



# IMPROVING WORKER WELL-BEING DURING COVID-19: CREATING A POSITIVE AND SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE FOR EMPLOYEES

Protecting employees from the immediate health and safety risks of the COVID-19 pandemic can also help to alleviate stressors that have the potential to impact workers' mental health and well-being. The LHSFNA recommends that employers seeking to support worker well-being first review and implement the following LHSFNA guidance and programs:

- *Conducting Workplace COVID-19 Screenings and Assessments*
- *COVID-19 Workplace Safety & Health Program*
- *Sample Social Distancing Protocol for Construction Jobsites*

With these programs in place, employers can focus on implementing a robust worker well-being program that provides education and supports worker resilience by addressing mental health impacts such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance use disorder, which can all be created or worsened by circumstances associated with the coronavirus.

## Elements of a Comprehensive Worker Well-Being Program

The LHSFNA recommends employers take the following steps to meet the needs of workers:

### 1. Communicate clearly and frequently with employees before, during and after the transition back to work.

**Why it supports worker well-being:** Supportive and informative communication from senior leaders can be especially important in helping employees deal with the stress and anxiety that accompanies new routines and demands. Despite communities and businesses reopening, the COVID-19 outbreak is far from over. Good communication and support will help employees trying to find some sense of normalcy during the various phases of reopening.

### 2. Provide information and education related to mental and emotional well-being.

**Why it supports worker well-being:** Many employees don't feel comfortable speaking openly about their mental health struggles. Mental health and substance abuse disorders have historically been taboo subjects both in the workplace and in society.

Discussing and distributing information related to mental health shows support for these issues and helps reduce stigma. Anxiety, depression, substance abuse and suicide are among the most pressing mental health topics in today's workplace – they were before the coronavirus and will be more so as we move forward. Americans and Canadians are experiencing an increase in anxiety and depression due to the coronavirus pandemic.

### 3. Provide available employee assistance program (EAP) or member assistance program (MAP) information and community resource information.

**Why it supports worker well-being:** Studies following other pandemics and natural disasters show that up to 50 percent of people may experience anxiety, depression and some post-traumatic stress symptoms. In addition, addiction experts nationwide believe the multiple stressors caused by the coronavirus pandemic increase the likelihood for relapse, overdose and increased drug and alcohol use among people struggling to cope or in recovery.

EAPs and MAPs provide support, resiliency-building and coping strategies to people who need more formal treatment because of issues like depression and substance use.

#### **4. Implement critical incident stress management services (CISM) through the EAP or the LHSFNA if an employee passes away due to COVID-19 or after a jobsite critical incident.**

*Why it supports worker well-being:* A critical incident is a sudden, unexpected event – usually occurring at the workplace – that results in a serious injury or fatality. Having a trained counselor visit the worksite and provide assistance and support to those who witnessed or may otherwise be affected by the incident is important. This type of support helps workers and others recognize and cope with the emotions traumatic events can produce.

Implementing CISM services is another opportunity for employers to support mental health and show that a serious injury, death or other traumatic event is taken seriously. Showing empathy, support and genuine care and concern for employees can be very powerful in helping employees move on from traumatic events.

#### **5. Provide materials on bereavement, loss and grief to help employees cope with the loss of co-workers, family members or loved ones.**

*Why it supports worker well-being:* Materials on bereavement, loss and grief can help people understand their emotions and cope after a loss. Grief is always difficult, but the social distancing requirements of COVID-19 and the limits on social gatherings have fundamentally changed how we grieve. Without the ability to formally say goodbye to a loved one at their bedside or mourn at a funeral or memorial service, people may feel a sense of uncertain or delayed grief.

### **Assess Current Programs and Resources, Identify Gaps and Implement Changes**

Employers should begin by assessing existing worker well-being programs and resources in the workplace and identifying how these offerings could be improved or expanded based on the goals of the organization. The following sections can aid in this assessment process and provide actionable steps to strengthen the effectiveness of existing programs and resources and implement new offerings.

#### **1. Communicate clearly and frequently with employees before, during and after the transition back to work/jobsites.**

Assess current communication with workers for the following:

- What communications are necessary? To whom?
- What role will senior leadership play in communication?
- Are there opportunities for joint labor/management messages?
- What method(s) of communication should be used?
- What are your main messages for various audiences?

Take steps to improve offerings and address gaps:

- Show management's understanding of what workers have experienced and will continue to experience.
- Keep communications clear, brief and to the point.
- Ensure information is up-to-date.
- Allow workers to ask questions.

#### **2. Provide information and education related to mental and emotional well-being.**

Assess how mental and emotional well-being is currently addressed in your workplace:

- Is mental health included in safety programs or wellness promotion programs?
- Is mental health considered in performance management?
- Are steps being taken to address and reduce stigma in the workplace?
- Do policies (e.g., attendance, performance, conduct, drug and alcohol testing) prohibit an employee dealing with a personal or mental health crisis from seeking assistance?

Take steps to improve offerings and address gaps:

- Include mental health and suicide prevention topics in toolbox talks and company news; hang up posters.
- During safety talks, promote a culture that normalizes seeking support and reassure employees they can get help for any kind of problem.
- Incorporate mental health and substance abuse awareness in annual health and safety training.
- Promote peer support and use buddy systems as appropriate.
- Take the pledge to STAND Up for suicide prevention.

### **3. Provide available employee assistance program (EAP) or member assistance program (MAP) information to support workers in addressing their mental health.**

Assess how EAPs or MAPs are currently addressed in your workplace:

- Do you have an EAP or other resources available for employees dealing with personal struggles or crises?
  - Have you confirmed the availability of mental health services within your EAP and how employees access them?
  - Does your EAP provide training to employees on mental health and coping topics?
  - Can the EAP send someone to the jobsite to provide training on a regular basis?
- Do you have support systems in place for employees who are experiencing overwhelming life challenges?
- Is there a peer support network through the company or union?
- Are employees aware of all resources available to them and how to access them?

Take steps to improve offerings and address gaps:

- Work with LIUNA Local Unions regarding mental health benefits provided through health and welfare funds, including EAP/MAP benefits.
- Contact your company's health plan to learn what they are offering to support plan members.
- Provide all EAP/MAP and health benefit information to workers; include relevant website links and phone numbers for both the EAP and health plan.
- Include information on mental health benefits during employee orientation and at annual meetings or trainings.
- Provide community resource information for employees and their family members. At a minimum, provide the following:
  - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
  - Crisis Text Line: Text "HELP" to 741741
  - Disaster Distress Helpline 1-800-985-5990 or text "TalkWithUs" to 66746

### **4. Develop a plan for coordination of critical incident stress management services through the EAP or the LHSFNA if an employee passes away due to COVID-19 or after a jobsite critical incident.**

Assess how critical incident management is currently addressed in your workplace:

- Do you have a critical incident debriefing plan in place?
- Does your debriefing plan allow workers to:
  - Verbalize distress
  - Form appropriate concepts about stress reactions before false interpretations of the experience are formed
  - Return to normal functioning

Take steps to improve offerings and address gaps:

- Provide impacted workers with educational information about their possible responses to the incident and how to respond and cope.
- The LHSFNA's Health Promotion Division can help assess available resources and arrange critical incident services provided by trained specialists. Additional remote critical incident response services are available when social distancing is difficult to maintain.

**5. Provide materials on traumatic stress, bereavement and loss and grief to help employees cope with the loss of co-workers, family members or loved ones.**

Assess how bereavement, loss and grief are currently addressed in your workplace:

- Do you consider the psychological well-being of employees in the wake of trauma?
- Do you raise awareness about the impact of incidents and encourage self-care?
- Do you currently provide educational materials or resources to workers when a coworker dies?
- Do materials include information about normalizing reactions to critical incidents, dealing with loss and grief and steps people can take to deal with difficult times?

Take steps to improve offerings and address gaps:

- Provide the following LHSFNA handouts (available in English and Spanish):
  - *Reactions to Trauma Stress*
  - *Managing Trauma Stress*
  - *Understanding and Coping with Critical Incident Stress*
  - *Reactions to Loss and Death*
  - *Things That Are Helpful During Times of Grief*
  - *COVID-19 & Grief*