Innovation Report

Washington Association for Community Health

Buddy System Workforce Initiative

Moses Lake Community Health Center
"Healthcare with a Heart"

Strengthening retention efforts by supporting employees

Program Overview

Moses Lake Community Health Center (MLCHC) developed the Buddy System Workforce Initiative in response to a clearly defined workforce challenge. While the organization maintains a strong base of long-tenured employees, it has difficulty retaining new hires beyond their first year. MLCHC's Human Resource department identified a key trend—employees who remained in their position for 12 months were highly likely to stay long-term. This insight highlighted a critical opportunity to strengthen retention efforts by supporting employees during the transition period between initial hire and that one-year milestone.

To address this need, MLCHC implemented a structured, relationship-centered approach by pairing new hires with experienced staff mentors. This "buddy system" provides new employees with immediate, accessible support from individuals within their department who understand both the role and the organization. The initiative is designed not only to improve retention outcomes, but also to reduce the sense of overwhelm that often accompanies onboarding in complex healthcare environments.

What distinguishes this initiative is its intentional integration of human connection into the workforce strategy. Each department engages long-term employees who volunteer to serve as mentors, creating a built-in support network that fosters trust and psychological safety. This approach offers new hires a space where they can ask both critical and seemingly minor questions, particularly those that may not surface in formal onboarding settings. The buddy system complements traditional onboarding processes.



Moses Lake Community Health Center

- **Founded in 1978 as a dental clinic and quickly added medical services to address local need**
- **Today, more than 300 staff members provide comprehensive medical, dental, behavioral health & enabling services**
- **Over 32,000 patients served annually**
- **Over 135,000 visits annually**

Expanding the Onboarding Experience

The onboarding experience has been expanded into a comprehensive, layered approach that introduces new employees not only to their specific roles but also to the organization's broader structure and practices. Regular check-ins at 30, 60, and 90 days are paired with targeted surveys which allow the recruitment and HR teams to proactively identify and address challenges before they lead to turnover. Formal performance discussions are intentionally separated, ensuring that new hires feel safe providing honest feedback without concern or possible impacts to their evaluations.

Implementation of the initiative was data-driven and cost-effective. HR leadership used retention data to build the case for the program, positioning experienced staff as a valuable, underutilized retention resource. Because the model leverages existing personnel and focuses on relationship-building rather than new infrastructure, it has remained sustainable without requiring significant additional funding.

Throughout the process, the organization encountered challenges common to onboarding redesign—ensuring consistency across departments, addressing information overload for new hires, and identifying issues early enough to intervene effectively. These challenges led to important refinements, including the formalization of check-ins and surveys, stronger mentor expectations, and clearer distinction between training and evaluation.



Moses Lake Community Health Center's Human Resources Team

Successes and Looking Forward

The results have been impactful and show stronger continuity through the critical first 180 days, aligning with the program's primary goal. Equally significant are the qualitative outcomes: new hires report increased confidence, stronger connections to their teams, and a greater sense of belonging. Additionally, staff engagement has improved, as experienced employees actively contribute to mentoring efforts.

The success of the Buddy System Workforce Initiative lies in its simplicity and intentionality—using relationships, data, and structured feedback to solve a persistent workforce challenge. The organization is particularly proud of creating an environment where new employees feel supported from the start.

Looking ahead, MLCHC is committed to continued refinement of the model through ongoing feedback and expanded mentor support. In the coming year, MLCHC anticipates further gains in retention, deeper integration of mentorship throughout the organization, and the development of an even more connected and resilient workforce.

Washington Association for Community Health

The Association's innovation reports aim to support community health centers in leading innovation by identifying successful promising practices and communicating them to the statewide network.

Does your CHC have an innovation to share? Let us know!

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