
Work and mental health are intricately linked and creating appropriate policies and programs to promote mental well-being for workers and workplaces is an indispensable element of a provincial mental health strategy.

As the organization representing 170,000 unionized workers and advocating for all working Albertans, the AFL has an important perspective on and knowledge of mental health issues in the workplace.

The Federation is encouraged by the provincial government's mental health review, and urges an approach to mental health that includes workplace strategies.

The Problem

Mental health has a direct impact on the work lives of Albertans in every sector of the economy, and in every part of the province.

- Over the course of their lives, one in five Canadians will experience a mental health problem. Each week, more than 500,000 Canadians will miss work because of a mental health problem.
- Mental illness is associated with more lost workdays than any other chronic disease condition and the cost of mental health leave is, on average, double the cost of leave for a physical illness. Mental illnesses lead to 30 per cent of disability claims and 70 per cent of disability costs in Canadian workplaces.
- Estimates show that the financial effects of mental illness cost the Canadian economy around \$50 billion. In Alberta alone, that figure is \$14.4 billion – one of the highest in the country.
- Mental health issues in the workplace result in lost productivity, high turnover, increased recruitment and retention costs, lowered financial and management performance, heightened organizational risk, time loss and absenteeism.

The Solutions

The workplace is one of the frontlines in efforts to improve mental health outcomes through prevention, diagnosis, and treatment. This will take a concerted effort that Alberta's new government is in a good position to co-ordinate.

- Build awareness and understanding of mental health in the workplace and reduce barriers to treatment for those with mental illnesses. If not properly understood or supported, mental health issues in the workplace can manifest as performance, attitude or attendance problems, leading to a negative cycle of discipline, termination and potential legal liability for the employer.

- Other major barriers to getting help include stigma or unhelpful attitudes or environments at work, financial limitations and lack of accessible treatment. In the case of employees, they may be afraid of reprisal or job loss or demotion and may simply be unaware of their rights or supports available.
 - Nearly 40 per cent of working-age adults experienced symptoms of depression, but nearly 53 per cent of that group did not recognize their own symptoms or the need to seek help.
 - Employees with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a condition that can be well managed and treated in a supportive work environment, are 18 times more likely to be disciplined for behaviour and are two to four times more likely to be terminated.
 - Studies show that costs of mental illnesses to employers can be reduced by 10 to 25 per cent, and by 33 to 50 per cent for depression, by simple interventions and access to treatment. However, only about a quarter of those suffering depression get adequate treatment.
- Implement guidelines and standards to guarantee basic rights and protections, foster healthy working environments and shift the understanding of occupational health and safety to include both physical and mental health factors.
- A leading researcher in workplace mental health found a 700 per cent increase in court-awarded settlements due to mental injury in Canadian workplaces between 2003 and 2008. Legal and legislative solutions are therefore also important.
 - Implement the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace in all Alberta workplaces.
 - Amend the Workers' Compensation Act and the Occupational Health and Safety Code and regulations to include mental health in the definitions of "accident" and "occupational disease".
- Join five other provinces that amended their employment standards or occupational safety legislation to include protection against bullying and harassment.
 - Nearly 40 per cent of employees have experienced workplace bullying or harassment and, of those targeted, 45 per cent experienced mental health effects caused by the bullying.
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PTSD in Frontline Workplaces

- Frontline workers are the most vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including health care professionals, corrections officers, social workers, train drivers, journalists, and retail workers. About one in five nurses experience PTSD during the course of their careers, which expands to over a third in emergency department nurses.
- In Edmonton alone, in the first quarter of 2015, 24 emergency services workers reported psychological injuries. This is one more than for the entire year in 2014.
- Reverse onus presumptions in WCB legislation helps sufferers access the treatment they need more quickly without the difficulty of navigating a bureaucratic web – which can be particularly difficult to do in the case of mental illness. Preventative programming can also help employees identify the early signs and get the help they need.
- We must also reduce barriers to treatment for frontline workers, including the chilling effect of discriminatory actions or policies by regulatory or licensing bodies by amending regulations.

Changing Needs of Employed Caregivers

- Roughly one third of working Canadians provide some level of unpaid care for family members or friends with chronic health conditions, disabilities or aging-related needs. Most caregivers spend between three and 14 hours per week on their caregiving duties, but one in ten caregivers spend 30 or hours or more per week.

- This results in 2.2 million hours of reduced effort in the workplace every week and an estimated \$1.3 billion productivity loss annually. The value of the unpaid work provided by caregivers is \$25 billion.
- An estimated 15 per cent of employed caregivers reported cutting down on their regular weekly hours of work and 10 per cent have turned down jobs or promotions, and almost 400,000 caregivers have quit their jobs altogether.
- The estimated accumulated annual income loss associated with eldercare-related employment disruptions is \$336.8 million for employed caregivers. These choices can have long-term career effects, reducing earnings or entitlements to benefits, pensions and employment insurance. At least 60 per cent of unpaid caregivers are women.
- We should support caregivers by providing funding programs to reduce the financial burden and associated stress.
- We must also expand legislative entitlements to paid and unpaid caregiver leave, job protection, and flexible working arrangements.