Early action Queensland Mental Health Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention Action Plan 2015–17

Work Well Working Group

December 2016

On 6 December 2016, the Queensland Mental Health Commission and the Office of Industrial Relations co-hosted the first meeting of the Work Well Working Group.

The working group has been established to support implementation of the work-related priorities in the *Early Action: Queensland Mental Health Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention Action Plan 2015–17* (Early Action Plan):

- supporting mentally healthy workplaces by attending to risk and protective factors in work settings

- supporting early detection and appropriate management of mental health problems in the workplace

- increasing training and employment opportunities for people living with mental illness.

The Early Action Plan will be updated in 2017 to reflect changing priorities in mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention.

Purpose of the Working Group

The Work Well Working Group seeks to build on and support the significant areas of activity already underway across a wide range of government, non-government and private sector agencies by:

- fostering connections between working members

- promoting collaboration across areas of shared work

- providing advice on future directions in work related mental health.

The working group includes representatives from a cross-section of government and non-government partners:

- Queensland Mental Health Commission

- Office of Industrial Relations

- Public Service Commission

- Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland

- Department of Education and Training

- Department of Housing and Public Works

- Queensland Police Service

- Queensland Ambulance Service

- beyondblue

- MATES in Construction

- Australian Catholic University

- Employee Assistance Professionals Association

- Recruitment and Consulting Services Association

- Queensland Council of Social Services

- WayAhead Workplaces

- Aftercare

- Queensland Health

- Department of Social Services (Australian Government)

- National Mental Health Consumers Forum

- Toowoomba Club House

- Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

- Robert Walters

- Superfriend

The first meeting focused on introducing members, highlighting some of the many areas of existing activity underway, and starting a conversation about future directions and opportunities for collaboration.

Supporting mental health in the workplace

Work can have a major impact on people's mental health and poor mental health can, in turn, have a significant impact on people's performance in the workplace.

Businesses are increasingly recognising their role in supporting the mental health of their employees and seeking guidance on the best ways to fulfil their role.

While raising awareness of mental health at work and providing psychological assistance to employees are important, there are other steps employers can and are legally obliged to take, including attending to workplace psychosocial hazards and risks.

Responding to psychosocial hazards in the workplace

In the first meeting of the working group, Dr Kirsten Way from the Australian Catholic University provided members an overview of employers' legal

responsibilities to identify and manage workplace psychosocial hazards.

While psychosocial hazards vary among workplaces, there are a number of risks that are now clearly recognised, including high work demand, lack of role clarity and control, poor support, bullying and poorly managed change.

Dr Way highlights three imperatives that businesses need to consider when seeking to address or control psychological risks:

- matching controls to the specific risks that have been identified
- targeting well defined parts of the business where those risks are high
- focusing on work design, not solely on individual-level controls.

In her recent research, Dr Way has examined how supervisors' responses to conflict can impact on the mental health of employees. Her findings point to a link between collaborative approaches to conflict resolution and reduced anxiety, depression and improved job satisfaction.

Identifying psychosocial hazards at work

People at Work is a free psychosocial risk assessment process that aims to help organisations identify and manage risks to the psychological health of workers, volunteers and all people within a workplace.

People at Work measures psychosocial hazards through the People at Work survey. These hazards are based on a comprehensive review of known job demands and job resources that have been identified as risk and protective factors in the occupational literature.

Organisations that undertake the People at Work process have access to the survey, materials to administer and interpret the survey results and resources to help implement and evaluate psychosocial risk management strategies.

Building industry capacity to support mental health

Dr Simon Blackwood from the Office of Industrial Relations provided an overview of the *Mental Health at Work Action Plan (2016–2020)*.

Released by the Office of Industrial Relations in October 2016, the action plan aims build industry capacity to identify and manage work-related psychosocial hazards through:

- building leadership capability at all levels of industry
- turning the latest research into practical, evidence-based tools
- working with community, industry and partners to increase the visibility and importance of mental health
- providing a targeted and effective regulatory framework.

Major achievements to date include the establishment and coordination of a mental health community of practice, completion of the People at Work research program, and the appointment of a Mental Health Safety Ambassador.

Major priorities for the year ahead will be to work with industry to implement the People at Work process and work with the newly appointed Safety Ambassador and social partners to raise awareness of the importance of creating mentally healthy workplaces.

Supporting the mental health of employees in the public sector

The Public Service Commission (PSC) provides strategic workforce services to support a high performing, impartial and productive public sector workforce.

In partnership with the Office of Industrial Relations, the PSC is developing a health, safety and wellbeing framework for the Queensland public service, Queensland's largest employer.

Katherine Winlaw from PSC provided an overview of other related activities being led through their Commission that support the mental health and wellbeing of public sector employees.

A significant area of focus for PSC is the 10 Year Human Capital Outlook, which is examining the trends and forces shaping the work of the public sector and its workers and developing a roadmap to respond to changing workplace needs.

Supporting work flexibility has been identified as an area for further development with the potential to contribute to improved wellbeing in the public sector.

Increasing employment opportunities for people living with mental illness

Participation in meaningful work plays an essential role in helping people reach their full potential. Being employed in the right workplace can also contribute to positive mental health and aid recovery from mental illness.

Evidence shows that people who have experienced or are living with mental illness can have significant problems obtaining, retaining and returning to work.

This is particularly the case for those with more severe and persistent mental illnesses. It is estimated that as few as one in five people living with schizophrenia are employed in a part- or full-time capacity.

Using social enterprises to improve employment opportunities

Social enterprises have emerged as one of several strategies to improve employment outcomes for people living with mental illness, and in particular those with living with more severe and persistent conditions.

Social enterprises seek to create flexible and supportive workplaces that offer long term employment as well as potential pathways for people to transition into mainstream employment.

Luke Terry from the Toowoomba Clubhouse shared his experiences working with financial, government, and other community partners to development and implement social enterprises in the Toowoomba region.

The Toowoomba Clubhouse is in the process of establishing the Vanguard Laundry Service. This commercially competitive laundry will offer long term employment opportunities and career support while also providing sustainable funding for local mental health projects.

Luke stresses that most social enterprises only require relatively small investments to establish and scale-up. Building the capacity of the private and public sector to procure goods and services through social enterprises can help make these businesses sustainable in the longer term.

The role of recruitment professionals

Over 7,000 recruitment firms operate within Australia and the recruitment and on-hire sector are involved in the placement and employment of over one million employees nationwide.

Recruitment and employment consultant professionals can play a significant role in assisting people who have experienced mental health issues make their entry into or return to the workplace.

Sinead Hourigan from the Recruitment and Consulting Services Association provided an overview of the sector and some of the mental health-related dilemmas and challenges that face consultants in the industry.

One of the more common dilemmas is determining how to best advise clients about disclosing past experience of mental illness. While disclosure may result in stigma, it may also be important to ensure placed candidates receive appropriate support in the workplace.

Ms Hourigan argues that recruitment professionals have an important role to play not only as champions for their candidates but also as advocates to employers about the value of becoming employers of choice by creating inclusive and mentally healthy workplaces.

Discussion about future priorities

In group discussion, members shared their views about what we are doing well, what we could be doing better and how members might work together to promote inclusive mentally healthy workplaces.

Members recognised the need to operate on multiple levels to support mental health at work by:

- promoting positive mental health and wellbeing
- protecting employees from psychosocial risks
- intervening early to assist employees experiencing mental health issues.

It was recognised by members that workplaces have an important role to play in supporting people experiencing mental health issues, regardless of their cause.

Members acknowledged that while all business should attend to mental health issues, there was also a need for extra focus on high risk industries.

It was stressed that each industry and workplace is different and that responses to mental health issues need to be tailored accordingly rather than relying on one-size-fits all approaches.

It was recognised that improving employment outcomes for people living with mental illness will require innovative solutions that extend beyond traditional employment services.

With many different organisations involved in supporting mental health and employment of people living with mental illness, a key challenge is to work together in a coordinated way.

Our next steps

The Work Well Working Group will continue to provide a forum for members to connect, collaborate

and provide advice on mental health in the workplace in support of the Early Action Plan.

Members will be invited to participate in a roundtable on 22 March 2017 to inform the update of the Early Action Plan with a focus on work related priorities.

Further information

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