

Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission
Workplace Mental Health Project Roundtable Summary
December 17, 2020 – 9am-10:30am PST

Background:

In 2020, employers have faced huge challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic which has created financial instability and layoffs, long stretches of remote work and disconnectedness, and continued uncertainty. Additionally, widespread social unrest across the country during the summer brought racial inequity and consequently, workplace diversity, to the forefront. For all of these reasons, workplace mental health is perhaps more of a priority for employers than ever before. The Commission partnered with One Mind at Work, a global workplace mental health non-profit based in California, to develop a landscape analysis uncovering 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 help validate the findings in the report. 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 sector.

During the latter half of 2020, the Commission and One Mind at Work conducted a series of interviews and a roundtable discussion to gather deeper insights to advance the development of the framework. The December 17th, 2020 roundtable convened over 20 California based employers from a variety of different industries, sizes, and employee demographics.

Participants included:

- Gene Block, UCLA
- Keyondria Bunch, PhD, Commissioner, Workplace Mental Health Subcommittee Chair
- LuAnn Heinen, Business Group on Health
- Heather Holladay, Pacific Gas and Electric Company
- Drew Holzapfel, One Mind at Work
- Emma Hoo, Pacific Business Group on Health
- Anuja Khemka, The Steve Fund
- Hannah Lincecum, ReedSmith
- Lori Litel, United Parents
- Emily Mah-Nakanishi, CalHR
- Michelle Mitchell, CalHR
- Jennifer Posa, Johnson & Johnson
- Katy Riddick, One Mind at Work
- Nick Taylor, Unmind
- Beth Theierer, BHS
- Michele Villados, CalHR
- Michael Weiner, EY

Participants shared specific strategies to support workplace mental health, addressed internal and external barriers that interfere with workplace mental health initiatives and pointed out areas of opportunity. Outlined below is a summary of the discussion.

Key Discussion Topics:

What characterizes a proactive employer approach to mental health programs, especially when it comes to preventative care? How is it integrated within the larger employee wellness initiatives?

It was evident during the roundtable that many employers have taken tangible action to respond to the dramatic change brought on by COVID-19. To help employees navigate the new remote work environment, many employers have concentrated extra effort on enforcing work boundaries and allowing for flexible work schedules outside of the typical “9 to 5” schedule. However, participants commented that while this is a positive change, it must be reinforced by leaders as a cultural and organizational value.

A strong discussion took place around the need to shift the narrative around mental health and to position employee mental health as an engine for an organization in terms of productivity and creativity, rather than an inherent risk. In many ways, resilience is the key to achieving this outcome, as resilient employees are able to maintain good mental health through the many adverse events that can take place in their personal or professional lives or in the external environment, as we saw in 2020.

Quotes:

“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

“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

“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

“We need to understand that employees don’t live in a vacuum. We offer free and immediate assistance to counseling sessions. Many employees have taken advantage of this. From a standpoint of leadership, if your employees are going through a hard time, the way that leaders respond is really important to creating a compassionate and open work environment.” - Lori Litel, United Parents

“Our mental health initiative is unique. We have a task force that partners with different departments in our organization and can successfully provide resources and support to our employees.” - Hannah Lincecum, ReedSmith

How are quality workplace mental health programs designed to accommodate the diverse needs of employee populations (front-line workers vs administrative staff, generational differences, urban vs rural settings, etc.)?

For large employers in particular, accommodating diverse needs starts with understanding the key segments of the workforce and identifying their unique needs. Once that is accomplished, delivery of information and resources is key – they need to be comprehensive and accessible. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) can serve this purpose, if they are active and offer appropriate levels of service for each segment of the workforce.

Currently, many individuals are experiencing a mental health need for the first time, so some employers remarked at the need to educate their workforce to help employees self-monitor themselves and seek the care they need, when they need it. Additionally, some employers mentioned building a culture within their organization that allows people to talk openly and freely about their mental health as a first – and crucial – step to serving the needs of their employees. If such a culture is not in place, it can act as a barrier to implementation of programs and stall progress.

Quotes:

“Mental wellbeing is a priority for us. We need to provide for all our employee’s needs. We offer tailored messaging and programs that address each of our employee segments. Our leaders know they have different programs that can support their employee’s diverse needs.” - Jennifer Posa, Johnson & Johnson

“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

“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

Discrimination in the workplace – due to stigma, race or sexual orientation/gender identity – works against the goal of mental wellness for all employees. How can employers effectively address discrimination through their mental health program?

Attendees presented two interrelated methods of addressing discrimination in the workplace: the creation of safe spaces for employees to share experiences with peers or members of their own

community, and a platform for storytelling. Encouraging employees to share stories of vulnerability is an extremely effective way to combat stigma, but for employees that represent historically marginalized groups, these efforts can fall flat if they do not feel represented by the leaders or employees sharing those stories. A dual focus that provides both private spaces and more 'public' platforms ensures that all employees have a space where they can bring their full identity to work; it also erodes stigma around seeking treatment, which can improve overall utilization of benefits.

Quotes:

"It is really hard to nurture the multi-cultural pipeline. The Steve Fund helps to provide resources and safe spaces. We offer workshops with LatinX and black employees, targeting subsets in your company that might be reacting to stress and the pandemic." - Anuja Khemka, The Steve Fund

"We are talking a lot about stigma and treatment-seeking. We need everyone to have a place to safely talk." – Michele Villados, CalHR

How has COVID-19 changed the workplace and how have those changes affected employee mental health?

COVID-19 has brought workplace mental health to the forefront; this was discussed throughout the roundtable. It is clear that mental health has become much more of a societal priority than it has been in the past, and while there are many reasons to believe that this trend is helping to reduce stigma, at the same time, the constant uncertainty and anxiety of living and working through a global pandemic is leading to high levels of stress and burnout. Employers discussed this tradeoff and pointed to leaders as the key to preventing work stress and burnout.

Quotes:

"With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic we're seeing the barrier between work and home dissolve. We must implement programs that educate our employees on wellness practices to help foster this separation." - Keyondria Bunch, PhD, Workplace Mental Health Subcommittee Chair

"The biggest challenge is the lack of separation in this work from home environment. Leaders need to show how they are balancing work and setting boundaries." - Emily Mah-Nakanishi, CalHR

"We must build and promote resilience in our workplace culture. This means we must rise above the adversity that COVID-19 presents and find ways to thrive and protect our employees against harm." - Nick Taylor, Unmind

What are best practices in supporting employees in high stress working conditions who are at risk for burnout?

Leaders bring organizational values to life, and if leaders set the tone by taking time off, talking about their own vulnerability or methods of coping with stress, or balancing family with work, it signals

‘permission’ for other employees to do the same, which makes a huge difference in how employees set their own boundaries and preserve their mental and emotional health during difficult times.

Quotes:

“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

“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

“We’ve had some amazing leader communications where the executives talk about what they are doing. We integrate these themes into our executive communications. For example, our CHRO uses journaling to process what’s happening shared that with the company.” - Jennifer Posa, Johnson & Johnson

How would you characterize the role telehealth plays in workplace mental health?

Attendees affirmed a major theme of the past year – that employers are augmenting digital and telehealth offerings for employees. In part, this is due to the impact of COVID-19 and the decreased access to in-person care. It also is a natural progression as the digital health marketplace expands, devices such as smartphones and wearables have evolved, and digital mental health tools prove to be very effective interventions for some individuals.

Participants did raise a few caveats to these positive developments. First, employers must often be creative in promoting these solutions, such as virtual counseling and wellness apps, to drive utilization. Second, not all digital solutions are created equal, and many are not evidence-based interventions. There is a massive opportunity in increasing the evidence base behind these digital solutions, so that employers can confidently provide them to employees.

Quotes:

“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

“We have a few behavioral health related apps that we have rolled out. They have underperformed in terms of the utilization... but those that are using have reported that they are very effective. For some

people, these apps are exactly what they want. Others may want to connect with a therapist. It all depends on the employee's needs.” - Michael Weiner, EY

*“Apps are like gym memberships. Having the membership doesn't necessarily get you to the gym; but if you pair that with a trainer to incentivize you and hold you accountable, you can get really good results.”
– Heather Holladay, PG&E*

How do you ensure employees are getting the quality care they deserve? Are there resources, tools, or types of support that you wish you had in order to provide quality care?

The most significant barrier cited in the roundtable is the lack of coordination between provider, payer and employer. Many participants remarked that the providers that are technically “available” to employees might not have appointment availability for weeks. Similarly there are many providers that are not using evidence-based mental health techniques. Cost is also a high barrier for employees seeking care, as many mental healthcare providers do not take insurance and are not incentivized to do so; attendees cited high co-pays were cited as problematic for low-earning employees. Paid mental health leave was also raised as an important need – this would allow people to take leave, while retaining their benefits, and seek treatment.

Quotes:

“There are many flaws in the system that exists currently. The framework by which we categorize mental health is not right. The research that has been done has limitations in its ability to be applied to different types of populations. The assessment tools used to triage people to care are limited. There are so many barriers to good health outcomes.” - Nick Taylor, Unmind

“We need better covering of co-pays for mental health treatment. With high deductible health plans, folks can't afford to pay their co-pays. Money should never be a barrier for care” - Beth Theirer, BHS

“I am a huge advocate for paid mental health leave. It's tough, budgets are tight. Not just for the state of California, but in general. If someone needs time to seek treatment and move out from a really difficult phase, they should be able to stay hired, retain their benefits and return to being a productive employee and member of the community.” - Michele Villados, CalHR

Do employers have enough visibility into provider networks?

Lack of visibility into the nuances of health plans makes it difficult for even the most diligent employer to choose a plan that best serves employees. Variability in EAPs means a “hit or miss” level of quality among vendors, and often, data is not detailed enough to properly evaluate them. For example, one may be able to view the number of sessions a patient attended, but not whether or not the patient successfully recovered. While there is no reliable, standardized way for employers to vet plans for these types of issues, review committees can help.

Quotes:

“As an employer, try to look at the onboarding process of health plans, and what tools they use. Review committees can be very helpful.” Beth Theirer, BHS

“Employers need agreed-upon metrics in order to understand what plans are truly effective.” – Mike Weiner, EY