



CENTERSTONE

Employee Wellness Guidelines

A Comprehensive Guide for the Crisis Workforce

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Introduction

A Comprehensive Guideline

This guideline shares best practices and lessons learned to bolster and sustain mental and physical wellness among crisis service workers. It is intended to highlight how crisis providers and behavioral health systems can integrate wellness into every stage of the employee experience.

Introduction

Crisis professionals are there when people need them most. They listen, comfort, and act in moments that can define the course of a life. This work is profound, but it also takes a toll. Just as crisis providers show up fully for others, they deserve workplaces that show up fully for them. Supporting their wellness is not only about reducing burnout but about creating the conditions in which they can thrive, both as professionals and as people.

Wellness depends on more than individual resilience—it requires a system that functions well. Staff need to be prepared for the jobs they are asked to do, supported in their daily work, equipped with adequate tools and staffing, and guided by supervisors who are fair and consistent. When those conditions are absent, the strain of crisis work can accumulate in ways that cause lasting harm, much like an invisible weight that follows staff home. Without ways to release that burden, stress becomes embedded in the employee experience, leading to exhaustion, disillusionment, and even changes in how people experience their lives outside of work.

This reality underscores why wellness must be treated as the core infrastructure of crisis care. Without it, turnover accelerates, morale deteriorates, and individuals' care outcomes suffer. Research confirms that burnout is one of the strongest predictors of turnover in health care and human services and retention is closely tied to supportive organizational practices (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Shanafelt et al., 2015). The public health significance is clear: when workforce wellness fails, the ability to deliver timely, quality care breaks down. In crisis services, this means people in crisis face avoidable harm and pain.

Centerstone is the largest nonprofit provider of mental health and substance use disorder care across the United States, with decades of experience leading both remote and on-site teams across the crisis care continuum, from crisis lines and mobile response services to crisis facilities like walk-in behavioral health emergency centers and crisis stabilization and residential units. The content for this guideline is drawn from interviews with the Centerstone leaders of those services and captures the agency's approach to embedding wellness into its culture and operations.

Wellness Throughout the Employee Lifecycle

Employee wellness is not the result of a single program or initiative but is shaped by the full arc of a person's experience within an organization.

Attraction and Recruitment

Recruitment is often the first place employees form an impression of whether an organization genuinely values its people. Centerstone leaders understand attraction and recruitment not just as a staffing function, but as the first opportunity to support wellness in a future employee's experience. Candidates who come to Centerstone with honest expectations and an early sense of support are more likely to thrive, while mismatched hires can contribute to rapid burnout and costly turnover.

A critical theme in managing expectations is providing realistic job previews. Centerstone hiring managers recognize that sugar-coating the intensity of crisis work sets new staff up for disillusionment. As one director explained, "If you recruit someone by saying this is an easy, remote counseling job, and then they're faced with suicidal individuals in chaotic home environments, it is devastating—for them and for the team." In this spirit, crisis leadership experimented with shifting the language of posted position descriptions to emphasize the grit required for crisis care. The result was that more well matched candidates applied. As one director reflected, "People self-selected in because they wanted meaningful, tough work—not just a paycheck."

Attracting talent to crisis services also includes clear, transparent communication about the benefits of the role. Candidates should have a full understanding of the compensation package including any shift differentials, healthcare offerings, flexible scheduling options, opportunities for mentorship and development—including previewing career paths within the agency—and other benefits that reflect the organization's investment in its workforce. Providing this information up front demonstrates respect for applicants' needs and highlights the value the organization places on employee well-being. In a field as demanding as crisis care, a strong comprehensive wellness and benefits offering is not merely a recruitment tool. It is key to sustaining staff for the long term.

Equally important is cultivating a team-based mentality that draws people together around a shared mission. Many individuals who pursue crisis roles are motivated by personal or lived experience, including those with military-connected backgrounds, who bring unique perspectives and strengths to the work. Highlighting this sense of collective purpose can be a powerful

attractor, signaling to candidates that they will be joining a community rather than taking on a job in isolation.

Key elements of attraction and recruitment include:

- **Realistic job descriptions:** Share honest descriptions of both challenges and supports.
- **Wellness signaling:** Job postings should highlight organizational supports like flexible scheduling, wellness resources, team culture, and opportunities for ongoing development, especially career pathways for employees.
- **Mission alignment:** Candidates with lived experience often connect deeply to the mission and show higher resilience.

Interview & Hiring Process

The interview and hiring stages play many roles: screening for readiness, providing clarity and reducing uncertainty about the role, and reinforcing wellness culture from the outset. When organizations emphasize both the practical supports they offer and the unifying mission that drives their teams, they send a clear message that every staff member is valued, supported, and essential to carrying the mission forward.

Transparency at the hiring stage is critical for setting staff up for long-term success and wellness. Candidates need a clear picture of the “nuts and bolts” of the job, like what shifts they will be working, the pay they can expect, the responsibilities of the role, and the realities of day-to-day tasks. Without this clarity, staff can encounter surprises that lead to dissatisfaction and burnout. Remote work is a good example: applicants may assume “remote” means working from home, when the position may involve traveling into the community, entering individuals’ homes, or transitioning between home-based and clinic-based work. Some remote work may allow employees to work from their home, like the individuals who work on crisis lines, but they are required to have a private space with a door, free from distractions.

At Centerstone, transparency is important early in the process. Initial communication with candidates provides information about essential elements of the position, such as shift days, hours, and compensation. It also explores candidates’ core beliefs about crisis work and their strategies for self-care—factors Centerstone leaders have found important for identifying candidates who can sustain crisis work. Candidates are asked to confirm their interest before scheduling an interview; this also helps screen out numerous applicants who do not respond to initial communication. Outlining these expectations up front through screening and by providing policies, like written remote work agreements, ensures that candidates understand the demands of the role and can make informed decisions that align with their circumstances. This kind of role clarity helps avoid early turnover and builds trust between the organization and staff.

Centerstone’s crisis services leaders also work to make sure that the person screening and interviewing a candidate is deeply acquainted with the nature of crisis work and the needs of the team. In some cases, this means a crisis services team leader is screening and communicating



directly with applicants; in other situations leaders maintain a consistent partnership with the same talent acquisition representative who truly understands the crisis work, rather than a general HR recruiter. In this scenario, the talent acquisition agent screens all candidates for crisis positions and helps identify individuals whose skills and temperament align with the demands of the role. This recruiter becomes a knowledgeable partner in the hiring process, able to convey the realities and rewards of crisis services to prospective candidates. Crisis leaders can strengthen this connection even further by actively engaging talent acquisition agents in training or shadowing opportunities for crisis workers, experiencing the work firsthand and authentically representing it during recruitment.

Centerstone leaders use interviews as a tool to assess an individual's flexibility, resilience, and self-awareness—not just technical skills. Asking scenario-based questions during an interview can be especially helpful in assessing a candidate's fit for a role in crisis services. Questions like, "Tell me about a time you had to de-escalate a high-stress situation" elicit responses that reveal skills, but perhaps more importantly how a candidate navigates situations that are likely to be emotionally demanding. "They don't have to know every single piece of the job," said one Centerstone leader, "but we want to make sure they can remain judgement free in a situation that may be challenging for them."

It's also imperative to communicate that staff are never alone in this work. Crisis services can feel overwhelming if potential candidates are concerned that they must navigate challenges in isolation. Employers can ease this burden by emphasizing the consistent availability of supports, such as clinical supervision, peer mentorship, and clear channels for asking administrative or practical questions 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In addition, organizations should highlight opportunities for growth and development, including access to ongoing trainings that will serve staff throughout their careers and regular supervision opportunities, which are highly valued yet can be difficult to obtain in many behavioral health settings. Centerstone has seen that when candidates understand that their roles offer both clarity and pathways to advancement, they are more likely to stay engaged, supported, and committed to the mission over the long term.

Key elements of the interview and hiring process include:

- **Role clarity and transparency:** Candidates should be given a full and honest picture of the “nuts and bolts” of the position. Clear communication, especially expectations around compensation, shift schedules and remote work, helps prevent misunderstandings, reduces early turnover, and signals respect for employee wellness from the start.
- **Scenario-based screening:** Interviews should include questions that test flexibility, resilience, and judgment in high-stress situations. These scenario-based questions not only assess technical skill but also reveal how candidates respond to emotionally demanding circumstances, offering insight into their readiness for crisis work.
- **Support and growth pathways:** Employers should emphasize that staff are never alone, with access to clinical supervision, peer support, and clear channels for guidance. Highlighting professional development opportunities that build long-term skills reinforces organizational commitment to staff well-being and growth.

Onboarding and Early Support

The first days and weeks on the job often shape whether new employees feel grounded or adrift. Research by BambooHR shows that organizations have on average just 44 days to influence whether an employee will stay. In fact, 70 percent of new hires decide if a role is the right fit within the first month—nearly 30 percent within the first week. Centerstone leaders echoed this reality, describing onboarding as a make-or-break period for wellness: a supportive start builds confidence and resilience, while a chaotic one accelerates stress and turnover. The BambooHR study underscores the stakes, finding that nearly one in four new hires cry during their first week, and one in five say their company does nothing to help them build social connections. Because social acceptance and belonging are the strongest predictors of retention, organizations must provide not only the tools and resources needed to perform the job, but also the social and emotional supports that help employees thrive (Navarra, 2023).

Structured onboarding that includes shadowing, mentorship, and regular check-ins helps employees feel safe, capable, and far more likely to remain beyond the critical first 90 days. A thoughtful onboarding process begins before the employee's first day. Simple gestures like a welcome call or email, providing a training manual, or sharing an introduction to the training team help set a positive tone. New hires want to feel like they are part of the team early on, which can be fostered through detailed training schedules, team introductions with photos and fun facts, and regular opportunities to connect.

All new hires on Centerstone's crisis services team complete an Employee Wellbeing and Resilience Card, which captures the personal needs, strengths, and experiences that support their wellbeing and success. The card includes questions about workplace needs, communication and recognition preferences, support and coping strategies, personal boundaries, and any populations that may impact them in providing care. It is regularly referenced by the employee and clinical leadership to foster a supportive work experience and to help staff stay grounded in their strengths and resilience practices. An additional strategy used by some teams is to create a

personal “wellness list for home,” which outlines the habits, routines, and restorative activities that help employees stay balanced outside of work. These lists encourage staff to intentionally boost the practices that keep them strong, such as exercise, sleep routines, creative hobbies, time with loved ones, or community involvement, while consciously leaving workplace stress at the door. Together, the Resilience Card and home wellness list help employees maintain continuity between their professional wellbeing strategies and their personal lives, reinforcing a holistic approach to resilience.

Centerstone also evaluates new employees before they begin training to measure knowledge, confidence, and preferred learning style, repeating an evaluation post-training to assess growth, learning outcomes, and the overall effectiveness of the training. This helps reinforce the notion that no one is placed into front-line work until they feel comfortable. Importantly, trainers themselves have worked in these roles, which can reassure new employees that training will adequately prepare them for their role and builds credibility in Centerstone’s processes.

Documentation can be one of the more challenging aspects of crisis services work; one strategy is to approach it as a skill that is built gradually over time. Rather than expecting new hires to master documentation all at once, competencies are scaffolded step-by-step—beginning with foundational tasks such as creating a chart, then progressing to documenting specific types of calls, and later adding more complex elements like follow-up notes. Documentation training is paired with other clinical skills as they are introduced. For example, as staff learn how to coordinate with law enforcement or respond to a particular type of crisis interaction, they simultaneously learn how to document that encounter accurately. This approach helps staff integrate documentation into their clinical practice, building confidence and consistency as their responsibilities expand.

Onboarding is also about modeling the culture of support. Centerstone leaders emphasized the importance of demonstrating that staff are never expected to navigate difficult situations in isolation. Managers openly consult with one another when challenges arise, showing new hires that asking for guidance and other perspectives is not a sign of weakness but an ethical and professional approach. Shadowing, paired with gradual practice alongside experienced staff, reinforces that new employees are always supported as they build their skills.

A strong orientation also addresses safety and resiliency from the outset and should be tailored to the dynamics of the employee’s role. For crisis line staff, it includes training around boundaries, caller behavior, and the unique dynamics of phone, text, or chat. For mobile crisis staff, this includes practical preparation, like appropriate footwear, navigating homes safely, handling pets, and prioritizing personal safety. For workers in crisis facilities, this could include training on preventing violence and reducing the use of restraints, discussing de-escalation strategies in confined shared spaces, managing high acuity behaviors, and maintaining personal and professional boundaries.

By embedding documentation standards, safety, and resilience early in the onboarding process, organizations not only prevent bad habits from forming but also help staff feel secure in their roles. Correcting mistakes later is far harder than teaching the right practices from the beginning.

An example of a structured framework for the first several months in a role in any part of the crisis continuum is described in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Sample Structure for the First 90 Days and Beyond		
Phase	Summary	Sample Activities and Supports
Phase 0: Pre-boarding (~1-2 weeks prior to official start day)	Creates a welcoming and prepared start by ensuring new staff feel connected, informed, and valued before their first day. Reduces anxiety, clarifies expectations, and sets the tone for wellness and retention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome communications • Introduction to organizational mission and values • Preliminary paperwork • Sharing onboarding schedule • Picking up keys or badge (for workers in facilities) • Scheduling tour of workplace/receipt of equipment for remote staff • Receive training manual • Access to complete pre-evaluation
Phase 1: Orientation & Core Training (Days 0-10)	Establishes a strong foundation by fostering social connections with coworkers and teams and introducing organizational values, policies, and essential crisis skills. Prepares staff with baseline knowledge and expectations before engaging in direct work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductions to coworkers and teams • Designation of a work buddy/experienced staff • Orientation to compliance policies and ethics • Electronic health record basics • Foundational crisis trainings/certifications • Conduct a virtual or in-person facility tour • Completion of Employee Wellbeing and Resilience card • Completion of benefits and other HR paperwork
Phase 2: Shadowing & Observation (Days 10-30)	Builds confidence and solidifies expectations by allowing new staff to observe experienced colleagues across varied settings and styles. Reinforces that staff are supported and not working alone.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish supervision and create regular feedback loop to “take temperature” of how new hire is feeling • Shadowing team members in multiple environments (e.g., homes, schools, hospitals, community sites) with opportunities to learn different approaches • Asynchronous/e-learning modules and trainings • Continued required trainings, mandatory reporting training • Complete roleplays demonstrating skills learned • Pass final competency test • Receive feedback on demonstrated skillset and growth opportunities (30 day written evaluation)
Phase 3: Supported Practice (Days 31-60)	Provides a safe transition into practice, with supervisors guiding and giving feedback as new staff begin to take the lead. Ensures readiness for independent work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint crisis response with supervisors (mobile crisis) • Receive feedback on demonstrated skillset and growth opportunities (60 day written evaluation) • Continued education through skills-building sessions • Clinical supervision

Phase 4: Independent Practice with Support (Days 60-90)	Fosters independence in an employee's specific role while maintaining consistent oversight, consultation, and wellness support. Encourages professional growth and sustained resilience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one supervision focused on reviewing crisis calls to strengthen skills and highlight gold-standard practices (988 calls, chat, text) • Complete independent crisis assessments with regular consultation (mobile crisis) • Structured opportunities for professional development and self-care • Receive feedback on demonstrated skillset and growth opportunities (90 day written evaluation)
Phase 5: Coaching and Ongoing Support (Days 90-180 and beyond)	Marks the shift from initial onboarding to long-term professional growth and sustained wellness. Reinforces belonging, encourages continuous learning, and connects staff with career pathways to support retention and resilience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing regular supervision and performance check-ins focused on strengths and growth opportunities • Enrollment in advanced or specialized trainings • Ongoing peer consultation • Reinforce wellness supports such as EAP resources • Feedback opportunities to continuously improve the onboarding process

Ultimately, onboarding is not just about teaching technical skills. It is about helping new employees feel safe, supported, and prepared for the unique challenges of crisis work. When done well, onboarding lays the foundation for staff wellness and long-term retention.

Key elements of effective onboarding and early support include:

- **Structured preparation:** Offer welcome outreach, training manuals, detailed schedules, and introductions to build early connection prior to the first day of employment.
- **Shadowing and mentorship:** Stepped opportunities for practice with experienced staff and regular check-ins helps build confidence.
- **Culture of support:** Model consultation with peers and reinforce norms around seeking support, emphasizing that staff are never alone in difficult situations.
- **Resiliency and safety training:** Provide guidance on practical preparation for safety challenges and reinforcement of boundaries in crisis work.
- **Skill development from day one:** Teach correct practices up front, with individualized coaching as needed.

Ongoing Support and Development

Wellness requires continuous reinforcement throughout an employee's experience with an organization. Crisis work is ever-changing, and staff need resources that can adapt with those changes. Centerstone leadership has intentionally built a patchwork of outlets, like supervision, peer relationships, and skill development, to ensure employees can access guidance and assistance in the ways that work best for them. Ongoing professional development is viewed not only as

protection against burnout but also as a pathway to sharpening core competencies.

Regular supervision, including opportunities for additional sessions when needed, is a cornerstone of wellness at Centerstone. This includes coaching-oriented supervision delivered in formal and informal ways. Leaders frequently use reflective check-ins, drop-in times, or rotating opportunities to meet with supervisors outside their direct reporting line. Whether in person or remote, leaders consistently signal to staff that they are available for questions and concerns so that employees feel comfortable seeking consultation individuals beyond their direct supervisor. One Centerstone leader explained, "It's great to meet with your direct supervisor, but sometimes it's easier to share something with someone you don't report to. That variety makes us feel cared for."

Debriefing after difficult cases is equally vital. Leaders described offering immediate opportunities to debrief through a structured, trauma-informed conversation that helps staff make sense of an intense event, regain emotional equilibrium, and identify what support they may need next. These debriefs typically include a brief grounding exercise, a concise factual overview of the incident, optional opportunities for staff to share what felt most challenging or what went well, and space to normalize reactions and discuss coping strategies. Facilitators also assess immediate needs, such as taking a break, adjusting duties, or scheduling a one-on-one follow-up, and review available resources, including peer support, supervision, or clinical services. The goal is not to force detailed retelling or "fix" the emotional impact in a single meeting, but to provide connection, validation, and a supportive pathway for continued care.

Some tough cases meet the threshold of a critical incident, an event in which staff have been closely involved or proximate to, such as a suicide attempt, death, or other event requiring formal reporting to the state. These incidents often carry a different emotional weight than routine challenging cases, particularly when staff were directly engaged in the response. In these situations, leaders may bring in a separate facilitator who was not involved in directing the response, to lead the debriefing and provide support to staff. Having a facilitator who is more removed from the incident can create space for staff to reflect and speak openly about both the clinical and emotional aspects of the event. When leaders need to notify staff that a critical incident has occurred, they follow a clear process to communicate the information in the least traumatizing way possible while still meeting ethical obligations. Decisions about how and when to notify staff are typically made collaboratively by multiple leaders, helping ensure that the communication is thoughtful, supportive, and consistent. Centerstone leadership also build in flexibility for staff who prefer to process an incident later or whose schedules prevent immediate participation. "Sometimes people want to talk right away, others need a few days," one leader explained. Having trained colleagues available around the clock ensures that employees are never left to carry the emotional weight of a crisis alone.

Peer networks play a major role in reducing isolation. Teams rely on buddy systems and round-table discussions to process cases and prevent vicarious trauma. Staff noted how brief huddles of even just ten minutes to share what's hard and what keeps the team going become a wellness ritual. Whether remote or in-person, teams build connection through informal check-ins, celebrating wins, and sharing coping strategies.

Centerstone's crisis leadership also embeds resilience training into daily operations. Leaders integrate skills-building into standing meetings, sometimes branded as a "resilience hour," where staff practice forms of resilience, role play, or share wellness tips. Alongside training, recognition programs can also support morale. One Centerstone recognition program allows staff to acknowledge one another, either anonymously or by name, by submitting words of encouragement that are later shared by a neutral party. For crisis teams that operate 24/7 and supervisors cannot observe every recognition-worthy act, this peer-driven program allows all employees to highlight the positive contributions of their peers. Receiving this kind of recognition reminds staff that both small acts and major accomplishments matter. In addition, small morale boosters add even more dimension to team wellness dynamics, like informal team shout-outs, reading success stories aloud, curating Spotify playlists, sending care packages to remote staff, or even a stocking a bowl of chocolates in the office. Though modest, these gestures communicate recognition and appreciation and complement more formal recognition channels. As one staff member put it, "When the organization invests in my skills and celebrates my contributions, I feel valued."

Finally, leaders underscore the importance of modeling wellness themselves. Directors and supervisors demonstrate boundaries around availability, use personal time off (PTO) consistently, and openly practice self-care. One leader shared, "Sometimes I'm the first to explain how I'm taking care of myself, so staff know we're intentional about wellness too." Visible examples like these normalize healthy behaviors and encourages staff to do the same.

Key elements of ongoing support and development include:

- **Regular supervision:** Provide supportive, coaching-oriented, and reflective supervision with multiple access points.
- **Debriefing structures:** Ensure immediate and flexible debrief opportunities after critical incidents.
- **Peer support systems:** Foster buddy systems, huddles, and informal connections to prevent isolation.
- **Continuous training:** Integrate resilience skills, shadowing, and refreshers into ongoing practice.
- **Recognition culture and morale boosters:** Incorporate recognition, creative supports, and "warm fuzzies" like creating shared playlists that sustain motivation.
- **Leadership modeling:** Encourage managers to demonstrate and normalize boundaries, recovery practices, and visible self-care.

Compensation and Job Satisfaction

Compensation and satisfaction are not only about salary but also about how employees perceive fairness, recognition, and stability. Centerstone's crisis leaders acknowledge that while community mental health systems cannot always compete with private sector pay, they can foster wellness

through creative benefits, transparent policies, and a culture that people value as much as paychecks.

Centerstone has taken steps to strengthen compensation practices, including regular market analyses and adjustments to keep salaries competitive. In Tennessee, for example, three market adjustments were implemented in a single year after leadership recognized that compensation was not aligned with current market rates. Pay transparency is also emphasized: staff can review salary ranges in Centerstone's online HR platform and have open conversations with supervisors about how their pay fits into the organizational structure. Shift differentials, recognition of degrees and credentials, and geographic adjustments are used to ensure fairness.

Flexibility is one of the most valued benefits among Centerstone employees, as consistently reflected in all-staff surveys. At Centerstone, flexibility means empowering employees to manage personal responsibilities—such as attending a medical appointment or a child's school event—without penalty, whether real or perceived. To ensure this opportunity is equitable for all, requests for time away from work should be submitted with reasonable notice when possible. This allows leaders to plan coverage and support the team, making it easier for everyone to take time off with confidence that both their colleagues and the work are cared for. By balancing individual needs with collective support, Centerstone sustains a culture of care where employees feel valued and the organization continues to meet the needs of the community.

Centerstone has also invested in benefits that address both physical and mental health, including expanded paid parental leave, additional leave for military families during duty station changes, access to the CALM app, telehealth options like access to the 98point6 app for urgent medical care and surgical second opinions, and chronic condition supports such as diabetes and menopause programs. These offerings reflect a recognition that crisis services are demanding, and staff need resources to maintain both their personal and professional health.



But Centerstone leaders caution that compensation and benefits alone are not sufficient to maintain employee wellness: the system or agency must be functioning in a healthy way, too. As one leader put it bluntly, “We should not ask people to be well in spite of a broken system. Health system leaders need to get their house in order first, and then compensation and benefits can really matter.” In Centerstone’s view, a house in order means employees understand the job they are being asked to do, they are supported in their work, they have access to all the tools and adequate staffing, they get performance feedback and good supervision, and have collegial relationships with their supervisors and peers.

Key elements of compensation and job satisfaction include:

- **Fair compensation:** Conduct regular market analyses, maintain transparent pay scales, and offer shift differentials and adjustments that reflect the realities of crisis work.
- **Benefits that matter:** Flexible scheduling, wellness resources, paid family leave, telehealth supports, and targeted health programs all contribute to well-being.
- **System integrity:** Compensation alone cannot buffer burnout; a healthy organizational system—adequate staffing, supportive supervision, safe environments—is the foundation for wellness.

Career Pathways and Retention

Retention depends on employees believing they have a future in their organization. Centerstone leaders described visible career pathways as one of the strongest wellness strategies: without them, staff often feel stuck and leave for higher-paying opportunities. For community behavioral health agencies that cannot always match pay at private companies, having clear pathways for advancement is a critical piece of retaining and supporting employees.

Conversations about aspirations must begin early. At Centerstone, this involves asking new employees from the beginning if they want to be a frontline crisis worker in the long-term, or if they are considering roles like management in the future. Regardless of the employee’s answer, Centerstone strives to teach the relevant skills from day one so people are constantly improving. This proactive approach helps staff envision a future within the organization, whether in direct care, leadership, or other specialties.

When career development is prioritized, the impact is immediate. At Centerstone, staff who have been promoted into supervisory roles after demonstrating strong skills reported feeling “seen and invested in.” Fostering growth also means preparing staff for more than clinical roles. The field of behavioral health has traditionally promoted strong clinicians into management roles without equipping them for leadership positions. In response, Centerstone developed manager training tailored for crisis services, offering staff not just technical skills but also tools for supervision, communication, and program management.

Staff feedback is also shaping growth opportunities. Centerstone leaders described surveying employees about their professional interests, like policy work, training, or community outreach,

and then identifying or creating avenues for them to participate. This signals that career growth is not limited to a linear promotion ladder but can also include lateral development and skill-building across the organization. As one leader in crisis services explained, "Whenever we expand crisis services, it's a chance to improve the program and give staff more to contribute to. That growth excites people."

Recognition also matters in retention. By elevating employee voices, leaders communicate that development is not only about formal advancement but also about fostering visibility, confidence, and pride.

Key elements of career pathways and retention:

- **Clear progression:** Map advancement opportunities from entry-level to leadership, ensuring staff know what's possible.
- **Leadership development:** Train future supervisors in management skills, not just clinical expertise.
- **Employee-driven growth:** Solicit staff input on areas of interest and create opportunities for cross-training and contributions outside direct care.
- **Visible recognition:** Elevate staff contributions through videos and presentations highlighting successes and encouraging participation in leadership opportunities.

Transition and Exit Process

Even when staff depart an organization, wellness can still be reinforced through thoughtful transition and exit practices. Centerstone views exits as opportunities for learning, relationship-building, and respect. A supportive process protects organizational reputation, preserves morale for remaining staff, and even opens the door for former employees to return with new skills.

Transitions include how staff are treated in their final weeks. Leaders emphasized the importance of acknowledging contributions, celebrating successes, and ensuring that colleagues can say goodbye. It is important to recognize the impact of the departing team member, for that team member but also on the coworkers who remain. Exit interviews that capture a departing employee's experiences within both the broader organization and their specific program can provide valuable insights. By identifying patterns in feedback—whether related to workload, pay equity, supervision, training, or workplace culture—these interviews can inform ongoing wellness and retention strategies.

Exit processes can also strengthen alumni networks. Staff who leave a role in crisis services often work in related roles in the community. Keeping connections open through alumni groups, invitations to events, or informal check-ins can foster a sense of belonging that persists even outside the organization. Sometimes employees return to the agency, and when they do these "boomerang" employees often bring valuable skills, perspectives, and renewed energy. One Centerstone crisis services leader described the experience of an employee who left on good



terms and later rejoined the organization: "She came back stronger, with more experience, and we were better for it. That only happened because we parted ways respectfully."

Key elements of transition and exit processes include:

- **Respectful exits:** Treat departing staff with dignity, appreciation, and recognition for their contributions.
- **Feedback loops:** Use exit interviews and transition conversations to identify systemic stressors and inform improvements.
- **Team acknowledgment:** Provide opportunities for colleagues to express gratitude and closure.
- **Alumni networks:** Maintain relationships with former staff, encouraging return hires and knowledge-sharing.

Organizational Conditions for Wellness

Wellness depends on the health of the broader system in which employees work; no amount of individual resilience or self-care can compensate for an organization that is chaotic, under-resourced, or inconsistent. When staff know their roles, trust their leaders, and believe their voices will be heard, they can focus their energy on the demanding work of caring for others. It is critical that organizations build a culture of clarity, stability, and trust into the everyday conditions of work.

Leadership Consistency

Leadership is the backbone of workforce wellness. Centerstone staff emphasized that leadership consistency does not mean rigidity; it means leaders who listen first, communicate clearly, and act predictably. A consistent leader is willing to listen without assumptions and be transparent and clear about expectations so people can make sound decisions without fearing reprisal. Presence, clarity, and follow-through build the trust that sustains teams through the volatility of crisis care.

Centerstone's move toward a just culture reinforced that trust. Rather than defaulting to write-ups following incidents with staff, managers now begin with a threshold investigation: What happened? What usually happens? What does our organizational policy require? What should happen next? Leaders then consider context and learning: was this a slip, a system issue, or willful disregard? The process is conversational, streamlined, and focused on understanding how people learn and how the system can improve, not simply on assigning blame.

Consistency also shows up as a growth mindset. The workforce and its needs have changed; leaders must adapt practices to "meet people where they are," from scheduling and communication to training and supervision. Empathy is paired with accountability, meaning that managers set boundaries, enforce policies, and still approach people with genuine regard. For instance, one Centerstone leader described approaching an underperforming colleague with a sentiment of "This is where we need to be, and I'll help you get there." The goal is an environment in which fair decisions are made in the open, not surprises or shifting goalposts.

Leadership in crisis services can take many forms, and at times it requires a hands-on presence close to the front lines, particularly for teams operating around the clock. Shift leads and team supervisors often play a critical role in balancing clinical needs with supervision, helping staff navigate day-to-day operational tasks like answering documentation or administrative questions, helping manage workflow during busy periods, or simply being available to talk through a challenging interaction. For staff who are doing emotionally demanding work, having leaders who

are visible, accessible, and engaged in the realities of the shift can provide both practical support and reassurance that they are not carrying the weight of the work alone.

Key elements of leadership consistency include:

- **Just culture mechanics:** Start with threshold investigations before discipline, weighing context, learning about employees' needs, and system factors.
- **Listening without judgement:** Seek facts without assumptions and share reasoning and decisions openly to reduce uncertainty.
- **Clarity of expectations:** Define roles, performance standards, and rights to make decisions so staff can act confidently.
- **Growth mindset:** Adjust workflows, communication, and training as staff needs evolve.
- **Empathetic accountability:** Pair compassion with firm boundaries, and exercise fairness consistently.
- **Visible presence:** Show up in frontline spaces (including overnight shifts) to demonstrate respect and reliability.
- **Stability in direction:** Avoid rapid shifts in team or organizational priorities. When change is necessary, explain why and how that change will be enacted.

Work Environment

The physical and cultural environment shapes wellness every day. Centerstone prioritizes safe, functional workspaces. That includes investment in clean, safe, and welcoming spaces to boost morale and foster pride in the workplace, as well as counseling remote staff to make sure their physical work environment meets the demands of the job.

Work environment also includes cultural dynamics. Centerstone leaders emphasized the need for respectful, inclusive teams where collaboration is the norm. As one staff member shared, simple practices, like greeting colleagues by name, celebrating birthdays, or offering to cover a shift, can transform the atmosphere from transactional to supportive.

Staff also described the importance of wellness amenities, even small ones. For teams that work out of physical facilities like crisis stabilization units, quiet rooms with relaxing seating and lighting, flexible break areas, or access to outdoor spaces signal intentional choices to care for employee needs. Leaders explained that while budgets may not always allow for grand investments, small gestures often carry significant weight. One Centerstone leader described how putting an ice maker in the employee breakroom helped boost morale. Engaging external partners to offer moments of respite and positive distraction can also provide meaningful boosts to staff morale and wellbeing. For example, partnering with a local animal rescue or pet-therapy organization to bring in therapy dogs every few months gives employees a chance to decompress, connect, and simply enjoy a joyful moment in the workday. Similar partnerships—such as with art studios for

short creative workshops, local yoga instructors for brief stretching or meditation sessions, or community gardens for seasonal plant-potting events—create low-lift, high-impact experiences that help staff reset, feel appreciated, and return to their work with renewed energy.

Remote work environments add another layer of complexity, particularly when recognition or connection opportunities inadvertently exclude those who are not on-site. Leaders address this by creating virtual huddles, chat groups, and recognition rituals that intentionally include remote teams, reinforcing that togetherness is not bound by geography. Many of the same ideas that bring joy and restoration to in-person teams can be adapted for remote employees through virtual partnerships. Brief virtual visits with therapy animals, short online grounding or stretching sessions led by mindfulness or yoga instructors, and creative micro-workshops hosted by artists or musicians all offer accessible ways to pause and recharge. Seasonal care packages or simple DIY kits can also be paired with optional virtual gatherings to build connection. These small, thoughtfully designed experiences help remote staff feel supported, energized, and part of a caring community even when working from a distance.

One Centerstone leader described a simple grounding practice used at the beginning of shifts to help staff pause and center themselves. As the team gathers—either in person or virtually—to organize coverage and assign responsibilities, they take a few deep breaths together. Each staff member chooses a word from a set of laminated cards, such as “courage,” “patience,” or “steadiness,” and may share their word aloud if they wish. Staff are encouraged to carry it with them as an intention for the day, reflecting on how it might guide their interactions with colleagues and the people they serve. The practice is part of a broader culture of looking out for one another: team members routinely check in with simple questions like “Have you eaten?” “Had some water?” or “Taken a break?” Debriefs throughout the day also create space to ask what can be taken off someone’s plate, reinforcing that caring for staff is an active and shared responsibility.

Key elements of work environment include:

- **Safe facilities:** Maintain clean, safe, and functional physical spaces.
- **Team culture:** Foster respect, inclusion, and collaboration across teams.
- **Wellness amenities:** Provide quiet rooms, flexible break spaces, and small morale boosters that signal care. Engage external partners to provide joy-boosting experiences for staff.
- **Remote inclusivity:** Ensure remote staff are fully integrated into recognition, connection, and wellness practices.

Metrics and Continuous Improvement

Maintaining a well workforce requires ongoing measurement, reflection, and adaptation. Leaders at Centerstone emphasized that just as individuals’ care outcomes are monitored with rigor, staff wellness must be tracked from multiple angles to ensure progress and prevent silent burnout. Without data and feedback, patterns of stress or attrition may go unnoticed; with data, leaders

can identify challenges early and make meaningful adjustments. As one Centerstone leader noted, “We ask ourselves all the time: is this meaningful, is this valuable? If not, we adjust.”

At Centerstone, continuous improvement is embedded across the organization and happens on several levels. Clinical supervisors review evidence-based materials before disseminating content to staff, ensuring that professional development activities remain current and credible. Quality assurance measures, such as monthly documentation or call/chat/text audits, policy adherence reviews, or evaluations of call response rates, attendance, and use of staff breaks, also play a role in fostering a supportive and accountable environment. Typically, staff participate in at least two audits per month, with additional reviews offered as requested, creating opportunities for learning, feedback and recognition of the contributions they may make every day.

In addition to providing helpful clinical data related to care outcomes, these data provide important insights into if other things are going on in an employee’s life. For example, leaders may notice that an employee has not been taking breaks or that call answer rate or attendance is low. These observations give leaders an opportunity to approach the situation through a just culture lens, asking not just what happened but why, and exploring whether additional supports like an employee assistance program or leave under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) might be appropriate.

Supervision adds another layer of measurement and feedback. Examples of clinical supervision may include one-on-one meetings or group supervision sessions, which can create opportunities to discuss challenging cases and explore emerging needs. Furthermore, ongoing coaching and bi-annual performance reviews bring together multiple indicators—attendance, documentation, skill development—to assess progress and set goals. Importantly, staff are not left to guess expectations: managers outline where employees are now, what meeting expectations looks like, and how to move toward higher performance.

At the management level, leaders look for patterns across teams. If a recurring mistake or pain point emerges, it becomes a focus for skill-building or a topic for the next team meeting. Similarly, if staff report higher levels of frustrations with a process or seem to leave the organization at a particular point, leadership explores how to adjust processes or provide more support, with the goal of helping individuals do their jobs more effectively and be less stressed in their roles. In addition to regular supervision and team meetings, feedback loops at Centerstone also include anonymous surveys and quarterly pulse checks that surface trends in satisfaction, workload, and engagement.

Continuous improvement also extends to leadership development. New managers are offered training on the transition from peer to supervisor, and employees take turns attending conferences and trainings through a rotation system. This not only builds individual capacity but also signals that growth is integral to and expected during an employee’s experience at Centerstone, and that growth opportunities are made available in a fair and consistent manner.

Key elements of continuous improvement include:

- **Multi-level measurement:** Monthly audits, supervision, and performance appraisals surface opportunities to assess performance and ensure wellness and growth are supported.
- **Just culture approach:** Frame audits and supervision around learning and support, rather than seeking to lay blame.
- **Feedback loops:** Augment regular audits and supervision with pulse surveys, anonymous feedback, and retention data to identify trends and adapt supports.
- **Skills-building cycles:** Address common staff questions and pain points through monthly sessions and ad-hoc trainings that respond directly to frontline needs.
- **Leadership development:** Provide ongoing training and conference opportunities to equip managers for evolving roles and frontline employees to adapt to ever-changing crisis needs.
- **System-wide reflection:** Regularly ask whether practices remain meaningful and adjust to eliminate duplication or inefficiency.

Conclusion

Employee wellness in crisis care is not a single program, but an ecosystem that touches every stage of the workforce journey. From the first job posting to the last exit interview, each moment communicates whether staff are valued, respected, and sustained. A well-functioning system ensures that employees are prepared for the roles they take on, supported with the right tools and supervision, and trusted to make decisions without fear of reprisal. When those conditions are in place, staff can carry the weight of crisis care without being permanently burdened by it. Wellness initiatives and benefits then become not just perks, but part of a deeper infrastructure that prevents the “death by a thousand cuts” that repeated stress can otherwise inflict.

The lessons from Centerstone highlight that organizational wellness is both a moral imperative and a practical necessity. When employees feel cared for, they are more engaged, more resilient, and more committed to delivering care that changes lives. Conversely, when systems are chaotic or neglectful, staff wellness erodes and care for individual help seekers suffers. The public health stakes are significant: when wellness fails, the ability to deliver timely, quality crisis care breaks down, and lives may be lost that could otherwise have been saved. Investing in wellness, therefore, is investing in the future of crisis services themselves. It is how organizations honor the people who stand on the frontlines of crisis every day—and how they ensure that those professionals can continue to show up fully, not only for others but also for themselves.

References

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