



UCSF Department of Medicine

ZUCKERBERG SAN FRANCISCO GENERAL

Promoting Joy and Well-Being



August is National Wellness Month, a time to reflect on work satisfaction as well as our overall joy and well-being. It encourages us to holistically examine all dimensions of our wellness including career, spiritual, emotional, physical, social, environmental, and financial, and to engage in self-care, healthy habits, and human connection. In this newsletter, we describe our efforts to augment well-being for our faculty and staff in the Department of Medicine at ZSFG.

Larissa Thomas, MD, Professor and Director of Faculty Experience for the UCSF Department of Medicine (DOM) at ZSFG, has been working with department leaders to foster well-being. Engaging in

work that is meaningful to our values, goals, and lifestyle is rewarding, and connecting with purpose emphasizes finding joy in the workplace. “Everyone at the General is very mission-driven, which is a huge source of strength,” she said. “But we can’t rely only on a sense of mission to combat burnout”.

Burnout, a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment, is an ongoing issue nationally: the first well-being studies in the early 2000s suggested that 50 to 60 percent of physicians were burned out; more recent studies estimate this at 40 to 45 percent. It can lead to decreased job satisfaction, work

errors, and desires to leave an occupation. “There’s consensus nationally that about 80 percent of the drivers of burnout relate to organizational efficiency or cultural factors in the healthcare system,” said Dr. Thomas. “Those include whether leaders value provider well-being as much as patient well-being, how effectively they communicate change and seek feedback, whether clinicians and staff feel safe at work, and whether they feel supported to live their lives outside of work. It’s also important for people to have the resources they need to do their jobs, that teams work at maximal efficiency, that the electronic health record has clinician-designed processes that make things like order sets and documentation easier, team-based workflows to handle inbox messaging, and that there’s adequate staffing.”

Like most doctors, Larissa Thomas, MD, went into medicine wanting to care for patients and change the world. But that idealistic outlook took a hit during the strenuous years of training. Her residency experiences inspired her passion for improving well-being for residents, faculty, and other health care team members. She now is also Director of Well-Being for UCSF Graduate Medical Education.



Larissa Thomas, MD



"My role is to create programs to enhance faculty experience in the department of medicine. We held our leadership training for new chiefs and leaders from January-April 2025. Our new chiefs and leaders across all sites participated in 4 in-person sessions orienting them to leadership in DOM."

-Urmimala Sarkar, MD, MPH
Associate Chair for Faculty Experience, DOM



Embracing Self-Care

Dr. Thomas collaborated with leaders across the country to develop the Charter on Physician Well-Being, which states that fostering well-being requires commitments at the societal, cultural, organizational, and individual levels. They worked to reduce workplace stress and to embrace physicians accessing mental health care.

Health systems can support well-being at the individual level by providing mental health resources. "When I was in residency, there was concern that if you took antidepressants, it would somehow be reflected to the medical board or affect licensure," said Dr. Thomas. "There's good data showing that in states that ask punitive, invasive questions about mental health care for licensure, physicians report being less likely to seek mental health care."

In California the licensure questions have been changed to focus on current impairment inspired by the advocacy of Dr. Thomas and her colleagues. "The language now acknowledges that physicians have physical and mental health conditions just like their patients, and it's important for physicians to seek treatment," she said. "That's a huge change. It's important to make sure patients are safe, and the way clinicians stay well and don't become impaired is to get early treatment for routine mental health conditions."

Communication, Feedback and Advocacy

One central focus, especially post-

pandemic, has been the importance of both community and communication. "It's important to share the initiatives the department has been working on, and to provide forums for feedback," said Dr. Thomas. The ZSFG Department of Medicine monthly newsletter is one method of communicating across the department to learn about and celebrate each other, foster connection, and share both the challenges and successes that faculty and staff are experiencing in their daily work. Also, Neil Powe, MD, Chief of Medicine at ZSFG, started a series of Tea Talks, where faculty discuss bright spots of working at ZSFG as well as concerns about topics such as clinical work, research, and work-life integration. Challenges tend to group by career stage, so sessions are divided up by groups of assistant, associate, and full professors.

The ZSFG Department of Medicine has also initiated faculty town halls, presented both in-person and virtually, focusing on topics such as the faculty experience, the ambulatory care setting, and research. "We address common issues and have time for Q&A" said Dr. Thomas.

The department has also established affinity groups. For example, Peter Hunt, MD, Professor and Associate Chief for Research in ZSFG DOM, created several groups for researchers with similar interests, bringing people together in person and encouraging organic conversations that could lead to collaborations. The department is also creating work-life integration groups with themes such as faculty who are returning from parental leave, parents of teenagers, and caregivers of older adults. "Sometimes it's nice to connect with work colleagues and share resources with people who have the same set of benefits or are looking at the same school districts," said Dr. Thomas.

Improving faculty well-being on a systems level can be challenging in a resource-limited environment. "The department is often in an advocacy role rather than directly controlling resources, but we can still improve people's experiences and support them in working within this system, even if we can't always control the outcomes," said Dr. Thomas. Dr. Powe has

"Our team approaches well-being by focusing on transparency, support, and creating an environment where expectations are clear and resources are accessible, thoughtfully combining professional development with team-building activities to strengthen our workplace community and connections."

-Leonard Telesca
Director of Administration and Finance for ZSFG DOM



addressed salary parity, recently rolling out a department-wide adjustment in faculty salary scales. Beth Harleman, MD, Professor and Vice-Chief of Medicine at ZSFG has developed training for mid-level faculty directors in a Clinical Leaders Professional Development Program. The DOM developed the Principal Investigator Organizational management Training for Early Stage Investigators (PIVOT) interactive course taught in part by ZSFG instructors Gabe Chamie, MD, Associate Professor and Leonard Telesca, MSOD, Director of Administration and Finance for ZSFG DOM. The course provides knowledge and skills on the research ecosystem, organizational management, human resources, and finance. Dr. Powe as Chair of the DOM Promotions Committee has worked to make the faculty promotion process for the entire DOM enterprise more transparent.

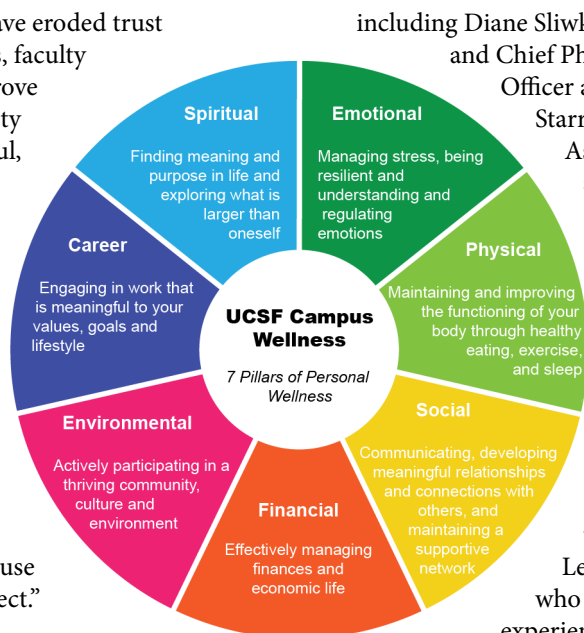
'A Very Positive Shift'

One way that organizations can support well-being is by promoting wellness across the enterprise. UCSF has instituted a MyWellness Resource Hub (<https://mywellness.ucsf.edu/>) addressing all pillars of wellness. Organizations can also foster an environment of psychological safety. "That's the ability to speak up, take risks, and make mistakes without fear of punitive consequences," said Dr. Thomas. "Even if there are hierarchical structures, people lower in the hierarchy feel they can speak up if they see something that is unsafe or isn't working, and their opinion won't be held against them. At a time when

so many things have eroded trust in our institutions, faculty and staff can improve psychological safety through thoughtful, bidirectional communication. That includes seeking out constructive feedback, because if they aren't hearing suggestions for how things could be improved, it's probably not because everything is perfect."

Physician faculty well-being is closely intertwined with the well-being of residents, staff, and other clinical team members. "Sometimes when we try to address burnout for one group, that work is shifted to another group," Dr. Thomas said. "I call that the 'zero-sum trap of well-being.' While most of what I've discussed focuses on the physician experience, the staff experience is equally important in creating high-functioning health care teams.... Investing in well-being is not always resource-neutral, but investing a small amount of resources upfront in new staffing or programs can have a long-term return on investment because it improves retention, patient care, and patient satisfaction."

Dr. Thomas also works synergistically with other leaders to improve well-being



including Diane Sliwka, MD, Professor and Chief Physician Experience Officer at UCSF Health; Starr Knight, MD, Associate Professor and Director of Faculty Experience at ZSFG; Urmimala Sarkar, MD, Professor and Associate Chair for Faculty Experience for the DOM; and Leonard Telesca, who oversees staff experience in ZSFG DOM.

For the last several years, UCSF has participated in an annual survey for faculty which measures well-being, burnout, and how likely they would be to recommend ZSFG as a place to work. The survey also invites suggestions for improving their work experience, and describing an improvement they have seen in the past year. Most respondents in ZSFG DOM would recommend ZSFG as a good place to work. However, certain groups, such as early-career faculty report some challenges to well-being.

Staff at UCSF recently participated in the 2025 Gallup staff engagement survey to identify our strengths and improvement areas as a workplace. Staff at ZSFG DOM achieved an impressive engagement grand mean of 4.14, substantially higher than the overall UCSF score of 3.91. With strong participation from 220 staff members across 13 divisions and central administration, the results reflect our department's continued commitment to fostering a positive work environment. Staff particularly valued their relationships with supervisors and colleagues, rating both "my supervisor or someone at work seems to care about me as a person" and "the mission or purpose

"I create and lead numerous programs and initiatives from my 1:1 coaching engagements to our leadership retreats and monthly webinars from a deeply holistic perspective, focusing on the heart and meaning of the needs in our community."

-Aaron Tabacco
Director of Staff Experience, DOM



of my organization makes me feel my job is important” at an exceptional 4.50. Additionally, staff gave high marks (4.43) to their coworkers’ commitment to quality work. Encouragingly, we saw a decrease in those reporting frequent burnout, dropping from 27% in 2024 to 22% in 2025. Looking ahead, we invite all staff and supervisors to join us for our annual Staff Appreciation and Staff Excellence Awards event this September - watch for a calendar invitation coming soon!

Kadijah Grant, Staff Experience Manager at ZSFG said “At ZSFG, we recognize that employee well-being—encompassing physical, emotional, mental, and professional health—is essential to the strength and sustainability of our healthcare workforce. Since 2011, the Wellness Center has served as a refuge for staff, and since 2020, has made a focused shift toward addressing burnout and stress through a multitude of restorative offerings and meaningful recognition events. These

initiatives are now woven into the fabric of our hospital culture. In the face of national healthcare staffing challenges, supporting the well-being of our team is not just a priority—it’s the foundation of exceptional patient care.”

“There are a lot of things happening locally to improve well-being,” Dr. Thomas said. “Nationally, in the last decade there’s also been a huge shift away from individuals taking on all the responsibility for wellness, to organizations having a responsibility for supporting their people. That’s the way that every major institution, from the CDC to the National Academy of Medicine is looking at well-being now, and that’s a very positive shift.” “We are making substantial progress in the Department of Medicine at ZSFG but there is still more work to do to improve our work lives,” said Dr. Powe.

-Elizabeth Chur

Editors: Neil Powe, Leonard Telesca, Ali Cunningham

SPOTLIGHT

Mary O. Gray, MD, has been announced as the permanent chief of the UCSF Division of Cardiology at ZSFG

Brian B. Graham, MD has been announced as the new Senior Advisor for Space Management and Strategy in the UCSF School of Medicine

Ayesha Appa, MD has won the 2025 Teri Liegler award at the HIV/ID All Division Event at Pride Hall

Harini Sarathy, MD has been elected to the Haile T. Debas Academy of Medical Educators

Annie Luetkemeyer, MD has been named a fellow of the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA).



Stanford Model for Occupational Well-being

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Actions to Promote Occupational Well-Being

- **Faculty tea sessions with Chief**
- **Faculty experience town halls**
- **Sharing experiences - ZSFG DOM newsletter**
- **Faculty and staff awards**
- **In-person gatherings**
- **Funded coverage for leaves of absence**
- **Increased support for inpatient and ambulatory work**
- **Increased clinical faculty salary scales**
- **Clinical and administrative staffing advocacy**
- **Support for scheduling software**
- **Data access for research and QI**
- **Work-life integration groups**
- **Career advancement support for clinicians, educators, researchers, and staff**
- **Advocacy for campus parking changes**
- **Robust mental health support through insurance and FSAP**