



Colin Corneau photo

Protection for workers in a time of pandemic



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BY JACKIE JONES

As Manitobans adjust to living and working during the COVID-19 pandemic, companies, too, are looking to adjust to the new normal and protect their workers.

"The psychological health and safety of a workplace contributes to employees' health and overall health of our communities and the success of an organization," says Ela Partyka, program director for the Canadian Mental Health Association. "The context of the COVID-19 pandemic creates additional complexities and challenges due to concerns for health, safety, employment, childcare, and other personal demands."

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it more important for organizations to focus on how they can not only protect their employees' physical health but also mental health, as employees are experiencing anxiety around contracting illness, job security, family health and parenting while working from home, etc.

"Employers can support their employees' wellbeing by implementing health and safety practices in the workplace, providing mental-health resources and demonstrating empathy when addressing workers' concerns," Partyka says. "Open communication

with employees can help them cope better. Businesses could share their COVID-19 prevention in the workplace and provide training, education and updates on government guidelines for businesses."

The past few months have been a stressful time for many and adapting to changes when returning to work might be an additional challenge for some employees. From the beginning of the pandemic, Manitoba's heavy construction industry was deemed an essential service.

Cindy Blair, human resource manager for Borland Construction Inc., says the biggest hurdle at the start of the pandemic was the unknown.

"The start of the construction season coincided with many businesses being shut down for an undetermined period of time," says Blair. "When the province advised that essential work would continue, Borland was ready to navigate the complexities of a pandemic, making informed decisions and taking action based on public health orders and recommendations."

From the start, Borland Construction ramped up communication on the various services it provided to employees that could address mental health concerns and communication plans to mitigate possible exposure to the virus.

"Constant communication with employees, listening to what was causing worry and anxiety and making adjustments to the workplace to ensure our employees well-being continues to be Borland's goal."

Jason Moffatt, Safety Manager of J & G Group of Companies, recalls that one of the main hurdles at the start of the pandemic was trying to gather knowledge about COVID-19 and the requirements that had to be met to ensure the safety of the workers.

"There was a degree of anxiety among a lot of workers, in particular those employees who had prior medical issues," says Moffatt. "Those who were responsible for the care of elderly parents or young families seemed to be the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic."

"The J & G Group of Companies has been very proactive in evolving policies and procedures to ensure a safe work environment for their employees. These have been accepted by both management

and the workforce as a 'new way of doing business' through these trying times."

Management should be aware there might be anxiety among workers and should encourage them to voice their concerns.

To catch early signs of mental distress, employers should watch for behavioral and performance changes. Demonstrating compassion, empathy and flexibility during this time is important in making workers feel supported and valued.

WHEN ASKED WHAT ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO, PARTYKA SUGGESTS:

Create physical safety – employees need the necessary equipment that protects them from contracting the virus.

Paying attention to the workload of employees – we need to protect employees from burn out. Organizations need to take a serious look at scheduling employees in a way that allows for adequate rest and time off.

Offer psychological protection and support – encourage mutual support within the team and equip managers with skills and time to support their employees, listen to concerns and respond appropriately.

Promote work-life balance – create where possible, time for family time and time off.

Continue clear and consistent communications and expectations – in the environment of rapid change and adjustments to remain responsive, communication and clear expectations are critical. Transparent, clear and continuous communication is vital for effective organization performance.

"Organizations depend on their workforce to continue to operate," stresses Partyka. "Thus, it is in organizations best interest to create a work environment that protects and promotes employee wellbeing and mental health."

Blair is confident the heavy construction industry has responded and adapted quite well. "Workers know that we are in this together and want to do their part to stay well and keep the industry working."

RESOURCES FOR EMPLOYEES:

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PLANS

The CMHA Service Navigation Hub (SNH) provides information on a range of topics related to mental health, mental illness, distress and strategies connected to resilience.

When you connect to the SNH they listen and assess your situation; provide immediate support; educate and provide consultation on your rights and to determine next possible steps of action – whether to proceed with intake to CMHA programs or to refer to appropriate community supports.

You can reach them directly at: 204-775-6442 or email at: hub@cmhawpg.mb.ca

Visit: service navigation hub for more detailed information on the support a Recovery Navigation Specialist can provide as well as other crisis supports within Manitoba.

<https://mbwpg.cmha.ca/news/cmha-manitoba-and-winnipeg-response-to-covid-19/>

<https://mbwpg.cmha.ca/programs-services/community-and-workplace-education/new-cmha-toolkit-supports-employees-and-employers-with-planning-psychologically-safe-return-to-the-workplace/>

PROVINCE-WIDE CRISIS SERVICES

Klinik Crisis Line – 204-786-8686 or 1-888-322-3019 or TTY 204-784-4097

Manitoba Suicide Prevention & Support Line – 1-877-5357170 (1-877-HELP170)

Kids Help Phone – 1-800-668-6868

Manitoba Farm, Rural & Northern Support Services – 1-866-367-3276

First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line – 1-855-242-3310

