

HOW ASSOCIATIONS CAN PROMOTE WORKER WELLBEING & BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

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The coronavirus pandemic has caused economic uncertainty, forced solitude, and created worries about contracting the virus, which have increased stress levels in most adults.

But even before the pandemic, construction workers were particularly susceptible to mental health issues and suicide. More construction workers die by suicide each day than all workplace-related fatalities combined with a rate of 43.5 suicides per 100,000 workers, second only to the mining and oil/gas extraction industry.

Following a multi-year initiative to combat opioid misuse in home building, the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) is launching a new effort focused on member mental wellbeing. Recent research suggests that industry associations have been overlooked as an agent for change, and that they have a role to play in promoting the importance of worker health and wellbeing to their member organizations.

According to one source, “Self-care and wellbeing programs are well within an association’s scope. Helping to create sustainable workplaces and healthy, thriving professionals strengthens your industry or profession, and deepens your volunteer leadership bench.”

Conversely, when a growing number of industry professionals suffer from stress and high rates of depression and substance use, it’s an indication of deeper problems within the profession that must be identified and fixed. These issues are not only threats to physical and mental health, but they’re also

threats to the sustainability of the profession and the association.

What happens when young people choose not to enter a profession because of its demands on a healthy lifestyle? What happens when members can’t spare time or energy outside work for volunteer leadership?

Addressing mental health in the construction industry is a timely endeavor for NAHB. As one construction company has observed:

“On a construction site, we wear hard hats, safety vests, harnesses, gloves and more to help ensure our safety. But health and wellness impact more than our physical bodies. If you are feeling overwhelmed, depressed or even suicidal, that pain is internal and may not be visible to your colleagues and others in your life, even to those closest to you.

Mental health issues are more prevalent than we know, and they impact all occupations. We can’t tell what is going through our coworkers’ heads and what is happening in their personal lives that may affect their work. Starting a conversa-

continued on page 11

tion about mental health isn't easy, but your friendship and attentiveness may make the difference on the jobsite and far beyond."

As with the opioid crisis, NAHB understands that the home building industry is not immune to the effects of mental health conditions impacting the construction industry. Unfortunately, many construction companies have yet to incorporate mental health, substance abuse, addiction recovery, and suicide prevention into safety, health, and wellness culture and programs.

So Why the Construction Industry?

Specific aspects of working in construction and related fields inhibit conversations about mental health and prevent help-offering or help-seeking when problems surface. These factors include:

- Job and financial instability – for contract workers and self-employed
- Culture of stoicism – emphasis on self-reliance and toughness
- Lack of community – short term transient jobs make it hard to build connection
- Demographic of men at risk - White men ages 45-64 highest risk for suicide.

MindWise strives to understand behavioral health needs within the cultural contexts unique to workplace sectors. Suicide in the construction industry is four times the national average, with 15.6% of construction workers experiencing a substance use disorder (National Survey on Drug Use and Health). A series of focus groups and extensive interviews with key stakeholders and leaders in a global construction company revealed key areas of need. These included:

- A lack of information and knowledge as to how to talk about mental health
- Acknowledgment that substance misuse occurs on worksites
- The need to move from "policing to preventing"
- The desire for improved communication through the organizational pipeline

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- A sense that one's leadership and managers care about workers' wellbeing.¹

Perhaps more important than anything else, through our continued efforts across the construction industry we are witnessing a readiness, even desire, in the workforce to talk about mental health and substance misuse.

Barriers to real understanding

Prior to COVID-19, 30% of adults in the United States were diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, while 70% reported experiencing anxiety at least once in their lives (APA, 2019). We know that the impact of the current global pandemic has resulted in nearly 20% of adults saying worry and stress from the coronavirus has had a major impact on their mental health (Kaiser Family Foundation).

While these numbers paint a grim picture, the good news is that raising awareness and increased understanding about mental health risk, helpful treatment and other resources can bring real, positive change. The now common refrain, *we are all in this together*, is surfacing dialogue about mental health in the context of normative responses to ongoing stress. Since mental health struggles are not new, it seems the biggest behavioral health problem has been inaction.

continued on page 12

Misinformation and stereotypes have long contributed to inaction by perpetuating stigma. What is stigma and why is it harmful? Stigma occurs when an idea, such as mental health problems, is seen as negative and undesirable so that people distance themselves from those involved. Stigma thrives on myths and fear, creates silence and deepens the sense that what we are not talking about should be hidden. It is more accurate to think of mental health akin to physical health – it exists on a continuum ranging from healthy and fit, to experiencing acute or chronic illness. Mental illness and the positive impact of early diagnosis and treatment need to be better understood and considered on par with physical health.

Starting the conversation

Conversations about behavioral health are the most effective ways to learn and share accurate information - for ourselves, family, friends, and coworkers – and reduce stigma. Practicing conversations is key; the more we practice, the more comfortable we feel helping ourselves and others. Based on our findings, MindWise developed a Behavioral Health Literacy program to level-set understanding of mental health and substance misuse throughout an organization's workforce - pro-

viding the language to have respectful, open conversations.

What can employers do?

- Recognize the need for a **psychologically safe work environment** – one that promotes trust, fosters communication within and between teams, and encourages appropriate risks in sharing ideas and respectful feedback.
- Know that effectively addressing mental health in your workforce means **going in for the long haul** rather than providing a one-time initiative. Systemic programs embedded within an organization keep mental health conversations alive, which in turn encourages help-seeking and prevention through early identification. In fact, the return on investment (ROI) on mental health programs in the workplace increases significantly beginning in year three (*Deloitte, 2020*).
- **Provide accessible behavioral health resources** – Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are a vastly underutilized resource; a 2014 Towers and Watson study showed that only 5% of employees were using stress reducing services of-

continued on page 13



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ferred by EAPs. Lack of knowledge regarding EAP offerings, misinformation regarding processes and privacy impede utilization.

- **Be proactive and preventative** – engage employees on a regular basis through tools such as behavioral health self-screening and mental health awareness materials which allow for early identification of difficulties. When paired with EAP services and other resources, this proactive engagement becomes crucial to prevention.
- Implement a **critical incident protocol** to address mental health-related events on job sites so that your foreman, managers, and team members are prepared. A recent article focusing on safety and productivity in construction addressed the need to decrease confusion on job sites. Having a clear plan in place for emergency situations related to mental health is vital to reducing confusion and chaos, which can often ensue during and after an event. (*ForConstructionPros.com, Aug 3, 2020*)
- Provide specific **resources for substance misuse**. While 15.6% of construction workers live with a substance use disorder, *the impact of an employer recommending treatment has been found to be the strongest factor in an individual seeking treatment*. The good news: When Individuals with substance use disorders receive treatment and recover, absenteeism decreases by 36%.
- Think upstream about how to provide behavioral health programs in trade schools and apprenticeships as a way of **strengthening the future workforce** in construction. Given rates of burnout, stress, and substance misuse in construction-related fields, supporting mental health should be prioritized at all ages and career stages. For younger workers, providing mental health resources while transitioning to permanent or fulltime work fosters connections and encourages longevity in the industry.

As we continue to manage the impact of COVID-19 and the national unrest we are experiencing, addressing mental health is needed now more than ever. With job sites closed and worry among those who are returning to jobs, fostering resilience through effective behavioral health programs is vital. Taking one step toward building awareness is far better than standing still.



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1: MindWise discovery findings, Turner Construction 2019-2020