

Staff Reductions & Unemployment

COPA – Health Care Administration Committee

This document is intended to help the athletic trainer in the healthcare administration role navigate staff reductions and unemployment for their staff. This is a new experience for a lot of individuals, even for those that have been through certain staff reductions or terminations before the volumes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most important things to keep in mind when going through these reductions is that the decisions are not personal and that the healthcare administrator has to worry about the organization and all employees as a whole, as well as the individual employee. By making the correct decisions to reduce staff in situations like the one we are currently in, the healthcare administrator can help to ensure the organization keeps its doors open and can continue to serve its patient population. There are options when reducing staff that might include termination, layoffs, furloughs, etc., and these can be fairly confusing to navigate and determine the best course of action for your organization. Below is a list of some frequently asked questions and answers to help guide you through the process, as well as enable you to give your staff some advice when you have the difficult conversation with them.

Q: What is the difference between being furloughed, laid off or terminated?

A: The biggest difference between these three terms is the outlook for the future. Being furloughed means that it is usually a temporary arrangement for a pre-established period of time set by the organization, as well as a typical extension of benefits. This is the most common practice at this time. Most organizations are looking to bring back many of their employees when it is safe to return or when patient volumes or surgeries in the organization start to ramp back up. A layoff is typically used for a more indefinite situation and when benefits will not be maintained. It is also more rare to see full staff involved in a layoff be brought back. Finally, termination is if the position is eliminated with no intent to bring the staff member back to the organization.

With the governmental assistance that health care organizations are able to receive at this time, as well as an anticipated return to normalcy, there is a higher percentage of organizations that are using a temporary staff reduction with the intent to bring their employees back. A lot of organizations are also continuing staff benefits for them while they are off work.

Q: My organization has decided to reduce staff. Now what?

A: First, determine what type of reduction your organization is going to go through. Is the intent for this to be temporary or a long-term reduction? If your organization believes it will be temporary, find out what sort of assistance is still available to the employee during this time. Also determine how they can file for unemployment and the process that might be determined to bring the employee back to work, if known. If you are involved in the decision, ask for a clear definition of how many cuts need to be made and how many staff members you can keep.

Q: It is time to have the conversation with staff. How do I prepare?

A: During this pandemic many organizations have been affected, and it is not uncommon for these difficult conversations to be taking place. It is important to be honest with the employee and ensure that they understand this is to protect their position going forward, as well as the organization. This portion of the discussion is crucial because it is important that the staff feel taken care of during this time so they are more likely to return when your organization returns to full capacity. Your Human Resources department should have some resources available for you that will help navigate the conversation and a follow-up packet of information to send the employee which might include for how to apply for unemployment. Also, be clear about which benefit programs are still available to staff and what they will and will not have access to while off work.

Q: As a leader, how do I support my employees who are affected, as well as myself?

A: How you will support your employees during their absence in a layoff or furlough situation should be determined by your Human Resources department. Guidelines such as how often, by what method (i.e. phone, text, email), and for how long to touch base with them on updates from the organization should be determined and also relayed to the employee during the conversation. They are not receiving good news, so as a leader, it is important for the employee to know when they might hear from you to stay connected with the organization. Your Human Resources department should also provide wellness resources available, such as Employee Assistance Programs, to help those who might need it. Leaders may also need support prior to or after having these difficult conversations. Reach out to other colleagues in similar leadership

roles who might have experience with having to lay off or furlough employees to discuss any questions or challenges you may face prior to the conversation.

Q: We are starting to see the increase and need for more staff. How do I decide who to bring back and what do I present to leadership to prove they are needed?

A: This can be both exciting and very stressful. It is very important to fully understand the need, as well as what can be proved. In the initial stages, versatility will be one of the best qualities you can look for in an employee that is returning. It is likely that with all the reductions, individuals are wearing many hats and sharing different responsibilities outside of their typical job description. Bringing back a high performer in their department that is unwilling to stretch to other areas could be problematic, so identifying those individuals that can help in their specific role, but also help cover other areas that have not been re-staffed yet, will be more of an asset.

In terms of how to show leadership these staff members need to return to work, the negative effect of keeping them off work needs to be identified. You will need to express why keeping them off is more of a cost to the organization than their salary. This can be achieved a couple of ways. First, if they are responsible for any patient throughput or can help increase volumes and revenue, demonstrate this as a benefit and offset to salary.. Second, if the organization is falling behind in a certain department that is short staffed and is hurting the workflows of the organization, identifying volumes and benchmarks to prove the shortfall can help identify the need. Third, if the department or staff member is versatile and will have an impact on many parts of the organization as a whole, identify what those pieces are and present that to leadership. Whichever measures you elect to use, be sure to keep in mind that this is not personal and needs to be purely fact- based metrics. Keeping emotion out of the decision making process will help prove your point, as well as avoid bringing too many employees back too early. If too many staff are brought back too early, it will be detrimental to your department, and potentially your organization, and you will likely be looking at another staff reduction. So remember, keep emotion out of it, use facts and data to drive decisions, and be ready to prove and explain why certain staff need to return.