

# Together As One: Advancing Joy, Resilience, and Peer Support in Oncology Care





**O**ncology is a field where science and compassion meet at the bedside. Every day, clinicians face the emotional weight of life-altering diagnoses, the complexity of care, and the relentless pace of modern medicine. The stakes are high—not only for patients and families, but for the clinicians themselves. Burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral distress are not abstract risks; they are daily realities that threaten both well-being and the quality of care.

At Advocate Health, we define our driving purpose as follows: “From discovery to everyday moments, we’re redefining care—for you, for us, for all.” Supporting this purpose are 4 powerful commitments:

- **Lift everyone up.** We believe everyone matters and create spaces where all belong and can thrive.
- **Lead the way.** We chart new paths to achieve the extraordinary.
- **Think boldly together.** We collaborate with humility, turning the best ideas into new possibilities.
- **Embrace the unknown.** We drive change through fearless curiosity and unshakeable optimism.

#### **The Advocate Health Model: Best Place to Care**

Advocate Health’s approach is driven and anchored by its leadership team, who built a model to address the full spectrum of clinician and care team experience with 3 pillars: *Culture of Wellness, Personal Resilience, and Efficiency of Practice*.

The Best Place to Care initiative is a strategic imperative. The initiative integrates well-being into every clinical aspect of the organization, from leadership development to daily workflows. It is focused on removing barriers between clinicians and patients, allowing clinicians to focus on the work they really love—being with their patients. Leaders are finding that this work differentiates Advocate Health from other organizations; one clinician shared, “I just wanted to say a quick word of thanks for that wonderful overview of the Best Place to Care resources. This is the fourth place I have worked at in the past 35 years, and it was both one of the most useful parts

**“As the Advocate Health enterprise vice president of Teammate Well-Being and an emergency medicine physician grounded in compassionate clinical care, I believe that embracing well-being as a cultural shift sparks leadership development, resources, and programs that affirm and uplift the humanity of our clinicians and all teammates. At the heart of this movement are dedicated experts with the foresight to weave together diverse initiatives into a cohesive fabric of support—ensuring that care for our caregivers is both intentional and enduring.”**

*Mila Felder, MD, FACEP, enterprise vice president of Teammate Well-Being at Advocate Health*

of an orientation I have ever attended—and one of the most encouraging! Comparing the relative lack of support I felt at my last job to what you just presented today practically made me cry. I am really happy to be here and would love to partner with you to advance this mission within my new team and future partners.” By expanding the reach and impact of the well-being initiatives to nursing and administrative leaders, Advocate Health has ensured that every voice is heard, and every team is supported.

**“Every decision we make in cancer care must meet the highest standard—the one we would want for someone we love. That’s what we call The Loved One Standard; it is our highest standard. That’s also the lens I utilize every day as a physician, a leader, a mentor, a husband, a son, and a friend. The weight of this work is real, but so is the privilege. Supporting the well-being of our teams is not just strategic, it’s also deeply personal. When our clinicians feel cared for, they can bring their full selves to the bedside, the classroom, and the research bench.”**

Ruben Mesa, MD, FACP, president, Advocate Health Cancer National Service Line; president, Atrium Health Levine Cancer; executive director, Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist Comprehensive Cancer Center; senior vice president, Advocate Health; vice dean for Cancer Programs, Wake Forest University School of Medicine; and The Charles L. Spurr MD Professor of Medicine, Wake Forest University School of Medicine

Storytelling is at the heart of healing. Led by David Thoelle, MD, and Marji Getz, PhD, the Narrative Medicine Community features biweekly meetings and an annual conference, and the Wake Forest School of Medicine Narrative Medicine Program hosts monthly virtual lunch hours with clinicians and learners. This programming provides clinicians with a safe space to share their stories, reflect on shared experiences, and find meaning in their work. As one participant remarked, “It was great training and a valuable opportunity to share space with colleagues. I appreciated the supportive virtual environment, where we could openly express our feelings and stressors. It helped normalize the challenges we face and reminded me that I’m not alone in navigating stress.”

As director of business development at Atrium Health Levine Cancer, and with a portfolio spanning internal communications and special projects, Anja Workman helps translate culture into daily experience through thoughtful storytelling, accessible updates, and healing spaces. She produces and curates enterprise-facing communications, such as the *Cancer Team* newsletter, executive summaries, and the annual impact report that highlights achievements, celebrates teams, and advances mission-driven work.

### **Peer Support and Compassion Champions**

Sponsored by Advocate Health’s enterprise vice president of Teammate Well-Being, Mila Felder, MD, FACEP, and led by research manager of Trauma Recovery and Resilience, Krystal Lott, MSN, DNP, the Together As One peer support ambassador program is a trauma-informed, evidence-based initiative that empowers clinicians to recognize and respond to stress in themselves and others. With 89 sessions in 2024 and 72 more in 2025, Together As One has become a cornerstone of Advocate Health’s culture of well-being. The program is now integrated into orientation programming for new clinicians and new nurses; more than 5000 teammates across Advocate Health have trained as Together As One peer support ambassadors.

Yet Together As One is more than training—it is a movement that equips clinicians to support one another in moments of stress, trauma, or emotional fatigue. Its impact is measurable: Average satisfaction scores exceed 4.7 out of 5, and more than 90% of participants say they would recommend the program to a colleague. As one new clinician reflected, “This has been my favorite training so far during week 1. Much appreciated and so relevant to sustaining ourselves in health care for the long run. I am 18 years into my practice, and Together As One has been one of the most important things I’ve done to keep myself balanced and energized in medicine.”

For Lott, “Together As One means honoring every mind and every story. Our differences are not something to fix; they are strengths that make our community vibrant. When we lead with compassion and curiosity, we create spaces where everyone belongs.”

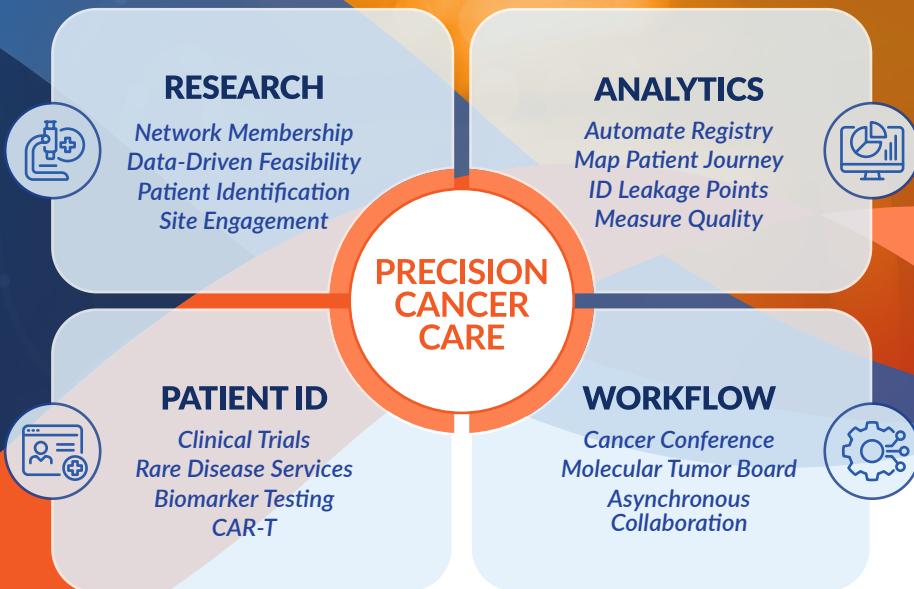
### **Supporting the Supporters: A Compassionate Framework for Oncology Care Teams**

The Code Lavender program and its foundational component, Compassion Champions Network, are grounded in the belief that self-care and compassion allow clinicians to provide the best care for their patients and family members. Code Lavender was designed to

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meet teammates where they are: in moments of acute distress, in the often-hidden fatigue of cumulative stress, and in the everyday work of showing up with empathy. Compassion Champions pledge to the following 3 behaviors:

1. Practicing self-compassion and self-care in their work
2. Relating compassionately to their teammates
3. Championing compassion in their workspaces through planned activities and everyday moments.

Currently over 11,000 Advocate Health teammates have taken the pledge.

An active group since 2012, Compassion Champions participate in an (optional) monthly virtual meeting to share stories of recent and planned Code Lavender events. This regular touchpoint serves to encourage and educate other champions. These meetings also provide updates about Code Lavender and other organizational well-being programs and resources. From the early days when a dozen teammates brainstormed ideas over the phone in 2012, to now in 2025 when an average of 234 champions attend monthly meetings, there is ongoing steady growth and documented momentum. These champions are enthusiastically endorsed by health care system leaders who recognize the value of compassion and its mitigating influence on stress and burnout. Throughout the Compassion Champion network, teammates are appreciated and recognized not only for their clinical expertise and outcomes, but also for their hearts (eg, care and devotion). They reflect the belief that “it’s not just what you do that matters; who you are and how you are also greatly matter.”

**“In oncology, where the emotional toll is profound and persistent, the Together As One program has transformed peer support from a hopeful concept into a healing practice. It empowers clinicians not only to show up for their patients but to show up for each other. This is how we sustain compassion in the face of suffering.”**

Sigrun Hallmeyer, MD, director of the Cancer Service Line at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital; medical co-director of Oncology Research at Advocate Aurora Research Institute; founder and medical director of the Cancer Survivorship Center at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital

“Compassion isn’t just what I offer others—it’s how I live. Whether I’m teaching, playing music, or supporting a teammate through a crisis, I believe that healing begins with reflection and joy. Spiritual health is about rhythm, breath, and belonging. Through Code Lavender and Compassion Champions, we’re creating spaces where teammates can pause, reconnect, and rediscover the strength that comes from being cared for.”

Reverend Greg Hathaway, MDiv, BCC, ACPE, certified educator and area vice president of Spiritual Care and Education at Advocate Health

component to help improve culture and support teammate well-being. Yet, there was also a clear recognition that more needed to be done to help teammates in crises. This recognition led to the creation of a 3-level framework for Code Lavender activities. Level 1 activities focus on creating an intentional culture of compassion. Levels 2 and 3 are responsive interventions to acute moments of distress when teammates need support. The severity and scale of the event determine the difference between Levels 2 and 3.

- **Code Lavender: Level 1.** Culture building and prevention activities are Level 1 interventions. These proactive activities are designed to engage employees and create a culture of caring. Offered as events, 1:1 well-being check-ins, or ongoing education, these activities highlight the importance of employees treating themselves and others with compassion, mindfulness, and joy. A Level 1 activity now occurs every 5 minutes across Advocate Health facilities in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.
- **Code Lavender: Level 2.** These mild to moderate interventions are provided in response to employee requests for help. Examples include responding to employees who are experiencing personal or professional distress, such as family death and/or illness, complex clinical cases, or patient deaths.
- **Code Lavender: Level 3.** These interventions are targeted at more severe and often widespread events that employees and teams experience. Examples of Level 3 events are mass casualty events or the sudden and unexpected death or severe injury of a teammate.

Several years ago, the health care system decided to separate and record its supportive responses to workplace violence events as an additional category. In 2024, Advocate Health recorded 85,819 Level 1 interventions, 12,001 Level 2 interventions, 1112 Level 3 interventions, and 2074 responses to teammates impacted by workplace violence.

Another integral component of the Code Lavender program is the confidential, 24/7 teammate helpline called the HOPEline. Staffed by trained chaplains who offer expert guidance, appropriate resources, and a listening ear during times of stress, the HOPEline also serves as the referral source for leaders who do not have direct access to a chaplain and need to request Code Lavender support.

Based on trends observed nationally and regionally at Advocate Health, the Code Lavender strategy team identified specific facility sites that would benefit from additional support. These included skilled nursing facilities, urgent care sites, and freestanding emergency departments, all of which lacked on-site access to chaplains. Although these sites reported high levels of emotional fatigue, moral distress, and burnout, they had fewer on-site support resources. Recognizing this gap, Code Lavender leaders envisioned a new model of care to embed consistent, compassionate presence into these environments.

**“The Anchor program is about more than stress relief—it’s about restoring the inner resources that clinicians and research faculty need to thrive. We’ve seen how these practices help reconnect people to their values, their breath, and their sense of meaning in medicine.”**

Suzanne C. Danhauer, PhD, senior associate dean for Faculty Well-Being, and director, Center for Integrative Medicine at Wake Forest University School of Medicine

This vision was realized when the Code Lavender program received a grant that funded 3 full-time chaplain positions dedicated to these sites of care. Known as Integrative Compassion Catalysts, these chaplains provide more than support in times of crisis; they are charged with cultivating a culture of compassion by:

- Regularly rounding at their assigned sites
- Offering brief check-ins with teammates
- Opening huddles with moments of reflection or inspiration
- Responding to Code Lavender requests
- Modeling whole-person care.

Importantly, these Integrative Compassion Catalysts also rotate on-call coverage for the 24/7 HOPEline, reinforcing their role as an accessible and consistent source of support.

As this model has matured, it has proved to be both scalable and deeply impactful to teammates. These chaplains translate the core values of compassion, connection, and care from theory into lived experience—1 interaction, 1 relationship, and 1 site at a time. The grant that funds this work will end in July 2026.

Code Lavender provides unique support that complements other Advocate Health teammate programs including Behavioral Health, Human Resources, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Teammate Relations, Performance Excellence, and LiveWELL.

### **Moodfit App and Mind-Body Training**

At Advocate Health, personal resilience is nurtured through accessible, evidence-based tools such as the [Moodfit app](#), which offers support for stress management, mindfulness, and self-care. Across the health care system, there are currently 14,700 active subscriptions, with 3900 new subscribers added in May 2025 alone—a clear indication that clinicians are seeking practical ways to care for themselves.

Another resource for clinicians and staff is the Anchor Mind-Body Training, originally developed at Georgetown University and expanded by Suzanne Danhauer, PhD, senior associate dean for faculty well-being and professor at Wake Forest University School of Medicine. The program offers a community where participants practice meditation, guided imagery, and biofeedback, building resilience from within while strengthening their sense of purpose and connection to others.

### **Employee Assistance Program and Mental Health Concierge**

Confidential, 24/7 support services are available to all Advocate Health clinicians, tailored to the unique needs of health care providers. Through grant funding from The Duke Endowment, Advocate Health piloted a physician-led rapid access support model that allows physicians, faculty, residents, and advanced practice providers (APPs) quick access to behavioral health care. These services are complemented by proactive crisis responses, such as targeted support during annual respiratory syncytial virus outbreaks, ensuring clinicians have the necessary resources and support.

### **Well-Being Grants: Fueling Innovation and Connection**

These grants have funded programs such as Narrative Medicine, Finding Meaning Groups, and team-based wellness initiatives in oncology and across Advocate Health. Feedback from recipients is powerful: “We are truly honored to be given this grant. It was an amazing experience to find out when we were all together last night! Our hope is that the groups will grow, and there will be a need for multiple groups. Future grant requests will not be ruled out for expansion of the program: to set up new groups and support training for group leaders.”

### **Efficiency of Practice: Reducing Burden, Improving Teamwork**

Systemic inefficiencies and administrative burdens are major drivers of burnout in oncology and across all specialties. At Advocate Health, the Efficiency of Practice pillar is designed to address these challenges head-on, leveraging technology, workflow redesign, and robust teamwork to enable clinicians to focus on what matters most: patient care.

One of the most transformative interventions under the Efficiency of Practice pillar has been the implementation of DAX Copilot and Epic Super Users. DAX Copilot has been described by clinicians as

a “game changer,” helping them to complete notes more efficiently and leave work on time. The data support this claim: approximately 18% of users saved over an hour a day, and 40% saved at least 30 minutes per day. Advocate Health has found that the subjective perceived benefits of DAX are even greater, with clinicians reporting improved resilience and well-being.

The Encounter Specialist model, which pairs clinical support staff with providers to assist with documentation and patient flow, has also shown statistically significant reductions in after-hours work and documentation time.

### Measuring What Matters

Teamwork is critical for clinician well-being, patient safety, and the overall morale of the care team. National literature data consistently show that strong teamwork and clinician well-being are directly linked to better patient outcomes. Findings from a 2016 systematic review in *PLoS One* indicated that care team well-being, care team burnout, and patient safety are closely connected, with higher care team well-being associated with better patient outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Data from a 2025 American Society of Clinical Oncology study showed that improving work-life integration and emotional support of health care staff is essential not only for retention but for safe, high-quality care.<sup>2</sup> Relational coordination and a sense of team have been shown to improve both staff and patient outcomes in outpatient surgical clinics.

In oncology, where emotional labor is especially intense, peer support has helped clinicians process grief, navigate difficult conversations, and maintain compassion in the face of suffering. Oncology teams have embraced the Code Lavender and Together As One peer support program as a way of being, with clinicians supporting one another through the highs and lows of patient care. These programs have also been shown to improve caregiver well-being and patient outcomes in critically ill children and children’s surgery.

Advocate Health measures teamwork and engagement at least twice a year via standardized surveys and site discussions, including the COSWE (Culture of Safety and Well-Being Engagement) survey, using Perceptyx. Key highlights from Advocate Health’s 2025 COSWE survey:

- **Team efficiency.** In the Illinois and Wisconsin Division, 69.4% of family medicine, 73.7% of internal medicine, 66.3% of obstetrician-gynecologists (ob-gyns), and 78.7% of pediatric physicians and APPs rated their care team’s efficiency as “optimal” or “good.” In the North Carolina and Georgia Division, these numbers were even higher for ob-gyns (82.1%) and pediatrics (76.4%).
- **Sense of belonging.** 55% of Illinois and Wisconsin Division family medicine, 63.9% of internal medicine, 51.7% of ob-gyns, and 61.5% of pediatric clinicians agreed they have a strong sense of belonging. In the North Carolina and Georgia Division, the rates ranged from 39.3% (pediatricians) to 63.1% (ob-gyns).
- **Support and trust.** 74.5% of Illinois and Wisconsin Division family medicine, 79.7% of internal medicine, 73% of ob-gyns, and 83.6% of pediatricians agreed with the statement “I believe my teammates have my back.” In the North Carolina and Georgia Division, this rates from 78.2% to 84.5% across specialties.
- **Barriers to teamwork.** The most common barriers cited were insufficient support staff (up to 51.2% in North Carolina and Georgia Division, family medicine and 48.4% in Illinois and

“Well-being is not a side conversation—it’s the pulse of how we lead, teach, and care. As a practicing physician and clinical leader, I’ve seen how the emotional and physical toll of medicine impacts our ability to show up fully for our patients and each other. Through the Best Place to Care initiative, we’ve created space for honest dialogue and meaningful change. Our engagement with the AMA Joy in Medicine program helps us move beyond metrics. It’s about restoring connection, trust, and purpose—one conversation, one team, one moment at a time.”

Suzanna J. Fox, MD, Advocate Health, enterprise chief physician executive, executive sponsor of Best Place to Care, and AMA Joy in Medicine Gold Recognition Leader at Advocate Health

Wisconsin Division family medicine), electronic health record (EHR) limitations, and institutional policies.

- **What would keep clinicians in their roles.** Top factors were enhanced workflow efficiency (up to 60.8%), fewer EHR hassles (up to 62.3%), consistent staffing (up to 50%), and a greater sense of team (up to 42.3% in Illinois and Wisconsin Division ob-gyns).

These results are not just numbers—they reflect the lived experience of thousands of physicians and APPs across Advocate Health. These data show that while most clinicians feel supported and value their teams, significant opportunities remain to improve workflow, staffing, and the sense of belonging.

COSWE survey data are not only collected—they are acted upon. Physician and APP leaders, along with the Best Place to Care team, review the data, develop action plans, and share results transparently across the organization. Focus groups and bidirectional conversations ensure that frontline voices are heard and that interventions are tailored to the real needs of clinicians. For example, when COSWE data revealed that only about half of clinicians felt a strong sense of belonging, Advocate Health launched new onboarding and peer support initiatives, expanded the Together As One program, and increased leadership visibility in clinical areas. When staffing and workflow efficiency were identified as top concerns, the organization invested in float pools, optimized scheduling, and expanded the use of DAX Copilot and Encounter Specialists.

## Lessons Learned and Key Findings

For cancer teams looking to implement similar well-being programming, Advocate Health shares what works:

- **Leadership engagement.** Success depends on visible, sustained leadership across the organization. Invest in clinician leadership development and broader organizational tools for leaders to adopt and use to elevate the importance of a well-being culture in daily practice.
- **A comprehensive approach.** Addressing well-being through culture, resilience, and efficiency creates a supportive environment where clinicians can thrive.
- **Data-driven interventions.** Regular measurement and analysis of teamwork, burnout, and workflow efficiency inform targeted interventions and continuous improvement.
- **Storytelling, peer support, and compassion through action.** Narrative medicine and a multitude of local and organizational programs such as Code Lavender and Together As One foster connection, build a culture of compassion, reduce stigma, and improve resilience.

Advocate Health also shares what is challenging:

- **Systemic barriers.** Updating credentialing forms, navigating state-specific regulations, and aligning stakeholders are ongoing challenges.
- **Sustaining change.** Maintaining momentum and engagement requires ongoing communication, recognition, and adaptation.

## Credentialing Reform and Destigmatization

Advocate Health is committed to removing stigmatizing language from credentialing processes around mental health and substance use. Dr. Felder partnered with the Advocate Medical Staff Services team to perform a comprehensive audit of over 100 health care system forms and revise language to be more health literate and compassionate, less invasive, and aligned with best practices. In partnership with the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation, these changes set a precedent for reducing stigma and promoting mental health awareness on a larger scale. In July 2025, Advocate Health was recognized as Wellbeing First Champion by the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation in North Carolina and Wisconsin with the rest of Advocate Health close to completing similar positive changes. Advocate Health is also working to address Illinois State-mandated language with regulatory bodies in this state. The partnership with the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation has positioned Advocate Health as a national leader in this space.

## A Culture That Cares—From Day One and Every Day After

In oncology, where the human spirit is tested in profound ways, well-being must be foundational, not optional. At Advocate Health, this principle guides every aspect of the clinician and teammate experience. From recruitment and onboarding to leadership development and lifelong growth, Advocate Health is committed to caring for every individual as it would for a loved one—what is known as The Loved One Standard.

As Ruben Mesa, MD, FACP, president of the Advocate Health Cancer National Service Line, president of Atrium Health Levine Cancer and executive director of Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist

**“Clinician well-being is not a luxury—it is a necessity for delivering equitable, compassionate cancer care. As we redesign oncology systems to meet the needs of diverse communities, we must also build environments that foster resilience, inclusion, and purpose for those who provide care.”**

Nadine J. Barrett, PhD, MA, MS, FACCC, senior associate dean of Community Engagement and Equity in Research at Atrium Health Wake Forest Comprehensive Cancer Center in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and immediate past president of the Association of Cancer Care Centers

Comprehensive Cancer Center describes, this standard is the strong heartbeat of Advocate Health's culture. It shapes workflows that reduce burden, fosters spaces for connection and healing, and drives initiatives such as Together As One and Code Lavender, ensuring no one carries the emotional weight of oncology care alone. Investments in leadership development, workplace support, and well-being culture reflect a belief that thriving teams deliver the safest, most compassionate care.

The growing results are tangible: stronger teamwork, higher engagement, and clinicians who feel seen, supported, and valued. But the true impact is found in the stories of teammates who rediscover purpose, hope, and joy in their calling.

Looking ahead, Advocate Health will expand peer support, strengthen staffing strategies, and remove barriers to seeking help, making it as natural as offering help. Guided by The Loved One Standard and shared values, Advocate Health is building a culture where clinicians flourish and every patient feels the difference. This is not just about sustaining care—it is about shaping a future of true health, hope, and healing. ☐

Mila Felder, MD, FACEP, is Advocate Health's enterprise vice president of Teammate Well-Being. Suzanne Danhauer, PhD, is senior associate dean for Faculty Well-Being and professor at Wake Forest University School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Anja Workman is director of Business Development and Marketing at Atrium Health Levine Cancer in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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