

Recognizing that mental health is a concern in the industry helps remove the stigma and allow employers to begin to address the issue.



# HEAD CHECK

## Addressing mental health in construction. *By Andrew Pariser*

**I**t's 2020: the start of a new year and new decade. And it's time we do something about mental health in construction. The industry knows it is an issue; the industry supports events and campaigns including Bell Let's Talk, and the industry has the foundations in place to make a difference in workers lives.

Simply put, everyone agrees that mental health is an important issue and the questions moving forward are: "Now what? How do we make a difference?"

That was the focus of RESCON's first mental health symposium, which brought together 115 industry representatives who packed a venue in Vaughan, Ont., to hear from government and construction experts on the importance of understanding and addressing mental health in the workplace. A lot of heads were nodding in the crowd. As far as I am concerned, this event and discussion were long overdue.

If a worker sustains a physical injury, we all know what to do. We get the first aid kit, we provide comfort, we call an ambulance or family member, we provide support.

So why don't we treat mental illness the same way?

Mental illness affects people of all ages, education, income levels, and cultures. This includes those employed in construction and those who are connected to this industry.

Consider this statistic: one in five people in Canada will personally experience a mental health problem or illness, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). When you consider that we

have more than 1.3 million construction workers across this country, according to Statistics Canada's 2016 figures, that would mean mental illness affects at least 260,000 workers.

Our association's health and safety committee has identified mental health as a leading issue, and we have the goal of improving awareness, facilitating discussion, destigmatizing mental health and addictions, and taking a leadership position moving forward.

Ontario is fortunate to have an Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, Michael Tibollo, who understands this well and genuinely cares about this issue. He has been a mental health advocate for 40 years.

"About 500,000 people are not going to work every week because of a mental health issue," Tibollo said. "The stigma needs to end. We need to be sure that people who are suffering are able to talk about it and seek the help they need. None of you would stay away from a hospital or seek help if your leg was broken, so why is it that we don't seek help when we need to talk to someone?"

Tibollo said that prevention and intervention are the keys to solving the mental health and addictions crisis. He said spending \$1 on prevention and education is equivalent to spending \$21 after people recover from a crisis.

Ron Kelusky, Ontario's chief prevention officer for the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, offered solutions and next steps for employers interested in improving the mental health culture in their workplaces.

### Suggestions included:

- Creating a very safe and non-threatening culture in your company.
- Adding flexibility to benefits plans.
- Eliminating the stigma.
- If you see bullying happen, stop it.
- Mental Health is a continuum. It is all connected and not binary. The idea that people are either healthy or sick is a myth as individuals move along the mental health spectrum.

There are different root causes that can trigger mental health issues in construction workers.

"On a construction site, you can have a normal situation where it's a compounding, complex, physiological, psychological issue of an employee that results in a mental health situation. Or there could be a traumatic event that is witnessed that can cause it as well," Kelusky said.

The biggest challenge for employers dealing with employees in crisis was the return-to-work stage.

"Many of the human resource programs and policies that are existing within organizations are geared to the physical return-to-work process. And it is completely different when it comes to mental health."

But there is hope, he added.

"Studies have found that if someone experiences a severe mental health disorder, such as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), there's a likelihood of about 85 per cent that they will come back to work as a very productive employee.

“However, you need to provide proper support, treatment, and assistance throughout the process. Mistakes in how mental health injuries are dealt with lead to a higher likelihood that you will lose that employee forever.”

Finally, the event featured a panel which brought together leading resources that employers should know about and can utilize when creating mental health strategies.

Matthew Porter of BPA Financial Group highlighted features of the LiUNA, Local 183 Health and Wellness Fund, which is jointly trusted by labour and management representatives and has recently added mental health benefits. Recently launched, these benefits include:

- 1 A new LiUNAcare website and mobile app.
- 2 A Quickcare confidential mental health program.
- 3 Access to clinical psychologists, psychotherapists and occupational therapists.

These benefits are available to all members of the LiUNA, Local 183 plan and are among the top benefits offered to employees in any industry.

Chanda Chandalala, a crisis support worker for the CMHA, provided an overview of the extensive services, research and information CMHA provides, including workshops with high schools as well as specialized programs for immigrants and refugees. As a leading organization in the field of mental health, CMHA is a key resource for all employers and offers crisis services through its main phone line and website.

The bottom line is this: employers are not alone as numerous resources are available to assist the creation of policy, programs and mental health benefits.

This event represents the start of RESCON’s efforts. We look forward to making this an annual event and supporting employers’ efforts as they build programs and policies and implement meaningful change at the employee level.

We look forward to taking more of a leadership role this year by improving awareness, promoting discussion, and destigmatizing mental health and addictions on site. ✨



**Andrew Pariser is the vice president of RESCON.**



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