

**Testimony for J. Corey Feist, JD, MBA CEO & Co-Founder
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**House Energy and Commerce Committee
Subcommittee on Health**

**Hearing: "Legislative Proposals to Support Patients and Caregivers"
February 14, 2024**

Hello, my name is Corey Feist, and I am the CEO and co-founder of the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation. Our mission is to reduce burnout of health care professionals and safeguard their well-being and job satisfaction. We envision a world where seeking mental health services is universally viewed as a sign of strength for health care professionals.

I want to start by thanking the Chair and Ranking Member for the opportunity to address you all today and this Committee's work to pass the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Act last Congress. While there has been major progress made since I last sat in this seat, unfortunately, millions of health workers are still tirelessly working to save lives, often at great personal risk, yet cannot access mental health support and improve their professional well-being because of how our healthcare system operates.

On behalf of millions of health workers that account for 14% of all U.S. workers, I am here to encourage you to re-authorize the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act (H.R. 7153), which aims to reduce and prevent suicide, burnout, and mental and behavioral health conditions among health workers. I'd like to extend a special thank you to Representatives Jennifer Kiggans, Earl L. "Buddy" Carter, Debbie Dingell and Susan Wild for championing the reauthorization of this landmark legislation, along with Senators

Tim Kaine and Todd Young for championing the companion legislation to this bill, S. 3679.

Please act now to support our health workers' well-being, change how our healthcare system operates, and pass this bill.

I'd like to take a moment to clarify an important difference between two terms which are commonly used interchangeably but are not the same: depression and burnout. Depression is a medical illness that has many contributors, including biology, one's social structure and the environment in which we live and work. Burnout is an occupational syndrome related to the external environment in which people work.

In order to reduce burnout we must address both individual support and systems change. At the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation, we use the analogy that burnout is a bleeding wound. Individual support programs, like training or peer support, hold pressure on that wound which is important to keep the patient, in this case the healthcare workforce, alive. But until you address the environment of care, the source of the bleeding, you have not fixed the wound at its source. Systems efforts, such as reducing and eliminating administrative burden are critical to heal the wound of burnout.

Last time I was here in 2021, I shared my sister-in-law's story, the inspiration behind the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation, which my wife Jennifer, Lorna's sister, and I formed in June of 2020 to address the overwhelming response from health workers to her death saying "enough is enough." Lorna is the namesake for the law you have before you today for re-authorization. Since my last testimony, I have shared Lorna's story over 200 times with hundreds of thousands of people. Lorna's story has inspired many to speak out and speak up about their own challenges and observations about the

importance of this work and this law. So, instead of re-telling Lorna's story today, I'd like to share some of those stories that have been shared with us.

In the two weeks since the sponsors introduced H.R. 7153, thousands of people across the country have written to their representatives to ask for support on this bill, often sharing their own stories. A few quotes, only edited to ensure anonymity, include:

"As a pediatrician and physician dedicated to supporting faculty and trainees I see the strain they experience every day. We must support our clinicians."

"My amazing husband ... died by suicide in 2022. He was afraid to seek mental health care, he thought he could lose his job as an orthopedic surgeon ... This loss is enormous, tragic and could have been prevented if he wouldn't have feared punishment and stigma of needing help at a very stressful time in his life. This should never happen again. That is my goal."

"I have been a RN for 26 years. I have been at the beginning and end of many lives. I have been hit, spit on, and verbally abused by patients and their families. The company I have worked for, now 25 years, pays for counseling for their employees for any reason, job or personal issues. I just have to email 1 person and ask for it. No one else knows that I have asked. No one knows why. It has saved my marriage and literally saved my life. There is no dishonor in reaching out. I am a better coworker, a better nurse, a better wife and mother because of it."

"As a health professional myself, I know the immense burden health

professionals are under to continue to care well for our population. We desire to do so with the highest quality of care, but we cannot care for others if we are not also being cared for.”

Another story we heard in the past year came from the family of, a 28-year-old nurse Tristin Kate Smith who died by suicide. Tristin’s family shared a letter she had penned before her death in which she wrote:

“Ever since I was young, I expressed interest in healthcare and becoming a nurse, so I began my study. I gave my heart. My body, and my mind to you; dedicated long hours and days and gave you all my all. I have cried with patients, with their families, and for them. I held their hands, and they held mine as I moved forward in my nursing career....I no longer feel like you care about me or the people you say you serve...when we dare to think we are finally going to get the love and support we deserve, we get a pizza party and free pens for the “healthcare heroes”... I so desperately want to continue to help people, but I cannot stay in this abusive relationship...Each day, you ask me to do more with less.”

Tristin was a daughter. She was a sister and aunt. She was a friend. She loved writing, art, and animals. And she was a nurse – a significant risk factor of suicide. In fact, female nurses are 8.5 times more likely to die by suicide than the general female population.

Tristin’s experience isn’t an outlier. All types of our health workers continue to face a mental health crisis – pandemic or not – because of how our healthcare system operates. This is the source of the bleeding.

Consider the following statistics from the CDC's October 2023 Vital Signs Report which stated that our health workforce is in a mental health crisis:

- Nearly half (46%) of health workers reported often feeling burned out in 2022, up from 32% in 2018.
- Nearly half (44%) of health workers also intend to look for a new job in 2022, up from 33% in 2018.
- More than double the number of health workers reported harassment at work in 2022 than in 2018.
- And for those that experienced harassment, 85% reported feelings of anxiety, 60% reported feelings of depression, and 81% reported feelings of burnout.

Also consider that according to the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 100,000 nurses left the workforce during the pandemic and by 2027, almost 900,000, or almost one-fifth of 4.5 million total registered nurses, intend to leave the workforce, threatening the national health care system at large if solutions are not enacted. In addition, according to the United States Census Bureau, there will be approximately 46% more 60-90 year olds in the next decade.

Who is going to take care of this population?

The Dr. Lorna Breen Provider Protection Act was a much needed first step, and there has been remarkable change in protecting health workers' mental and well-being.

Since its passage, 44 health organizations received \$103 million in funding to implement evidence-informed mental health and well-being strategies.

Some early impacts of these grants include many grantees reporting hearing from

staff that they now feel like their organization actually hears them and cares about their well-being. Grantees also have shared that they are hearing from staff that they feel more engaged and more connected to their colleagues and see the importance of supporting one another. Multiple grantees have reported that health workers and leadership are now seeking out their crisis support services or wellness training for staff after understanding its value.

But this is only scratching the surface of caring for our caregivers – less than 1% of the 6,120 hospitals in our country received grants impacting 60,000 health workers, roughly .3% of the total population of health workers and it doesn't consider the 200,000+ other types of healthcare settings. As we look towards rebuilding a health workforce for the future who have all the necessary tools to deliver the highest quality care to patients, the positive changes being experienced by workers at grantee hospitals must be felt in every US healthcare setting.

Momentum remains critical and is essential to fully understand the long-term impact of system change to improve well-being and mental health.

For example, the Act also directed NIOSH to develop a campaign, which gives hospital leaders evidence-informed solutions to reduce health worker burnout, sustain well-being, and build a system where health workers thrive. This campaign launched in October 2023 is known as *Impact Wellbeing*:

The *Impact Wellbeing* campaign was developed from a robust formative research process, which found:

- Hospital leaders need actionable guidance on how they can address wellbeing at their own hospital. They also need support and resources throughout the lifecycle of efforts to improve staff wellbeing, including strategies for measuring impact over time.
- Healthcare workers do not want efforts to focus on individual resilience. Instead, they need hospital leaders to address the systemic factors at the root of staff burnout (e.g., adequate staffing, demanding work schedules, excess administrative work, etc.).

Health care leaders are just beginning to understand and adopt the *Impact Wellbeing* campaign's resources, including approaches to reduce operational and administrative burdens. It is essential to continue supporting them in implementing and evaluating these evidence-based strategies. Only then, will we be able to truly improve health workers' mental health and well-being, staff retention and recruitment, and patient care outcomes.

Tristin and other health workers' experiences, outcomes from current grantees, learnings from the *Impact Wellbeing* campaign – all that we invested in and learned over the past three years is why the reauthorization has a renewed focus on reducing administrative burden for health workers everywhere.

We now know more than ever before that to stop the bleeding of our healthcare system's staffing shortages and financial crisis; we must go beyond holding pressure on the bleeding and address its cause by changing how our system operates.

The reauthorization of the Lorna Breen Act has bipartisan, bicameral support and

has been endorsed by over 70 health care organizations spanning all aspects of the healthcare industry. In addition, thousands of healthcare leaders, health workers, and patients across the country have written to members of Congress, like yourselves, to support this reauthorization and increased funding. We encourage you today to take up this critical legislation and demonstrate our collective commitment to the future of healthcare in our country

This critical legislation is not just a matter of policy; it's a critical piece of the health delivery supply chain that benefits not only health workers, but every patient, every caregiver, every person that will require medical care in their lifetime. Thank you for your consideration and support of this lifeline for health workers.

Appendix 1

List of Organizations Endorsing the Reauthorization of Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act

Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation
ALL IN: Wellbeing First For Healthcare
Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science® and the School of Communication and Journalism at Stony Brook University.
American Association of Colleges of Nursing
American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine
American College of Emergency Physicians
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
American Hospital Association
American Medical Association
American Nurses Association
American Psychiatric Association
American Society of Health-System Pharmacists
Ballad Health
Bon Secours Virginia
Carilion Clinic
CHARM
CIMA Mennonite Hospital and Mennonite Health System
Community Health Center of the New River Valley
Emergency Nurses Association
Emory University's Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing
FIGS
George Mason University
GPW Health Center
Horizon Health Services
Inova
Johnson & Johnson
La Casa de Salud
Lifepoint Health
Medical Society of Virginia
Medicine Forward
National Medical Association
Nationwide Children's Hospital
Ochsner Health
Organizational Wellbeing Solutions
Shenandoah Community Health
The Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare
UVA Health
Valley Health
VCU Health System
Virginia Community Healthcare Association
Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association
Virginia Nurses Association

Appendix 2

List of Citations

- Definitions of depression and burnout – [American Medical Association](#)
- 22 million workers in the health care industry that accounts for 14% of all U.S. workers. There were 9.8 million workers employed as health care technicians and practitioners, including physicians, surgeons, and registered nurses. ([United States Census Bureau](#))
- Tristin Smith’s Letter to Her Abuser ([The Oakwood Register](#))
- Female nurses are 8.5 times more likely to die by suicide than the general female population. ([JAMA Psychiatry](#))
- Health workers face a mental health crisis ([CDC Vital Signs](#))
 - Nearly half (46%) of health workers reported often feeling burned out in 2022, up from 32% in 2018.
 - Nearly half (44%) of health workers also intend to look for a new job in 2022, up from 33% in 2018.
 - More than double the number of health workers reported harassment at work in 2022 than in 2018.
 - And for those that experienced harassment, 85% reported feelings of anxiety, 60% reported feelings of depression, and 81% reported feelings of burnout.
- 6,120 hospitals in the United States ([American Hospital Association](#))
- 100,000 nurses left the workforce during the pandemic and by 2027, almost 900,000, or almost one-fifth of 4.5 million total registered nurses, intend to leave the workforce, threatening the national health care system at large if solutions are not enacted. ([NCsbn](#))
- There will be approximately 46% more 60-90 year olds in the next decade. ([United States Census Bureau](#))

