

# Workplace Mental Health In California

Summary of Findings

January 2021



## Project Background and Purpose

The Mental Health Services Act provides a framework for California’s mental health system and directs the development of strategies to reduce stigma and unemployment for Californians diagnosed with a mental illness or seeking mental health services. Subsequent legislation, California Senate Bill 1113 (Chapter 354, Statutes of 2018), directed the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission to create voluntary standards for employers that would promote mental health and wellness in the workplace.

The Commission’s Workplace Mental Health Project aims to reduce mental health stigma; increase public, employee, and employer awareness of the significance of mental health; and create avenues to treatment, support and recovery. Two core components of this project are (1) to develop a shared understanding of the challenges of and opportunities for improving behavioral health in the workplace and (2) to develop and promulgate a set of voluntary standards. Improving awareness of and attention to mental wellness by employers and employees in the competitive employment sector serves as a strategy to reduce stigma and discrimination, prevent the progression of mental health challenges, and improve the early recognition and appropriate treatment of mental health needs.

Shared understanding of challenges and opportunities is being developed through a robust stakeholder engagement process. The Commission has partnered with One Mind at Work, a global workplace mental health non-profit organization based in California to conduct that process. In May 2020, the Commission and One Mind at Work released a landscape analysis that described current trends in workplace culture, access to services, mental health literacy and stigma reduction efforts, among other areas. Following this landscape analysis, the Commission held a public convening on workplace mental health to validate the findings in the analysis. The event was held virtually in May 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, attracted nearly 300 participants and featured perspectives from both the private and public sectors. The subsequent phase of work involved interviews with key stakeholders to further examine the internal and external barriers that organizations of any size, industry or demographic face when developing and implementing a workplace mental health program.

## Contributions

This summary was developed from the insights shared in several one-on-one interviews held between October and December 2020 and a roundtable discussion conducted on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Interviewees and roundtable participants represented private sector employers, business groups on health, non-profits organizations and academic institutions.

We would like to thank the following individuals that contributed to this report through an interview or participation in the roundtable discussion in December:

- Gene Block, UCLA
- LuAnn Heinen, Business Group on Health
- Heather Holladay, Pacific Gas and Electric Company
- Emma Hoo, Pacific Business Group on Health
- Candace Jodice, CVS
- Anuja Khemka, The Steve Fund
- Hannah Lincecum, ReedSmith
- Stephen Liptrap, Morneau Shepell
- Lori Litel, United Parents
- Emily Mah-Nakanishi, CalHR
- Michelle Mitchell, CalHR
- Stephen Parker, Kearney

- Jennifer Posa, Johnson & Johnson
- Misty Rallis, Kearney
- Alex Schuman, Alexion
- Nick Taylor, Unmind
- Beth Theirer, BHS
- Michele Villados, CalHR
- Michael Weiner, EY

## Key Themes

**To drive long-term change, mental health needs to be ingrained in the values and culture of the organization – and that comes from leadership’s commitment to continuous improvement.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed many changes related to when and where work gets done and how teams interact – two elements that define workplace culture. In addition, the collective stress and anxiety of the pandemic has made mental health a much higher societal priority than it has been in the past. In 2020, many organizations reacted to the pandemic in ways that considered and protected employee mental health. However, long-term commitment to continuous improvement is necessary if employers are to achieve real results in a post-COVID world. Unfortunately, some organizations – even those that have adapted to the challenges of the pandemic – might retain elements of a workplace culture that is detrimental to employee mental health. For instance, unmanageable workloads might drive stress while stigma creates high barriers to taking personal time or discussing mental health issues with managers. Workplace leaders – including executive teams and managers – set the tone for an organization and bring brand values to life for employees. They have a crucial role in eliminating stigma around issues of mental health by sharing personal stories, whether they be about struggle with a mental health issue, burnout, or their own methods of maintaining work and life boundaries. Leaders can also signal organizational commitment and empower employees by framing mental health as an imperative for success.

*“Some organizations have a culture that naturally lends itself to the importance of brain health and mental health issues. Others might need to shift how they frame mental health and make it a material brand issue – not just a ‘nice to have.’” – Alex Schuman, Alexion*

*“A lot of times, leadership fails to act on the cultural change they are talking about. It can’t just be about not sending an email. When leaders take time off and delegate authority, they demonstrate that it’s not only okay to step away from work to prioritize your wellbeing but also that they trust their team. That can go a long way in helping to foster a better culture.” – Michele Villados, CalHR*

*“The message needs to be tailored and simple. For example – we encouraged meeting-less Decembers to give people some time back and make sure they are able to use the time how they need it. That’s one thing our organization did to let our employees know we understood the mental health implications of the pandemic and the tough year.” – Jennifer Posa, Johnson & Johnson*

*“There are cultural elements we can improve that can help prevent mental health crises. Having good leaders that champion programs and demonstrate best practices like turning off email on vacation, not sending emails after hours, actually stepping back – that goes a long way in preventing employee burnout.” - Heather Holladay, Pacific Gas and Electric Company*

*“Holistic wellbeing should drive workplace strategy. That means physical and mental health along with things like social connection and financial wellbeing. The best programs go beyond physical health and stress management.” - LuAnn Heinen, Business Group on Health*

**Employers have an opportunity to frame and promote mental health as a positive lever for personal and organizational productivity, performance, and success.**

For a workplace mental health program to be successful, employees need to do more than buy into the concept; they need to engage with resources and programs. Framing strong mental health as a driver of business results or a way for employees to excel professionally is highly compelling to workers and for front-line managers who are balancing competing priorities. Positioning mental health as a path to self-improvement rather than risk mitigation would also align with the model of physical health promotion – fitness challenges, for instance, often appeal to all employees in an organization, even those that are not at risk for physical health issues. Employers are uniquely positioned to help educate employees and provide resources to help them maximize performance and productivity through better mental health.

*“We have ‘mental health’ from the moment we’re born. Mental health is not just the things that are wrong with you – it also drives our creativity, productivity and emotional engagement. There should be a more aspirational model of mental health that illustrates this, along with the understanding that at any time, the environmental, social and physical factors around you have an impact.” Nick Taylor, Unmind*

*“First, an employer really needs to understand what mental health is and isn’t. It isn’t ‘us versus them’ – we all are somewhere on the mental health continuum and can fluctuate one way or another at any time.” – Misty Rallis, Kearney*

**Employers who work to reduce stigma, social prejudice and discrimination build robust organizations.**

Employers are positioned to encourage help-seeking by individual employees by promoting education that allows them to be able to recognize and accept that they are experiencing a mental health challenge and access to support services that can help. Many industries face a continuing obstacle in instances where discrimination and negative consequences occur in tandem with accessing support, such as positions where help-seeking can limit duties or responsibilities. Other industries facing high levels of stigma may experience under-utilization of available services, risking an escalation of mental health challenges. Overwhelmingly, employers are invested in employee utilization of available support, even where it is limited or has significant gaps.

Increasingly, employers are understanding the urgent need to support employees that have experienced trauma, as a result of racial or societal issues or as an inherent impact of the profession itself – such as in

healthcare or law enforcement. Employers need to be particularly thoughtful in these areas to ensure that the communication and support provided help individuals heal and feel psychologically safe in the workplace.

*“It can be really difficult to nurture the multi-cultural pipeline in your workplace, but it is really important. Providing resources, safe spaces and workshops for LatinX, Black and other sub-sets of your workforce that may be experiencing unique stress or trauma from the pandemic or other events going on is a crucial first step.” – Anuja Khemka, The Steve Fund*

*“Lack of diversity among providers is a huge issue. Generally, in mental health, there is a dearth of measures that are commonly used so we are not in a place where we have a complete picture of, for instance, a patient’s experience with a certain provider from the lens of race or ethnicity. There’s a lot of work to be done to measure outcomes and capture issues of race and ethnicity the same way we do for gender and age.” – Emma Hoo, Pacific Business Group on Health*

*“We are working diligently to address the needs of a diverse workplace. We’ve created a very active EAP that offers different levels of service based on our employee’s needs – for instance the Fire Department program may be different than the Department of Corrections. We also offer a peer-to-peer program to encourage open dialogue between our employees.” - Michelle Mitchell, CalHR*

### **Managers are the key to a proactive, preventative approach.**

Managers have the opportunity – and responsibility – to be ‘first responders’ to mental health issues in the workplace, since they are often the first to observe signs of anxiety, depression, insomnia, or any number of other mental health issues. They have a key role in reducing risk factors and considering mechanisms for prevention – for instance, balancing workloads and expectations; using preferred modes of communication that align with cognitive differences; and flagging serious issues that might need professional care. However, it is crucial that – while recognizing the role that frontline managers have in bringing to life a proactive, preventative approach to workplace mental health – employers do not put undue burden on managers. Two key tactics prove to be effective in achieving this:

- **Manager training and resources:** Managers must be equipped with the resources and the information needed to address situations as they arise and make decisions that do not threaten the employee. Role-playing scenarios can help managers understand the solutions available to them so that they do not feel pressured to act as workplace ‘therapists.’ As an alternative to referring an employee to Human Resources, which can be stigmatizing, some organizations work with external organizations that provide third-party support to managers.
- **Peer support:** Internal peer support groups can be very effective in empowering and educating managers. A network of peers trained in mental health means that a manager can ‘safely’ disclose a situation and determine the best response.

*“Leading edge organizations do a really good job recognizing that frontline managers need support and put in place a system that equips and educates managers with resources to handle a wide range of situations. A manager does not want to bring a problem to his or her boss without a solution and having*

*a network of trusted peers to reach out to for support and advice in how to address mental health issues they observe within their team is a great way to put prevention into practice.” – Stephen Liptrap, CEO, Morneau Shepell*

*“Our mental health initiative is unique – we characterize it as a task force. They are made up of all different areas of the law firm – including different levels and departments. They partner with other departments and existing programs and are able to plug in and out easy and nimbly – for managers, that means that support is always close by.” – Hannah Lincecum, ReedSmith*

### **Employees struggle to access functional, coordinated care even if behavioral healthcare is included in their employers’ health plans.**

For many employers, a first step in improving access to mental healthcare is offering a health plan that includes benefits for behavioral healthcare. However, employers face numerous internal and external barriers when it comes to ensuring that employees are actually able to receive the care that is available to them. More coordination is needed between employers, payers, vendors and/or providers to overcome these challenges:

- **Low provider availability:** Employees might be able to seek care from a long list of in-network providers, but the actual appointment availability of those providers is extremely limited. Services exist to do the work of validating provider availability within, for example, a two-week timeframe, but they are expensive – sometimes prohibitively so for a small- to mid-size organization.
- **Variability of quality:** Not all providers use recognized, effective, evidence-backed mental health techniques, so quality can vary widely even within one plan. Currently there is no method to ensure the effectiveness or quality of mental healthcare; employers can vet plans, but data tends to be based on small data sets that are not robust enough to indicate if employees received timely, affordable care that led to positive outcomes.
- **Lack of benchmarking among employers:** Many employers are working on solutions to the same access problems, and more sharing of resources, benchmarks, and standards of care in different regions or countries would help provide a “North Star” for organizations that might not know where to start. In a large global organization, internal benchmarking would help achieve a coordinated response across markets.

*“There are two things that would help my organization achieve its goals in workplace mental health. The first is data – understanding the trends in society, the benchmarks, how my organization compares to others. The second is the ability to connect with people who run other organizations, to be able to share what works and what doesn’t. There is a tremendous amount of value in sharing best practices.” – Stephen Liptrap, CEO, Morneau Shepell*

**The most effective workplace interventions meet employees where they are.**

Many organizations take a “point solution” approach to workplace mental health, investing in specific Employee Assistant Programs, digital tools or other services targeted at reducing depression or anxiety, for instance. This approach tends to offer a fixed menu of options which – even if robust – may not serve the diverse and ever-changing needs of a large, multi-generational or geographically disparate workforce. Instead, employers should consider how they can integrate mental health interventions in ways that engage the employee in collaborative solutions and evolve with needs. Early and effective interventions start with listening to employees and depend largely on the system of ‘triage’ that provides preventative care or manages the vast majority of issues when they are nascent. If needed the system is capable of “scaling up” support for more serious mental health challenges, and in the rarest and most extreme cases is structured to respond to a crisis situation. There should also be careful consideration of return-to-work policies following a mental health challenge to support those in recovery.

Successful interventions increasingly depend on technological innovation. Common examples of early and effective interventions and innovative practices that meet employees where they are include:

- **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):** Employee-led groups that target specific experiences – such as grief and loss or trauma – can go a long way in meeting the mental health needs of employees, connecting them to the right resources and nurturing leaders and mental health champions from within. ERGs can also take the form of safe spaces for employees from LGBTQ, Black, Indigenous, LatinX or other marginalized communities to help those individuals feel emotionally and psychologically secure at their place of work.
- **Digital tools and apps:** The market for digital mental health tools and apps has expanded dramatically in recent years, and there are a multitude of options for virtual therapy, meditation, mindfulness, sleep, and more. Apps can be incredibly effective in targeting specific needs and many employers are currently – or have already – invested significant resources to test and research which tool best serves the needs of their workforce.
- **Integrated workplace mental health platform:** The need for a full service, integrated workplace mental health platform is pronounced among employers. However, there are few tools available that can display a full range of mental health resources in way that is accessible and intuitive to all employees. For example, this could be imagined as a hub where employees can learn about the organization’s Employee Resource Groups; access benefits information or schedule an appointment with a therapist; view a personalized feed of information or even interact in real time with a representative or ‘bot’ that can direct the employee to the right information or third-party support depending on the need. Platforms that help gather data on performance, absence and other metrics can help employees self-monitor their own fluctuating mental health needs.

*“We have rolled out a few behavioral health apps and while utilization is not where we thought it would be, those that have used them report that they are extremely effective. For some people, it’s exactly what they want – a light-touch resource that helps them build good habits. Others, though, want to connect with a therapist and go deeper. It just depends on what they need.” – Michael Weiner, EY*

*“The fact is everyone is at risk for burnout. Employers need to be proactive and create resource-rich environments. We do a weekly check-in for mental health with our team – sometimes it’s as simple as a moment of gratitude or focus on breathing. We have also created support groups for those that might be at higher risk, such as those isolating alone, parents, people giving care, or people that might be grieving.” – Beth Theirer, BHS*

### **Continuous evaluation lays the foundation for future success.**

The employers that have experienced the most success in developing and implementing workplace mental health programs and initiatives put processes of continuous evaluation in place. Evaluation looks different across organizations depending on priorities, size and culture. For example, employers with large workforces and a well-resourced HR team might be gathering and analyzing large amounts of data to understand EAP utilization. Others might be more interested in defining Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for managers to help them maintain awareness of their team’s mental health and take action to improve it. Lastly, organizations are increasingly turning to technology to uncover deeper insights about employee behavior to inform future phases of programming or services.

*“We do a lot of brainstorming with our EAP vendors. We have over 1000 behavioral and clinical resources we can tap into, and CVS represents almost every demographic, so we work hard to understand use cases. For example, what are some of the scenarios that would lead an employee to seek and utilize these resources? What are the social determinants of health that might be a factor – for example, education level or whether they live in an urban or rural setting?” – Candace Jodice, CVS*

*“Every project team has a barometer, which looks a bit different across each office, but functions as a regular ‘pressure release’ for issues that might impact mental health. It helps managers keep a finger on the pulse of the mental wellbeing of their team and lends credibility if an intervention or change in management style is needed since we’re collecting that data. For example, highs and lows are understandable, but if the barometer is trending down after a several weeks, it helps flag deeper issues.”  
- Stephen Parker, Kearney*

*“Telehealth has created a great opportunity for employers. The use of smart technology provides individuals the opportunity to continuously monitor their patterns of sleep, social media activity, locomotive activity, etc. It’s a great way to catch issues before they get worse.” - Gene Block, UCLA*



## About the Commission and One Mind at Work

### Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission

The Commission works through partnerships to catalyze transformational changes across service systems so that everyone who needs mental health care has access to and receives effective and culturally competent care in California.

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### One Mind at Work

One Mind at Work is a non-profit focused on the development and implementation of a gold standard for workplace mental health and well-being. One Mind at Work believes that a committed group of business leaders can transform the way we view and approach mental health, brain fitness and well-being in the workplace, how healthcare is purchased and provided under the new paradigm, and how we can gain equity, collaboration and parity between physical and mental health.

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