrupted, either expectedly (due to scheduled closings, holidays, vacations, etc.) or unexpectedly (due to illness, inclement weather, or other emergencies, etc.), Emergency Backup Care can allow employees to find safe alternative solutions and be fully present at work.

Federal Employees Health Benefits Program

Additional wellness supports to aid employees in caring for their mental, emotional, and physical well-being are provided through the [Federal Employees Health Benefits](#) (FEHB)² program. These programs, designed to meet the healthcare needs of employees and their families, can work in conjunction with EAPs to provide in-network, ongoing care to employees experiencing a mental health condition or to employees who wish to seek counseling.

The Environment of Employee Wellness Programs

To ensure Federal Employees are provided with the most equitable, welcoming, and inviting experience when accessing Employee Wellness Programs, it is important that agency leaders cultivate safe and comfortable environments both in-person and virtually for employees to access these resources. Agency leaders should be sure to pay special attention to the following key considerations:

² For employees with FEHB, additional information in plan brochures can be located in the following sections: 5(e) Mental health and substance use disorder services, and 5(h) Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Benefits

- Creating workplace cultures which normalize conversations pertaining to mental health and mental health treatment by consistently and frequently marketing available resources;
- Cultivating healthy work-life balances by ensuring employees have equitable access to workplace flexibilities, including alternative work schedules, telework and remote work, as aligned with agency policy and mission requirements;
- Ensuring employees feel safe and protected when accessing Employee Wellness resources by instituting proper confidentiality protocols, and establishing transparency in communicating confidentiality measures afforded to employees;
- Creating quiet, warm, and welcoming physical spaces within agencies or within virtual settings for employees to access certain Employee Wellness resources which are separate from the employee's workstation or shared office spaces; and
- Promoting psychologically safe spaces and work environments, where employees can function authentically, as well as express thoughts, emotions, opinions, and concerns without fear of repercussion, retaliation, or rejection.

It is important to keep in mind that agency leaders play a vital role in cultivating healthy and safe work environments, as they have a responsibility to demonstrate the beliefs of the agency and reinforce behaviors that reflect those values. This means that individuals in leadership roles should utilize their influence to help set the standard for prioritizing employee well-being by using new or existing communications channels, such as newsletters, regular emails to the workforce, employee Town Halls, or other methods to send messages to employees regarding available Employee Wellness Programs.

Employee Assistance Program Models

An Employee Wellness Program includes a traditional Employee Assistance Program (EAP), as well as additional supports and resources to create a more comprehensive approach to employee well-being and enhance Federal Employees' autonomy of care. EAPs can be executed by utilizing several different program models. Agencies should select the model which will be most effective within their organization, and provide the

most comprehensive selection of services, trainings, resources, and supports to Federal Employees.

Internal EAP Models

In an internal Employee Assistance Model, also referred to as an “in-house” employee assistance model, organizations utilize agency employees to offer any services provided through the EAP. In this model, agencies staff their Employee Assistance Programs with knowledgeable professionals who are employed through the agency. In internal models, EAP providers may have a greater internal knowledge and understanding of the agency and potential related stressors. There may, however, be greater challenges to employees’ perception of EAP providers’ confidentiality and objectivity.

External EAP Models

In an external Employee Assistance Model, agencies outsource all services provided through the agency EAP. With this model, an agency’s EAP services are provided through negotiated contracts or interagency agreements with a service provider. External Employee Assistance models can be cost effective when the programs are tailored to the specific needs of the agency. Since supports provided are external to the agency in an external model, they may be encourage viewed as bringing greater employee trust in EAP providers’ confidentiality and objectivity.

Hybrid EAP Models

Hybrid Employee Assistance Models employ the usage of both internal agency professionals and external service providers to render services to employees. This type of model can benefit from the advantages of both internal and external wellness delivery models and can offer agencies a more comprehensive selection of resources and services.

Section 3: EWP Implementation and Evaluation

Agency Considerations for Selecting EAP Service Providers

When selecting a new EAP service provider, agencies should consider the following details to ensure the EAP service provider is a proper fit for the agency:

- The scope of services offered by the provider;
- The current and future needs of agency employees;
- The mission of the agency, as additional services may be needed;
- The budget allotted for contract negotiation and the acquisition of services; and
- Location flexibility to ensure the service provider is able to accommodate both on-site and remote employees equitably.

When working with an existing service provider, agencies should regularly communicate the evolving needs of their employees to their service providers and ensure all core EAP services outlined above are consistently provided and maintained. Agencies utilizing an internal employee wellness model should also ensure their employee wellness programs encompass all services and resources outlined above.

Financial Considerations

A major element of consideration when developing an EAP is the financial investment required. Agencies should carefully consider the return on investment (ROI) building a robust EAP can yield. A 2020 study estimated the ROI of EAP counseling alone to be 5:1, or 500%, demonstrating strong financial value in employers investing in a quality EAP³. With the average annual operating cost of an EAP typically residing between \$12 and \$40 per employee, operating cost can often represent less than one-third of one percent of the total employee health care benefits expended within many organizations and offer employees readily accessible preventative care options for their well-being⁴.

³ Attridge, M., Sharar, D., Veder, B., & Steenstra, I. (2020). How to calculate the ROI for EAP counseling from improvements in work outcomes: Part 2 of series with global data from the Workplace Outcome Suite© by Morneau Shepell. *EASNA Research Notes*, Vol. 9, No. 2

⁴ Attridge, M., Amaral, T., Bjornson, T., Goplerud, E., Herlihy, P., McPherson, T., Paul R., Routledge, S., Sharar, D., Stephenson, D., & Teems, L. (2009). EAP effectiveness and ROI. *EASNA Research Notes*, 1(3), 1-5. Available online from <http://www.easna.org>

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, for every \$1 invested in an EAP, employers save an average of \$5 to \$16⁵. This is due in part to the notably low operating cost of an EAP in comparison to the high cost incurred by issues such as lack of productivity, absenteeism, accidents, and negative mental and physical health consequences which employees may experience when not appropriately afforded wellness resources, services, and supports. For more information on developing strategies to capture the benefits and costs associated with the use of work-life programs, please utilize [OPM's Evaluation Guide](#).

Cultural Competency of Mental Health and EWP Service Providers

Another critical element to consider when both selecting an EWP Service provider or mental health practitioner, and when designing organizational programs and trainings is cultural competence. Cultural competence refers to a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enables effective work in cross-cultural situations. The term 'Culture' refers to integrated patterns of human behavior that include the language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups, while the term 'Competence' implies having the capacity to function effectively as an individual and an organization within the context of the cultural beliefs, behaviors, and needs presented by consumers and their communities (Adapted from Cross, 1989).

Five essential elements contribute to an agency's ability to become more culturally competent⁶:

- 1) Valuing diversity;
- 2) Having the capacity for cultural self-assessment;
- 3) Being conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact;
- 4) Having institutionalized culture knowledge;
- 5) Having developed adaptations to service delivery reflecting an understanding of cultural diversity;

⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, *What Works: Workplaces Without Drugs*, P. 17, 1990.

⁶ Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., & Isaacs, M., (1989). *Towards A Culturally Competent System of Care, Volume I*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.

In addition to the five elements of cultural competency noted above, agency leaders should work diligently to ensure providers continuously meet and uphold the following criteria:

- A concrete understanding of the values and practices of employees and their families from diverse backgrounds which is rooted in factual information that supersedes stereotypes and generalizations about people from diverse backgrounds and cultures, and people with varying capabilities and limitations;
- An ability to utilize knowledge relevant to various cultures, religions, and social groups, and disabilities to tailor services to meet employees' social, cultural, and linguistic needs without ethnocentric biases;
- An understanding of the Agency's unique mission and the impact of this mission on its workforce in order to appropriately assess and respond to the needs of all employees
- A commitment to ongoing personal development in order to remain abreast of changing cultural needs and practices, and the impact of these changes on employees and their families;

Measuring the Success of Employee Wellness Programs

In order to ensure Federal Employees are provided with the most optimal and robust Employee Wellness Programs, it is integral that agency leaders regularly assess the progress of and engagement with these programs. Defining key parameters and benchmarks ensures that agencies can objectively gauge the effectiveness of their EWP and remain responsive to the evolving needs of federal employees.

Key Performance Indicators

Key performance Indicators (KPIs) are quantifiable measurements of an organization's progress towards a particular goal or intended result over a period of time. Defining set KPIs for EWPs enables agency leaders to effectively measure the overall success and impact of the program and highlight areas for growth and improvement. EWP service providers must ensure to keep records confidential and remove PII to the extent possible⁷, so as not to be able to

⁷ Individuals responsible for KPI tracking must comply with all federal and state laws, including Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations regarding client confidentiality.

identify specific employees who are using these services. Examples of these are provided below.

- 1) **Utilization Rates:** Utilization rates track the number of employees who have accessed an Employee Wellness Program Service over a period of time.
- 2) **Referral Rates:** Referral rates track the number of employees who were provided with a recommendation or referral to professional assistance for continued support.
- 3) **Employee Satisfaction Rates:** Employee satisfaction rates track how thorough or beneficial employees believe a wellness service to be.
- 4) **Re-engagement Rates:** Re-engagement Rates track the number of employees who accessed or engaged with a particular Employee Wellness service more than once.

Overcoming Barriers to Employee Wellness Program Usage

A prosperous and comprehensive Employee Wellness Program can significantly reduce instances of absenteeism, low productivity, employee burnout and other negative mental and physical complications, health care costs, accidents, and grievances. As such, it is vital for agency leaders to address any potential barriers to EWP usage in order to yield the most positive outcomes and experiences for employees. Many barriers to EWP usage fall into two main categories: structural barriers and attitudinal barriers. The difference between these barriers, as well as ways to overcome them are offered below.

Structural barriers include obstacles which negatively impact the efficiency and operation of a program such as policies, complexity in accessing wellness resources, availability of professional service providers (particularly mental health providers), and long wait times⁸. Agency leaders should ensure the following criteria are met:

- Wellness resources are readily available to employees in an easily accessible and central location (i.e., agency homepage or intranet) to

⁸ Vogel, D. L., Wade, N. G., & Hackler, A. H. (2007). Perceived public stigma and the willingness to seek counseling: The mediating roles of self-stigma and attitudes toward counseling. *Journal of counseling psychology*, 54(1).

ensure services and resources are provided in a manner that is accessible to people with disabilities;

- Services and resources are available for employees with disabilities using effective communication, reasonable modifications or accommodations, physical accessibility, and compliance with [Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#);
- Clear and concise instructions on how and where to access EWP resources are provided, including contact information of service providers or professionals;
- Employees working at [alternative worksites](#) have equitable access to Employee Wellness Program services and resources; and
- Agency leaders communicate set parameters for the amount of time an EAP service provider is allotted to connect an employee with a professional. Examples of these parameters might include establishing a specified limit on wait times to reach a mental health counselor.

Attitudinal barriers refer to mental interferences that are the product of one's, feelings, beliefs, and assumptions, and can include issues such as confidentiality concerns, stigmas associated with program usage (particularly the usage of mental health resources and counseling services), and a lack of understanding or awareness of available resources and services⁹. Agency leaders should ensure the following criteria are met:

- Confidentiality measures are immediately communicated when an employee accesses relevant wellness services, such as mental health counseling;
- Agency leaders inspire workplace environments which normalize conversations surrounding mental health and accessing mental health treatment by frequently promoting wellness tools, resources, and services, supporting diverse workplaces, fostering climates of inclusivity, and supporting employee usage of [leave options](#) and [alternative work](#)

⁹ Milot, M. (2019). EAP Treatment Stigma as a Barrier to Employee Help-Seeking: Predictors and Validation of a Brief Scale for its Measurement. *EASNA Research Notes*, Vol. 8, No. 2 Available from: <http://www.easna.org/publications>

[schedules](#) to care for their personal, mental, and physical well-being or to care for a [family member with a mental or physical health concern](#);

- The span of wellness resources available to employees are regularly communicated, including what each EAP service entails and what additional supplementary resources are supported; and
- Agency leaders dispel myths associated with EAP usage and communicate that employees with mental health and/or addiction issues are valued and supported, and that employees' security clearances will NOT necessarily be impacted should they utilize use mental health counseling or other wellness services.

Section 4: Conclusion

A holistic and comprehensive Employee Wellness Program can significantly benefit employees by providing resources, services, and supports to aid them in caring for and prioritizing their personal well-being, as well as the well-being of their family members. Agency leaders should assess their current Employee Wellness Programs to determine the extent their programs are aligned with the business goals of the organization and the unique needs of their employees and ensure that the core services outlined in this guidance are provided and maintained. Agency leaders should also promote and inspire safe and healthy workplaces by regularly communicating the availability of wellness resources to their employees and encouraging employees to utilize these resources on a proactive basis.

Section 5: Well-Being Resources and Supports

Below are some resources to assist agency leaders in supporting the well-being of their employees. We encourage agency leaders to have regular, open conversations regarding current and future emerging employee well-being supports and to make relevant resources easily accessible to employees.

For Agency Leaders

- [The U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being](#)
- [NIOSH Fundamentals of *Total Worker Health*® Approaches](#)
- [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion Mental Health Toolkit](#)
- [OSHA Training Resources for Employers to Protect Workers](#)

For Work Life Coordinators and Supervisors

- [NAMI Creating a Stigma Free Workplace: A Guide for Supervisors](#)
- [OPM Meaningful Conversation Starters Tip Sheet](#)
- [OPM Grieving Support Tip Sheet](#)
- [OPM Employee Assistance Program Tip Sheet](#)

For Employees

- [SAMHSA Creating a Healthier Life: A Step-By-Step Guide to Wellness](#)
- [SAMHSA What Individuals in Recovery Need to Know About Wellness](#)
- [CDC Healthy Living](#)
- [NAMI Work and Your Mental Health: A Guide for Employees](#)
- [CDC Physical Activity Basics](#)
- [American Heart Association Well-Being Resources for Employees](#)
- [OPM Mental Wellness in the Workplace Tip Sheet](#)
- [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Resources](#)
- [NIH Caring for Your Mental Health](#)



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