

Caring for Yourself While Caring for Others: Reaching Out for Support from the Community

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Over the past couple of years, I have had the unique opportunity to work with many early childhood program directors nationwide who are leading during challenging times. Their issues include the staffing crisis, inventory issues for necessary products, food shortages, and enrollment of children within their programs. Many have commented that most days are spent just trying to manage issues hour-to-hour, only to wake up and do it all over again the next day. Job burnout has been very real. While adrenaline assisted for the short-term, many are now reporting the negative impact of stress on the body and long-term health results. They are concerned about themselves, their staff, and the impact on everyone's health and mental health.

Throughout the pandemic, the media has reported a record number of people with issues related to their health, including anxiety and depression. These issues weaken the body's immune system, making it more difficult to prevent disease and maintain health. One of the most important strategies is to stay physically healthy by focusing on these four areas:

- [appropriate hygiene](#)
- [eating nutritional foods](#)
- [seeking medical care](#), and
- [coping with stressors](#)

While these four areas are things we are all already aware of, how can they be implemented? Here are early childhood leaders from across the nation who did this by simply reaching out and asking local community resources and businesses to help.

LUCYNA

Leader of her program for over 20 years, as the days wore on and the stress continued to seem greater, Lucyna gathered key staff members and asked them for ideas to help deal with the stress they were collectively feeling. Ignited by this opportunity to help, two staff members decided to contact local businesses, and within two weeks, the following services were in place:

- A local bath and beauty product store donated bottles of bubble bath and bath bombs, including ongoing donations every three months for everyone at the program to enjoy.
- After talking with the manager at a grocery store, he agreed to donate the fresh fruit and vegetable inventory that was close to expiration. The staff takes turns going by to pick up the inventory twice a week.

- One of the parents, a pharmacy technician, talked with her manager, who sends staff to the program to provide scheduled COVID vaccinations and tests free of charge.
- Neck, shoulder, and hand massages are offered at a reduced rate during naptime once a month.

The staff was so appreciative, and Lucyna reported that she has stabilized staff turnover, and the call-in rate has declined. She is feeling more hopeful and ready to tackle each day.

SHANTE

New to the field as a leader and childcare program owner, Shante opened her center a year before the pandemic took place. Impacted initially by low enrollment, Shante struggled to keep the doors open to serve children and families in her community. Her state utilized recovery funds to help stabilize child care, and Shante became eligible for many funding opportunities and services. Together with a business consultant provided by the local Child Care Resource & Referral Agency, ideas were generated, and Shante was able to reach out and establish the following services:

- The local cleaners donates laundry services. Staff only need to drop off and pick up their laundry weekly. The fee is so minimal that over 90% of the staff utilize the service.
- The local smoothie shop provides healthy drinks at a significant discount.
- [Oklahoma's Child Care Resource & Referral Agency](#) provides an online service, *Shared Services*, an Innovation of CCA for Social Good, providing access to a virtual doctor with low co-pay amounts.
- Gyms offer reduced membership fees, and one yoga instructor comes to the program site for free twice a week after business hours and on Saturday mornings for all interested staff.

Shante had no idea these were all possibilities until she contacted her childcare licensing representative and the Resource & Referral Agency in her area. She gained the confidence to reach out to her community for help. Enrollment is increasing, and due to these perks for staff, she has been able to attract qualified staff as the program has grown.

JESSICA

A graduate of the local community college, Jessica served as a lead teacher in her program. Due to the pandemic and medical concerns, the long-time director decided to retire, and Jessica was promoted to director in 2021. Jessica was eager to put her education and experience to good use and applied for the position. While Jessica was initially thrilled to serve as director, and the staff supported her promotion, she reported feeling “burned out.” It was getting harder and harder to stay positive with the staff. Recognizing her internal struggle, Jessica reached out to her former instructor at the community college, who helped her think of strategies and ideas to lift up herself and the staff that she cared for so deeply. Within weeks, she and her instructor worked to set up these services:

- Two nail salons agreed to offer significantly discounted manicures and pedicures.
- Local food trucks schedule monthly dates to provide lunch and dinner for monthly after-hours staff meetings.

- A family practice doctor provides in-clinic and virtual visits to staff and their immediate family members at reduced fees.
- Meditation breaks are scheduled throughout the day and supported by apps that are paid for by donations from parents.

Recognizing her ability to lead during tough times, the staff held a surprise potluck lunch for Jessica, and they collectively donated money for her to enjoy a spa day. Jessica reports feeling more encouraged, and the bond between her and the staff is stronger than ever.

NORMA

Serving a low-income area in a major city, Norma knew about many services but always thought of these in the context of serving families. As she worked in the classrooms to help cover staffing issues, Norma began to understand her staff's lives and concerns better. While she initially saw these as excuses to avoid coming to work, some invested time with individual staff members helped Norma better understand her staff's struggles. She realized that even some basic needs were unavailable to the staff or their families. That's when she decided to reach out to local businesses and the health department to assist with common challenges and develop interests she learned that the staff had:

- Hygiene products are expensive. After talking with the general store, who contacted a local business, employees of that business took up a collection to purchase a year's worth of products for each staff member. The company has committed to doing this yearly.
- A local restaurant agreed to provide weekly dinners for staff to take home to their families. The company mentioned above also donated to this restaurant to keep the meal service active.
- Once a month, the local health department sends out a nurse practitioner and dental hygienist to assess staff and their family members' health and provide referral services with follow-up.
- From working in the classrooms, Norma learned how much the staff liked to dance. She schedules daily dance breaks to disco music, resulting in the staff's shared interest in learning more dance moves.

The morale and low attendance rate began to change. Within three months, Norma's time in classrooms covering for staff was reduced significantly. She was able to start working more on her administrative tasks, which resulted in her feeling better about her abilities to lead. Norma and her staff feel stable and are more engaged with the enrolled families and children.

Each of the directors showcased in this article made the decision to prioritize self-care and caring for others. They wanted to avoid burnout. When reaching out to the community, they did experience some requests that resulted in a "no." However, each saw these as opportunities to grow awareness of their programs by being vocal about their needs. If you feel it's time to put you and the staff first, reach out to your community. Use these ideas and strategies as a springboard to investigate the possibilities.

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