

# If I Just Work Harder or Was More Organized: What we Tell Ourselves about Work-Life Balance

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# Show of hands

- How many of you saw the title of today's presentation and automatically thought it was a women's issue?
- How many of you thought that this talk would focus solely on issues related to parenting young children?
- How many of you feel powerless to effect change to help move yourselves or your staff toward more work/life balance?
- How many of you have trouble even defining work/life balance?

# What do we hope to accomplish?

- Begin defining the scope of problem
  - Examine available data – anecdotal and objective
- Inspire conversation and problem solving

# What today's talk won't include

- Shaming
- Leadership bashing
- Repetition of past unproductive conversations (hopefully! Though this depends on those of you in the audience!)

# VA Workplace Impacts

From VHA's DEI and whistleblower TMS training:

- Secretary McDonough letter in the intro which states “VA and our Nation face great challenges made even more daunting by the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges make it even more important that we have workplaces where everyone is treated well.”
- OIG report indicating that VA must do more to support VA employees [The Veterans Health Administration Needs to Do More to Promote Emotional Well-Being Supports Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic \(oversight.gov\)](#)

# Scope of the problem

- Fragile work-related infrastructures
- Disproportional pandemic impact on women and ethnic minorities, exacerbating pre-existing gender bias, gender stereotyping and BIPOC microaggressions
- Broken-Rung Theory: Career set-backs (real or perceived) result in women and minorities missing advancement opportunities and lead to a sense of always playing “catch up”
- In 2019–20, the number of students ages 3–21 who received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was 7.3 million, or 14 percent of all public school students. Among students receiving special education services, a higher percentage of Black students and students of Two or more races were reported as having emotional disturbances (7 percent each) and other health impairments (16 percent each) than for students overall (5 percent and 15 percent, respectively).
- 17.7 million individuals were caregivers of an older adult in 2011, or approximately 7.7 percent of the total U.S. population age 20 and older (i.e., the population typically thought of as ‘workforce age’).

# Government-wide pulse survey: VA results

- VA compared to other government organizations
  - I feel exhausted in the morning at the thought of another workday: 3.4 (3<sup>rd</sup> highest of all agencies)
  - IF I found a job elsewhere with more workplace flexibilities or remote options, I would take it: 3.6 (4<sup>th</sup> highest of all agencies)
  - Agency leadership shows that diversity and inclusion are important through their actions: 3.6 (second lowest of all agencies)
  - Employees like me are given the support to succeed here: 3.3 (second lowest)
  - Employees with different backgrounds are given support to succeed here: 3.6 (second lowest)
  - I have the resources I need to effectively do my job within current return-to-work arrangements 3.7 (3<sup>rd</sup> lowest)
  - I trust agency leadership to do what's right to protect employees' health, safety, and wellbeing 3.4 (4<sup>th</sup> lowest)

# Retention/turnover & change in work conditions

- Retention
  - FY21 was the highest facility turnover/total loss for VHA psychologists at 23.30% in more than a decade
- Reduction in work hours
  - As of April 2020, gender-related changes in work hours has grown by 20-50%. Updated census data was not readily available, but these changes are anticipated to have grown as the pandemic (and related infrastructure impacts) persist.
- Multigenerational impacts on work conditions
  - The percentage of children living in multigenerational households increased across all racial and ethnic groups between 2008 and 2018.

# Lived Experiences

- Dr. Laura Eaton
  - Balancing Act and Timing: Child with high medical needs & special education resources; decision to accept a position that could better accommodate work/life needs. Use of FMLA and AWS to meet family needs while maintaining full time employment (primary breadwinner). Relocating aging parent to help w/ childcare while preparing to be “sandwich” caregiver
- Dr. Michael Martin
  - Large staff of over 120 psychologists, many of who experienced childcare challenges, staff or family members who got COVID, mixed messages from facility, VISN, VACO about telework, fear from staff about return to work – confusion about my role to advocate, since many staff don’t directly report to me
- Dr. Theresa Schmitz
  - Caregiving challenges: maternity leave advocacy; daycare access limitations; breastfeeding/pumping; no family nearby to serve as “village;” older, medically compromised parents (near term “sandwich” giver needs anticipated); no vaccine availability for kiddos <5



# Solutions-Focused Group Discussion

# Possible Solutions – National Level

## National Level

- Challenge corporate culture where the ideal employee works long hours as a means to demonstrate unwavering commitment to the organization
- MH Hiring Initiative – consider intentionally advertising to/recruiting vulnerable groups.
- [Stay Interviews](#)
  - Perhaps an opportunity to create other milestone-based “stay” interviews.
  - Examine psychological safety of supervisor/employee dynamic to assure work/life balance feedback is genuine
- OMHSP is having conversations right now related to work/life balance factors and their impact on recruitment, retention, and burnout, at all levels of the organization
- Use of [Alternative Work Schedules \(AWS\)](#)
- Examining options related to the development of productivity expectations for employees with FMLA needs or other identified challenges
- Exploring possibility of including questions about this on All Employee Survey and other surveys

# Possible Solutions – Local Change Agents

## Local level

- Use of Alternative Work Schedules (AWS)?
- Employee retention workgroup at the facility?
- Protect midday “lunch” hour for doctor’s appointments, pumping, or other activities that support work/life balance
- Is video required for all meetings? Not requiring it facilitates/supports opportunities for pumping, driving to/from medical appointments
- Discussion of factors impacting work/life balance within team? Service? Facility? VISN?
- What can employees contribute to building a trusting relationship with supervisors? How can you be responsive to leadership?

# What Can I do?

- **Psychologist Leaders**

- Talk to your staff about their needs
- Don't immediately dismiss solutions because "we can't do that"
- Advocate for changes that are friendly to personal situations of staff

- **Frontline staff**

- Start discussions with other staff
- Generate reasonable solutions that have minimal impact on Veteran care to start
- Start conversations with sympathetic leaders to advocate for yourself and your fellow professionals

# Resources

- Stay Touchpoint meetings
  - [Stay Touchpoint Implementation Toolkit](#)
- [National Center for Organizational Development \(NCOD\)](#)
- Alternative Work Schedules(AWS)
  - 1994 Presidential memorandum directing all executive agencies to establish a program to encourage and support expansion of flexible family-friendly work arrangements
  - [OPM Handbook on AWS](#)
- Support for Telehealth and Telework for MH Employees
  - [4.25.22 Memo](#)
- [Gratitude App](#)
- Mobile Applications
  - [Mindfulness Coach | VA Mobile](#)
  - [MOVE! Coach | VA Mobile](#)
- [Self-Compassion](#)
- [Employee Support Toolkit](#)

# References

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