

Story Highlight

Working together to reduce stigma.



Jasleen Chhatwal was the previous president of the Arizona Psychiatric Society and now serves as the Chief Medical Officer at Sierra Tucson as well as an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry in the College of Medicine at the University of Arizona.

So there I was in late 2021, an early career physician, stepping into the role of **president of our state psychiatric society**. I had been participating as peer support counselor for Arizona physicians and seeing many colleagues with mental health challenges who **balked at the idea** of seeking professional help due to **fears** of negative board action and internalized stigma.

I felt **frustrated** knowing how many physicians were struggling on their own at a time that they were doing so much for our communities. The term healthcare heroes that was being used seemed to further give the message that they were expected to be **infallible**. I wanted to do something to reduce the barriers to seeking help. But was realizing that it was a **complex problem** that involved the culture of medicine, regulations, laws, and there **wasn't an easy starting point**.

I spent some time **educating myself** on Arizona state processes around medical licensure and found that our licensing applications asked questions about mental health that could feed into those fears I was noting in my peer support work. I **engaged a few others** in our society, we **collaborated** with the state medical association, reached out to the medical board, wrote letters, **involved 22** other medical associations, crafted new language and even testified a few times in front of the medical board.

Until finally, after **16 months of advocacy and engagement**, we saw that the board had fully accepted our recommendations. **We were ecstatic!** And in equal parts relieved. We now have a medical licensing application that does not ask stigmatizing, prying questions about mental health and hopefully starts to change our medical culture, allowing physicians to seek timely care for themselves.

And that's why I feel **hopeful** that we can bring about change - and we owe it to ourselves **to move structures** that impact our lives in the direction that helps make our **very meaningful work** more sustainable.