



Workplace Mental Health in California

Summary

Now more than ever employers understand the need to support employee mental health. The workplace is an optimal setting for prevention of mental health needs and promotion of mental wellbeing of Californians. In 2018, the Legislature directed the Commission to develop voluntary standards for mental health in the workplace. This document serves as a brief prepared for the Commission and summarizes the strategy to create standards to support mental health in the workplace.

Mental Health in the Workplace is More Important Than Ever

The world of work changed almost overnight with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost instantaneously workers were divided into two categories: essential and nonessential employees. The essential employees have continued to commute to work, but with an added element of fear for personal safety in doing their jobs. Nonessential workers, under the shelter in place guidelines, have transitioned to telecommuting. With that comes a host of relearning work patterns on digital platforms. Children are home from school and parents are also learning to become teachers. Sadly, many people have lost their jobs, have been furloughed, or lost wages.

Anxiety and fear have been pervasive and universal during quarantine. As mental health needs grow many employers are developing a deeper understanding of the need to support employee mental health.

The Mental Health Services Act and the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission

The Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) was established to drive transformational change of the mental health system in California. The values articulated in the Act expressed the imperative to fundamentally change how mental health needs are met and how to promote the mental wellbeing of all Californians.

The Act promotes prevention and early intervention activities as being essential to transformational change. While traditional mental health services provide a safety net for people with severe mental illness, the MHSA dedicates funds to preventing mental illness from becoming severe and disabling while promoting personal wellbeing.

Over the past two years, the Commission has focused attention on opportunities to strengthen California's commitment to mental health promotion and the prevention of mental health needs. The Commission's work on school mental health recognizes the opportunity to work with education partners to improve mental health promotion opportunities, prevention and



early intervention. Through its strategic planning process the Commission identified the need focus attention on all Californians, including those who are served in the private sector.

Workplace Mental Health

Many employers are seeking ways to increase wellbeing in the workplace. In best case scenarios employers are supportive of their employees, offer settings that increase resiliency, and provide opportunities for people to feel fulfilled and thrive. Supportive work environments ideally include role clarity, positive change management practices, reasonable workloads, opportunities for career growth, and the absence of workplace hostility.

However, for many people the workplace exists as source of stress. Burnout at work is rampant and in turn can adversely affect family and marriage, and health. Stress is also connected to a wide variety of physical health problems, including heart disease and obesity. When the workplace is unsupportive, mental health needs becomes exacerbated.

Developing Voluntary Workplace Standards

In November of 2018, the Legislature directed the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission to develop voluntary standards for workplace mental health. The Commission is engaging employers and employees, subject matter experts, and others to develop standards that support employee wellbeing, reduce stigma, and increase awareness of mental health.

This project has multiple goals. While the legislation focused on development of standards for employers, the Commission anticipates many benefits of engaging stakeholders in discussions about workplace mental health. Goals for the workplace mental health project include:

- Research and disseminate information on the benefits of emphasizing workplace mental health (i.e. productivity, less absences, etc) and learn what additional research is needed;
- Research current practices in workplace mental health and prevention opportunities in the U.S. and abroad that meet the needs of employers and employees;
- Identify risk and protective factors for mental well-being in the workplace;
- Provide a framework to organizations for creating policies and processes to address mental health in the workplace;
- Assess the utility of developing a certification strategy to support the adoption of the voluntary standards for workplace mental health;
- Support public and private collaboration relative to workplace mental health initiatives;
- Explore incentives for public and private organizations to prioritize and implement mental healthcare approaches in the workplace.

Project Strategy

The Commission has engaged One Mind at Work, a non-profit focused on supporting workplace mental health and well-being, to assist with engaging a variety of businesses to inform this work. One Mind at Work has engaged a committed group of CEOs in an effort to transform how mental health is viewed and approached, how brain health and well-being in the workplace can be strengthened, how healthcare is purchased and provided under the new paradigm, and how establishing parity between physical and mental health through collaboration

To further understand the current state of workplace mental health practices in California, the Commission contract with One Mind at Work to interview a sample of employers and prepare a landscape analysis. This document will be used as discussion points during a series of public engagement activities facilitated by One Mind Work and hosted by the Commission.

The Commission also contracted with Carolyn Dewa, PhD from the University of California at Davis, to write a research brief the outlining a landscape and foundation for workplace mental health in California. The brief summarizes the challenges and opportunities for mental health at work.

The landscape analysis and background brief are intended to serve as a starting point, to lay the foundation, create a shared understanding of the problem, and offer possible paths forward to develop a framework or standards for workplace mental health.

To complement this research, the Commission will engage in at least three activities to inform this this project:

- ✓ Engage Stakeholders: The engagement strategy includes convening employers and employees, subject matter experts, and others to share information and strategies with the Commission.
- ✓ Research Best Practices and Emerging Opportunities: Review available literature, interview subject matter experts, and conduct original research as needed to determine the needs and solutions for workplace mental health.
- ✓ Explore Implementation Opportunities: Given that the standards will be voluntary, identifying ways to encourage and support implementation is important to ensure that the standards will benefit workers and employers.

The Commission will incorporate the knowledge and insight gained through these activities into recommendations for developing the future framework or voluntary standards for workplace mental health.