

Increasing Access to Mental Wellness Workplace Supports

Issue

There is a need for integrated, effective, and efficient mental wellness support in the workplace for Alberta businesses. Mental health issues and concerns continue to cost businesses and the economy in both financial and human terms. Traditional solutions are not addressing the increasing need, and new and innovative approaches are needed to assist in dealing with the acceleration of mental health issues.

Background

Individuals who are experiencing mental health issues are employees, employers and business owners. When individuals are dealing with personal stress, trauma or loss, they are also trying to contribute and participate in the workplace.

According to the TELUS Mental Health Index,¹ 33 percent of workers have a high mental health risk; 43 percent have a moderate mental health risk. According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, psychological health problems are costing the Canadian economy around \$51 billion per year, \$20 billion of which results from work-related causes². About 30 percent of short- and long-term disability claims in Canada are attributed to mental health problems and illnesses.³ In 2011, mental health problems and illnesses among working adults in Canada cost employers more than \$6 billion in lost productivity from absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover.

One in every five Canadians experiences a mental health problem or illness within a given year. This figure equates to 20% of the Canadian population, approximately 7.1 million individuals, or the population of the 15 largest Canadian cities combined. We also know that one in two Canadians under the age of 40 will experience a mental health problem or illness by the time they turn 40 years of age. These numbers also directly impact the workplace, as every week, 500,000 Canadians are unable to work due to mental health problems or illnesses.⁴

Currently, workplace mental health is mainly the responsibility of business owners who may or may not be equipped or have the resources to support their employees. The government can and should help employers and employees access effective mental health therapies and support.

Considering the economic loss that untreated mental health issues like absenteeism and presenteeism cost the economy, in addition to long-term health impacts on the economy, an investment in mental health treatment, access and support would provide a significant return on the investment of public dollars allowing the individual to be more present and focused on their

¹ Telus Mental Health Index, December 2023: https://go.telushealth.com/hubfs/MHI%202023/Canada_MHI_December_English.pdf

² Mental Health Commission of Canada: Envisioning the future of workplace mental health: <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/blog-posts/50927-envisioning-the-future-of-workplace-mental-health/>

³ Mental Health Commission: <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/what-we-do/workplace/>

⁴ Morneau Shepell: *Mental Health in the workplace*: https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/drupal/2018-06/Monreau_White_Paper_Report_Eng.pdf

work, resulting in greater productivity for the business, the economy and reducing long-term health care costs.

The Government has invested in workforce development and training through programs like the Canada-Alberta Jobs Grant Program, realizing that an investment in an employee will benefit the individual, the employer and the larger economy. Additionally, the provincial Government has recognized the importance of addressing mental health and addiction by creating a dedicated Ministry and including it as one of four specialized areas in the new Health Care system.

The Government of Alberta has also provided more services through Alberta Counselling. However, many programs are reliant on someone reaching out for mental health treatment. An Ipsos study in 2021 showed that more than half (54%) of those currently living with mental health issues say they haven't sought medical support, whether in the form of counselling, psychological support, medication, or something else. The survey points to some important barriers – like affordability and stigma – preventing many from seeking the help they need.¹ In addition, mental health support is not a one-size-fits-all solution, and varied support and flexibility in programs are often limited by benefit programs or existing services such as those through Alberta Counselling or 211 referral services.

Using a proven model like the Canada-Alberta Jobs Grant Program and creating an Alberta Workplace Wellness Grant would allow these recognized benefits of workplace training and addressing mental health and addiction to be combined into a viable workplace solution. It would assist employers in finding financial support and customize mental health support for their employees. A critical feature should also ensure that owners, self-employed, and their families can access the program.

The limitations within the current Canada-Alberta job grant create unintended restrictions for wellness training and programs by limiting the hours to a minimum of 21 hours and limiting eligibility for the program. Numerous reports point to the impacts of mental health on businesses, including entrepreneurs and business owners. Business owners must also address their own mental wellness to support their workforce.

If a more flexible program could be implemented through a Workplace Wellness Grant, local health providers and entrepreneurs could provide solutions and support within the workplace and community. Building a wellness network with ties within the community could create a trusted and preventative support system that could identify individuals needing more intensive mental health therapy and intervention and provide support closer to home, allowing for variable hours of support, training, and mental health resources.

As prevention can be the first line of defence, identifying and managing stress factors, promoting psychological safety, and strengthening resilience among employees is an important step. Allowing employers to offer mental health training to equip their teams and leaders with the knowledge to recognize signs of distress, report concerns, and have the mental health resources to provide within the workplace can create a culture where mental well-being is addressed proactively and before issues worsen.

We also recognize that for businesses to become invested in mental health support for themselves and their employees, there must be a demonstrable benefit. In a study conducted by Deloitte, the median yearly ROI on mental health programs was CA\$1.62 among seven companies that

¹ Ipsos: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/six-in-ten-canadians-currently-experiencing-mental-health-issues-but-more-than-half-havent-sought-treatment>

provided at least three years' worth of data. For three or more years, companies whose programs had been in place had a median yearly ROI of CA\$2.18. Programs are more likely to deliver greater returns as they mature rather than yield immediate financial benefits. Indeed, achieving positive ROI can take three or more years.¹

Mental health solutions will take time to establish; however, programs in the workplace help create a culture within participating companies that values employees' overall well-being and results in employees becoming more productive and dedicated to their workplace.

Tracking the success of support initiatives should be an essential part of mental health initiatives. Employers can measure increased productivity and worker retention. Healthcare providers can track increased referrals as a preventative treatment and not during or after a mental health crisis has occurred. The government can gauge the popularity and uptake of wellness grant funding and an increase in overall economic productivity.

Improving individual mental health will take a collective effort. Health professionals, educators, the business community and all levels of government must come together to tackle this complex issue. However, while the task of addressing this challenge may seem daunting, the cost of inaction and not harnessing our efforts to effect change and improve the mental health of our communities is one we cannot afford.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Implement an Alberta Workplace Wellness Grant to provide at least two-thirds of funding for mental health and wellness services for employees, employers, owners and those who are self-employed with the minimum time eligibility requirement being set to no greater than six hours; and,
2. Support community-led, collaborative, and entrepreneurial approaches for service delivery and psycho-social education to address early detection, prevention and treatment to avoid duplication and reduce service delivery costs, as well as increase the understanding and importance of developing a system of wellness.

¹ Deloitte Insights: The ROI in workplace mental health programs: Good for people, good for business