

WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY

Burlington Chamber of Commerce & Ajax-Pickering Board of Trade

Issue

Mental illness in the workplace is having a severe impact on Canada and Ontario's productivity and, if the problem is left unabated, that impact will only worsen. The provincial government has a key role to play in mitigating the cost that mental illness levels on businesses.

Background

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, the total economic cost arising from mental health problems and illnesses is at least \$50 billion per year. Health care, social services and income support costs make up the biggest proportion of these costs, but the costs to business are also staggering: Canadian businesses experience \$6.4 billion in lost productivity (from absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover) every year. If left unabated, the cost to business will increase to \$16.0 billion by 2041.

One in four Canadians suffers a mental illness every year, often in the form of depression and/or anxiety. Currently, mental health claims (especially depression) have overtaken cardiovascular disease as the fastest growing category of disability costs. Today in Canada disability represents 4% to 12% of payroll costs.

Employee mental ill-health leads to absenteeism, decreased productivity and quality of work issues, which in turn impact business success. This is critical at a time when brain-based cognitive skills are required to provide competitive advantage locally and globally.

Health conscious workplaces can promote early diagnosis and reduce the impact of mental health problems, mental illness, and addictions. If a person receives effective treatment in the first few months of their illness, the duration, frequency, and severity of symptoms will be reduced. In addition, early and effective treatment increases the chances of the individual making a full recovery. When short-term disability becomes long-term, there is a lesser chance that the person will be able to return to previous levels of proficiency.

At one time a similar crisis existed with workplace physical safety. Measurement and tracking of incidence rates, coupled with public awareness, played a strategic role in turning the tide – proving the adage that 'what you measure is what you get'. The same can be true of workplace mental health.

Recommendations

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Develop a comprehensive workplace mental health strategy that emphasizes mental health treatment and rehabilitation for employees. The strategy must not be prescriptive or place an additional burden on businesses but should instead be focused on improving mental health awareness.
2. Establish metrics that track the incidence of employee disability due to mental disorders.
3. Broaden the focus of regional mental health centres to include workplace mental health issues enabling them to refer to agencies or for-profit local providers to treat employees of local workplaces by providing workplace-oriented programs.
4. Create a public education and awareness campaign on the social and economic value of workplace mental health and the availability of community workplace-oriented resources.
5. Ensure that what, in the past, has been referred to as mental illness, be termed a mental health challenge.

Estimated Financial Impact to the Province

Entail a small cost to government (less than \$10M)