

## DESIGNING FOR STAFF WELLNESS: ENHANCING THE HEALING ENVIRONMENT FOR CAREGIVERS

As healthcare systems grapple with workforce burnout and increasing staff turnover, hospital administrators are recognizing that designing for staff wellness is no longer optional, it's essential. The physical environment has a profound impact on the well-being of those who spend their days delivering care. Beyond creating healing spaces for patients, forward-thinking hospitals are investing in environments that promote the health, connection, and recovery of their own staff.

Designing for staff wellness means looking at the facility through a different lens, one that places equal priority on those who work in it. It involves embedding opportunities for rest, nourishment, collaboration, and restoration within the fabric of a healthcare campus. From daylighting strategies and lounges with views to outdoor access and nourishing food, the elements of design can make a real difference.

### Natural Light: A Fundamental Wellness Tool

Numerous studies and WELL Building concepts affirm what caregivers already know intuitively: exposure to natural

light boosts mood, reduces stress, and helps regulate circadian rhythms. For healthcare staff who may work 12-hour shifts or rotating schedules, consistent access to daylight is critical in supporting alertness and psychological well-being.

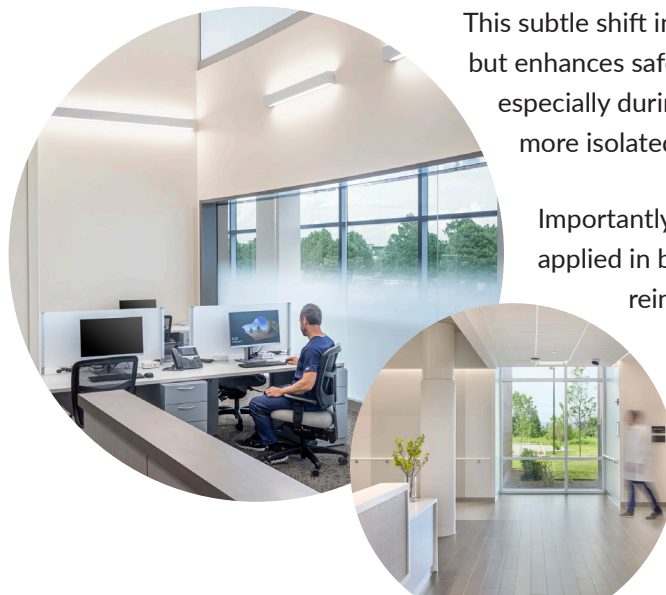
For years, hospital layouts have placed patient rooms along exterior windows, pushing staff spaces to the interior. Today's designs are rethinking that approach. For instance, projects that incorporate light wells allow daylight to penetrate interior corridors, giving staff exposure to light even in the heart of a building. Likewise, some facilities are deliberately positioning nurse stations and break areas near windows or using glass walls to bring light deep into core staff zones.

Elongated nurse stations are used to open corridors, improving both visibility and the flow of natural light. This subtle shift in design not only supports wellness but enhances safety and team communication, especially during off-peak hours when staff may feel more isolated.

Importantly, these daylight strategies are being applied in both inpatient and outpatient settings, reinforcing a consistent message that staff wellness matters, no matter where care is delivered.

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Light wells in care team areas, and corridors with exterior views allow natural light exposure



## Respite Spaces That Feel Like a True Break

While every hospital has staff lounges, too often they are tucked away, windowless, and functionally sterile, more utility room than sanctuary. Designing for staff wellness demands more. Respite spaces should provide a visual and emotional contrast to the clinical environment, offering caregivers a chance to genuinely disconnect, even for a few moments.

At a recently completed facility, the look and feel of the staff lounge was intentionally designed to be softer and more residential. Warm tones, natural materials, and comfortable seating signal to staff that this is a space for restoration. These intentional visual cues help staff transition mentally, allowing a true break from the high-acuity zones where they work.

BSA took this concept further in a sports medicine clinic, offering framed views of the mountains from staff break rooms. This access to nature, even if it's just through a window, helps reduce cognitive fatigue and provides a moment of calm in the midst of a demanding day. Where possible, staff should also have access to outdoor areas. The adjacent gym and café outdoor space allow staff to step outside, get fresh air, and return to being re-energized.

## Encouraging Healthy Lifestyles

Supporting staff wellness extends beyond the shift. By integrating healthy lifestyle amenities into hospital design, administrators can encourage long-term staff resilience and retention.

The above-mentioned sports medicine clinic provides a dedicated gym, offering an on-site fitness option for employees before or after hours. Locker rooms and showers make this easy to access and discreet. When wellness is built into the environment, it becomes more accessible, more realistic, and more widely used.

Likewise, the provision of healthy food, available quickly and close to break areas, makes a tangible difference for caregivers working within the constraints of short break times. Food lockers, like those piloted locally at a hospital here in Indiana, allow for scheduled delivery of nutritious meals, reducing the time spent traveling to and from the cafeteria. Staff can eat better, faster, and with more intention, which supports both physical health and morale.

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Staff access to views, exterior spaces, natural materials, and wellness facilities help with genuine respite and environmental contrast from the clinical space.



## Designing for Connection and Collaboration

Wellness is not only physical, but also social. Hospital environments that promote collaboration, reduce isolation, and encourage team-based care contribute to staff satisfaction and engagement.

One key way this is being achieved is through wider-than-code corridors. At an orthopedic hospital, for example, the corridors were designed intentionally to allow for impromptu staff interaction and informal huddles. These spaces are not just for transport; they become dynamic areas for teamwork and human connection.

Shared lounges and break spaces can also be used to promote cross-pollination between departments. When different care teams intersect in these areas, it fosters a broader sense of community and opens the door for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Flexible care team stations can use modular furniture that can be easily reconfigured to suit team size, workflow, or even mood. This kind of adaptability in design gives staff more control over their environment, another contributor to wellness and professional satisfaction.



## Designing with Intention

Designing for staff wellness is not about adding luxury; it's about removing barriers to well-being. When architects and hospital leaders work together with intention, it's possible to create spaces that nurture those who care for others.

Strategic shifts, such as placing a window by a break room or widening a corridor, can transform how staff experience their day. More strategic moves, like embedding daylight into core zones, adding gyms or healthy food lockers, or designing shared collaboration areas, can redefine what a hospital means to its workforce.

The message is clear: the healing environment must include the healers themselves. By investing in environments that support staff well-being, hospitals are investing in quality of care, workforce stability, and long-term organizational health.

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Expanded corridor width, gathering spaces, and shared break spaces allow for collaboration and cross-pollination.



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