

CRAIN'S CHICAGO BUSINESS

Crisis Point: The Pandemic Made Employers Care About Mental Health. Will it Last?

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Health care and restaurant employees, grocery store cashiers, teachers, truckers, delivery drivers—the economy's "essential workers"—experienced some of the toughest mental health pressures during the pandemic. Actually, workers in other job categories were affected, too, by the stress, burnout, out-of-whack work and personal routines, and career disruptions of the last two years.

Early in the pandemic, a Chicago woman who was juggling a full-time job while taking care of two preschool boys saw her work-life balance turned upside down. When her boss dismissed the three years of verbal abuse she had endured from a colleague, that pushed her to her wits' end. She questioned whether the company's culture was the right fit for her mental well-being.

"They were not supporting me through difficult situations and just paid lip service to the idea of work-life balance without recognizing how draining this whole thing was," says the woman, who asked Crain's not to publish her name for fear of industry backlash.

For Evan Reifman, a new job at a Chicago coffee shop brought constant last-minute schedule changes, along with recurring equipment breakdowns and an unrelenting stream of impatient customers. After nine months, he quit.

Employer's guide to mental health: Part 1

Mental Health First Aid is an employer's first line of defense to address the signs and symptoms of employee mental health issues.

Antwon Steer, an electronics store salesman, praises his company for how it communicated policies and safety protocols during the pandemic. But irate and entitled customers have had a negative effect on his mental health. "I get that everyone is going through something," he says, "but dealing with the public is getting tougher and tougher."

If the COVID-19 pandemic was a threat to physical health, it also took a massive toll on mental well-being. Though not as outwardly visible, mental health struggles in the workplace affect morale, productivity and the bottom line.

In fact, the nation's mental health crisis led President Joe Biden to announce a strategy to address it during his State of the Union speech. "Even before the pandemic, rates of depression and anxiety were inching higher," the White House said in a statement. "But the grief, trauma and physical isolation of the last two years have driven Americans to a breaking point."

In an October survey conducted by The Conference Board, 57% of workers said their mental health had degraded since the start of the pandemic. Workload was the driving factor. Half of respondents said work demands took a bigger toll on their mental health than COVID-19.

Anxiety and depression among U.S. adults increased after August 2020 and peaked in December and the following January, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention reported. Rates have decreased since then but still remain higher than pre-pandemic levels. Alcohol

consumption increased, and overdose deaths spiked immediately after the emergence of COVID-19 in 2020.

"Mental health has been more obvious, people's routines are changing and support is lower," says Amanda Griffith-Atkins, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Chicago's North Center neighborhood.

As the pandemic took hold, companies, C-suite leaders and human resources managers added or expanded health care benefits, ramped up employee assistance programs and committed to improving company culture, especially with employees working remotely, hybrid or in constant flux about returning to the office.

Now, as Chicago companies are returning to the office or some sort of hybrid schedules, they're figuring out how to continue with pandemic-adopted supports to ensure they are caring for employees' mental health and to attract and retain top talent.

"Whereas we used to say, 'It's OK to not be OK,' we are now saying, 'It's not OK to not be OK,' and employers should be doing something about it," says Amanda Lannert, CEO of Jellyvision, a Chicago-based benefits guidance software company.

Although 85% of C-suite and HR leaders believe mental health affects everyone regardless of having a diagnosed mental illness, 67% plan to return employee health and wellness benefits to what they were pre-pandemic in the next year, according to a survey by Modern Health, a global mental health benefits platform.

That shortsighted thinking is a mistake, Lannert says. As CEO of a company that helps employers streamline employee health care benefits and financial needs, Lannert and her team try to stay ahead of employers' needs. One of their surveys found that 95% of HR

professionals anticipate that employees will continue to seek mental health care.

"This is not a blip, but a new norm," she says.

Jellyvision is also about practicing what it preaches. In addition to robust employee benefits, the company offers 12 self-care days a year, when the entire office closes one Friday or Monday every month so employees can take care of themselves.

"If it energizes our workers, then trading eight hours of work with people working the rest of the week with more focus, then it's worth it," Lannert says, adding that a company culture can contribute to burnout and to a sense of entitlement to people's energy and time if they're never allowed to truly unplug.

"It is not enough to give people care," Lannert says. "We have to change things that are causing undue stress for our employees, or people are going to vote with their feet."

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

Judith Allen, clinical director and chief operating officer of Communities in Schools of Chicago, or CIS, has taken steps to address the additional stresses of the pandemic facing faculty and staff at Chicago Public Schools.

"Staff are burned out, tired and leaving the education space," Allen says.

Although the mission of the nonprofit is child-focused, the organization knew that the well-being of CPS staff, especially during the pandemic, was just as important. To that end, CIS added services for employees and school staff, such as "Compassion Fatigue" groups, where employees can vent and talk about what is exhausting them without

any fear of retaliation from supervisors and managers, who are not allowed in these groups.

CIS also increased one-on-one time between supervisors and staff to ensure that everyone is being heard.

"I'm not a huggy-buggy person, but when we talk about the concept of wellness, there is a cost to not being mindful of your staff's wellness," Allen says.

CIS of Chicago is also one of the few organizations in the city providing youth and adult Mental Health First Aid training, a course managed by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing that teaches people how to identify and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance abuse disorder.

"Our focus is helping the community understand that mental well-being is about being well and addressing mental health challenges and substance abuse challenges and that recovery is possible," says Tramaine El-Amin, client experience officer at the National Council for Mental Wellbeing. "We're taking a community conversation and putting it in the workplace context."

More than half of all Americans receive health care coverage through an employer. Although employer health care comes with cost-sharing benefits, the group plan may not contain coverage for the specific health care needs of every individual, especially when it comes to mental health care. Despite the 2008 Mental Health Parity & Addiction Equity Act, which required insurance coverage for mental health conditions, including substance abuse disorder treatment, to be the same as coverage for any other medical condition in a particular plan, health insurers have found ways to circumvent the rules, leaving individuals with inadequate care.

To help combat this, Gov. J.B. Pritzker last summer signed into law House Bill 2595, which requires insurers to cover medically necessary mental health care, including the treatment of mental, emotional, nervous or substance use disorders, beginning Jan. 1, 2023.

And the Chicago city budget boosted spending for mental health from \$12 million in 2019 to \$86 million this year.

EMPLOYEE BENEFIT CHANGES

Employers are also looking for ways to increase their mental health benefit offerings.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation's 2021 Employer Health Benefits survey, 39% of firms with at least 50 workers that offer health benefits made changes to their mental health and substance abuse benefits. Thirty one percent offered more ways enrollees can access mental health services, such as through telemedicine, which, according to Griffith-Atkins, is one of the best changes to come out of the pandemic.

"People can now access therapy during the day, especially since they are working from home," she says. "And employers are becoming more understanding of that."

Employers have also expanded their in-network mental health and substance abuse providers and increased coverage for out-of-network services, the survey showed.

"Finding a therapist who accepts your insurance is difficult," Griffith-Atkins says. "Any barrier that we can remove to get somebody in the door, it's just more likely that they will show up."

The explosive growth of telemedicine during the pandemic means that more people can access care.

Telehealth use increased from less than 1% of all outpatient visits to 13% in the early days of the pandemic. By March 2021, usage decreased to 8%, but it is still higher than pre-pandemic levels. It remains unclear whether policymakers will permanently extend waivers put in place during the pandemic to expand access to and coverage of telehealth services. But employers can contract directly with telehealth service providers to ensure that high-quality telemedicine and digital health are available to their employees.

Employers should also ensure that their brokered health insurance plan has adequate digital services for employees. A UnitedHealthcare mobile app, Sanvello, offers on-demand emotional support modules to help people with stress and sleep. It's also a useful supplement for individuals dealing with an emotional health problem that is more serious, says Dr. Rhonda Randall, executive vice president and chief medical officer at UnitedHealthcare's commercial line of business.

Last summer, Vida Health, a virtual care company that offers prevention and management services for chronic and mental health conditions, became an in-network provider for eligible Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Illinois members.

Other benefits that employees are turning to for support are employee assistance programs, a voluntary work-based service that provides short-term counseling and confidential financial, physical and emotional services. Although these programs have been around for several decades, EAPs have been traditionally underutilized.

"A lot of people don't know that their workplace offers that," says Richard Chaifetz, founder and CEO of Chicago-based ComPsych, the world's largest provider of EAPs. In addition to the lack of publicity surrounding EAPs, the stigmatization of mental health has also kept them in the dark.

"Mental health is still a private matter," says Lannert. "And it's weird to call a private hotline to talk about depression and loneliness."

The way to get more employees interested and engaged in EAPs and any other mental health offerings is to communicate often about these options, which Allen says is one of the features offered at CIS.

"We have newsletters that go out once a week, and a TV monitor in our main office that is updated throughout the day with resources about mental health and self-care," says Allen, adding that some of the schools her organization partners with have asked for those features as well.

Regular conversations and pulse checks on employees can also help employers learn the best ways to manage their workforce.

"Pay attention to your employees, and they will pay attention to you," says Chaifetz. "The more managers at all levels can do that, the better the organization functions." This, he adds, can lead to financial and intrinsic rewards.

Depression alone is a major cause of disability, absenteeism and productivity loss. Research from the CDC shows that depression causes about 200 million lost workdays each year at a cost to employers of \$17 billion to \$44 billion. And the World Health Organization reports that for every \$1 spent on treating common mental health concerns, there is a return of \$4 in improved health and productivity. Therefore, it behooves employers to reduce any job-related stressors that might be contributing to depression, like long hours, challenging job demands and limited or no autonomy in the workplace.

"This requires a whole paradigm shift," says Louis Haynes, clinical psychologist and executive director of Arcus Behavioral Health & Wellness, a nonprofit community mental health agency in Chicago.

"First and foremost, your employees need to believe that you have their best interest. There has to be trust."

LEADERSHIP CAN SET AN EXAMPLE

Dr. Wendy Dean is co-founder, president and CEO of Moral Injury of Healthcare, a nonprofit organization that provides training and consultation to organizations focused on alleviating distress in their workforce. Distress, she says, can come in the form of something so seemingly innocuous as electronic health records, most of which are based on reimbursement needs and lack an intuitive user interface. Not only do they detract from the physician-patient relationship, but research shows that the majority of physicians believe that electronic health records contribute to physician burnout.

"If it's causing people to work extra hours, it's not a workable solution," Dean says.

The health care industry isn't the only area that suffers under the weight of inefficiencies, which decrease productivity and employee morale. As companies plan to reopen their offices to workers, it would be wise to first review workplace practices and identify ways to streamline processes, such as updating office equipment, poor system integration and communication across departments.

"Leadership needs to be asking their workforce, 'What do you need to be successful today, and how can I get that for you?' " Dean says, adding that a leader's presence in the workforce sends a signal to employees that they are seen and heard.

Haynes agrees that leaders need to be more present and available in the lives of their workers. "A CEO is also human," says Haynes, who suggests that leaders can model what it looks like to take care of their

personal needs. "This is an opportunity to evaluate how we approach mental health in general."

And Lannert emphasizes the importance of being mindful of the new ways that people work after two years of being remote.

"Show respect for workers instead of forcing a mandate back to the office," she says, adding that work has continued even though employees are remote. "We can't put the cat back in the bag."