

Thrive in Your Workplace:



Reimagining workplace mental health in New York City



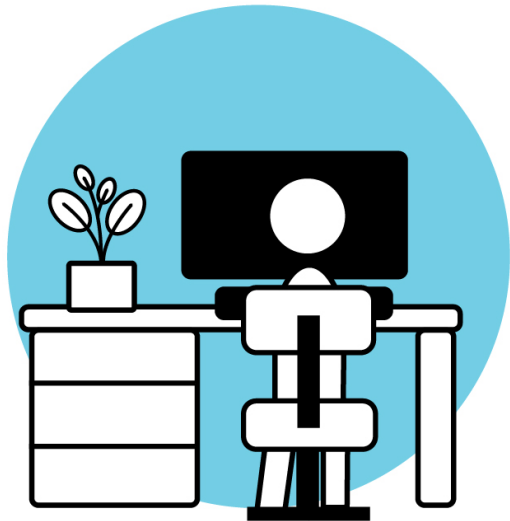
I. Introduction

In 2019, the City of New York launched its first-ever effort to promote mental health in workplaces across New York City with **Thrive in Your Workplace**, a public-private partnership developed by the Mayor’s Office of ThriveNYC (now the Mayor’s Office of Community Mental Health), the Mayor’s Fund to Advance New York City, and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

Thrive in Your Workplace (TWP) helps NYC employers across sectors integrate new strategies and practices into the workplace to promote employees’ wellbeing and facilitate access to mental health support. TWP employs a dual approach to meet its goals:

- 1 Organizational change:** 1:1 consultation with organizations to recommend customized workplace mental health strategies and implementation plans
- 2 Individual support:** Free training and resources to support the resilience of New York City’s workforce

This report presents findings from TWP’s work during the program’s first two years and key considerations for future workplace mental health efforts in New York City.



TWP Senior Manager
Christopher Lynn-Logue
presents on
Vicarious Trauma

II. Why workplace mental health?

Workplace mental health refers to a set of practices that can shape mental health-friendly workplaces. Mental health-friendly workplaces are those that value the health, including the mental health, of their employees, and have specific practices and policies in place to support employees.¹

A large body of research points to the negative effects of mental health challenges on employees’ wellbeing and on workplace productivity. **Untreated mental health challenges can be costly to both individuals and their employers. In NYC alone, depression and substance abuse are estimated to cost \$14 billion in lost productivity.**²



A recent World Health Organization (WHO)-led study estimates that depression and anxiety disorders cost the global economy U.S. \$1 trillion each year in lost productivity, while another WHO study estimated that absence, disability, and loss of productivity due to mental illness cost employers more than four times the price of medical treatment itself.³

Research also points to even greater savings from providing appropriate treatment of mental disorders and addictions via increased employee productivity, speed and quality of return to work after disability, and decreased absenteeism and turnover.⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has significant implications for workplace mental health in New York City and around the world. For those on the frontlines and those whose industries have been completely upended, the effects on mental health may be particularly devastating.

Social isolation, exposure to illness and loss, financial pressures, rapidly changing priorities, and heightened exposure to trauma have intensified strain on challenges, and accelerated mental health crises. An April 2020 poll found that 70% of workers felt more stressed during COVID-19 than at any other point in their entire career. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 84% of American workers reported really struggling with employment-related matters, of which 37% attribute these reasons to mental health.⁵

In this context, leveraging workplaces to support employee mental health is now more important than ever. In addition to promoting resiliency and wellbeing, strengthening workplace mental health practices can have a multiplier effect: studies point to increased productivity, speed, and quality of return to work after disability, and decreased absenteeism and turnover.

III. Program model

TWP has employed both organizational and individual strategies to advance workplace mental health, by providing employers with guidance to develop workplace practices that transform how they support employees, and by offering employees resources to foster resilience.

To achieve its goals, TWP developed a public health approach that includes both prevention and intervention to support all employees, including those at risk of experiencing a mental health challenge, those who may be in crisis, and connecting individuals to appropriate care when they need it.

TWP's initial focus on engaging organizations hinged on the recognition that safeguarding mental health at work extends beyond individual behavior change,⁶ as individual behavior change may be insufficient if the organization is not also providing a supportive environment. That is why TWP designed a consultative model to guide employers through an assessment and recommendations process that addressed all organizational domains, from leadership coaching to human resources policies to training programs.

TWP's tools and resources include:

- A comprehensive workplace assessment to inform 1:1 consultation with an organization
- An employer toolkit providing research and evidence-driven workplace mental health strategies
- Technical assistance for employers that includes support for planning and implementation of new workplace mental health initiatives
- 10+ webinars on topics including Peer support; Accommodations, risk and compliance; Offering high-quality mental health benefits; Evaluating your mental health initiative; and others
- Ongoing training available for the public created in-house or in partnership with experts
- A bi-monthly newsletter to highlight research and data and promote new program offerings

To access TWP's tools and resources for employers, including recorded webinars, visit mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/workplace

Expanding our reach in response to COVID-19

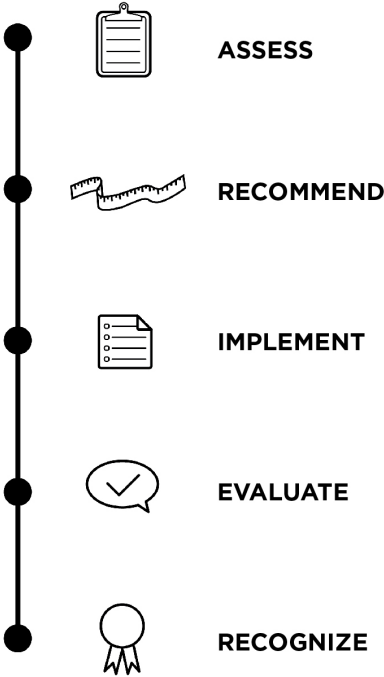
The devastating effects of COVID-19 on mental health highlighted the opportunity for TWP to support the emotional wellbeing and resilience of employees more directly, particularly non-profit workers delivering vital social services during the pandemic. To do so, TWP expanded beyond its original focus on organization-level interventions to reach individual employees directly. TWP created training webinars and guides focused on developing coping skills, reducing stress, and fostering social connection as a source of support among colleagues.

Training highlights:

- Addressing Burnout in the Workplace
- Addressing Collective Trauma from COVID-19
- Creating a Vicarious Trauma-informed Workplace
- How to Foster Anti-Racist Workplace Practices for Mental Health
- How to Support the Mental Health of Colleagues of Color
- Maintaining Momentum for Mental Health & Racial Equity
- Managing for Mental Health 1 – Supportive Management Practices
- Managing for Mental Health 2 – Balancing Performance Management & Mental Health
- Practicing Compassionate Leadership during Times of Adversity
- Promoting Mental Health in the Workplace during COVID-19: Practicing Mindfulness & Acceptance
- Resolutions for Resilience: Setting Personal and Professional Mental Health Goals
- Exploring Workplace Resiliency in 2021
- Supporting the Mental Health of Caregivers at Work

Resource guide highlights:

- Thrive in Your Workplace Toolkit
- COVID-19 Mental Health Employer Guide
- Resources to Support a Caregiver's Mental Health at Work
- Mental Health Resources for the Nightlife Industry
- Mental Health Resources for Performing Artists



IV. Framework & measurement

As a pilot program, TWP’s measurement strategy emphasized process measures to understand how the model could be adapted and/or expanded to meet its goals. TWP tracked reach, changes in knowledge and skills related to mental health, adoption of new workplace practices, and satisfaction with the program.



Team members from UnLocal, a TWP workplace mental health champion, host an immigration legal fair for educators

By the numbers:


130+ employers engaged through consultation

- **28** employers have completed the 6-month assessment, recommendation, and implementation process as of July 2021
- **43%** of employers adopted a recommended workplace mental health strategy
- **75%** of employers reported feeling confident in their ability to support employees’ mental health
- **67%** of employers reported feeling confident in their ability to implement mental health programming
- **95%** of employers rated their overall experience with TWP as good or excellent
- **86%** Net Promoter Score (NPS)
 - NPS measures the likelihood of employers promoting the service to others. [Scores above 50 are excellent, above 80 are considered world class.](#)

10 bi-monthly newsletters with **1700+** subscribers

2,402 attendees at virtual trainings and events since March 2020

- **98%** reported that the information is applicable to their organization
- **97%** reported enhanced knowledge on topics related to workplace mental health
- **98%** would recommend trainings to other colleagues



For its efforts to address employee burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic, **TWP was recognized with a Population Health Summit award** and \$2500 prize by NYSTEC. TWP’s focus on the relationship between diversity, equity, inclusion and burnout was noted as being particularly innovative and relevant, as BIPOC⁷ employees face the risk of heightened mental health challenges related to bias in the workplace.

V. Workplace mental health in NYC: Findings from TWP's network

Over the past two years, TWP advised over 130 organizations on their workplace mental health strategies. These organizations included small and large businesses, as well as small and large non-profits, across sectors.

From TWP's survey of employers who had engaged in the assessment, recommendation, and implementation process, 5 common themes and findings emerged:

1 Employers overwhelmingly identified employee wellbeing and morale as the most important factors in prioritizing workplace mental health

- 93% of respondents identified stress management and burnout as one of their top five mental health concerns for employees
- When workplace mental health efforts were framed in this context, leadership buy-in increased

2 Buy-in and commitment from leadership and managers is essential to advance mental health at work, but not all leadership are prepared to prioritize mental health

- Being a manager is a balancing act as they face the challenge of managing both employee performance and wellbeing
 - Managers report feeling increased stress related to their jobs due to both bottom-up employee needs and top-down instructions from leadership
- 70% of respondents prioritized the need to better help managers reduce the work-related stress
 - About 90% of respondents reported that there were no training programs to teach managers how to reduce stress and support employees experiencing other mental health challenges
 - Not surprisingly, both employees and managers do not feel comfortable discussing mental health with each other (67% and 96%, respectively)

3 Consistent communication is key to addressing stigma and encouraging help-seeking behavior

- Employers found that communicating actively and often during a traumatic time helped to reduce employee stress and anxiety, and employees even attributed improved morale to doing so

- Frequent messaging about available mental health resources and acknowledging mental health in staff meetings can address stigma and encourage help-seeking
- Reaching employees where they are can be a challenge, particularly in direct service organizations that employ office and field workers, whose day-to-day experiences look very different
- Employers chose to communicate via multiple mediums, including websites, email newsletters, social media, blog posts, virtual events, posters and flyers, and virtual anti-stigma campaigns

4 Implementation efforts can be easily de-prioritized for practical reasons such as insufficient funding and time (83%) and insufficient training and educational resources (66%)

- Employers were quick to adopt one-off, tangible solutions, like fairs and workshops, rather than engaging in long-term policy and program development that could have more lasting effects on both individual wellbeing and organizational culture
 - Only 50% of employers had policies in place that explicitly address mental health

5 A diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issue, mental health is at the intersection of many characteristics (race, gender, sexual orientation) and developing approaches to address potential discrimination at work can encourage positive mental health for everyone, particularly for employees who are at risk of workplace bias due to their identities or mental health diagnosis

- Identities with a history of oppression, such as people of color, members of the LGBTQI community and women, among others, experience increased negative physical and mental health symptoms related to perceived discrimination and harassment at work
 - In addition, individuals experiencing mental health challenges at work are more likely to experience workplace discrimination and should be considered in conversations about DEI as well
 - In spite of these realities, employers felt less confident in their knowledge of and ability to address DEI in the context of mental health
- Widespread protests during summer 2020 served as a catalyst for organizations to actively increase diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts generally, and in promoting mental health
 - Employers chose to focus on enhancing protective factors by promoting social support (e.g., Buddy systems or Employee Resource Groups) and adopting structured approaches to measure their efforts (e.g., MERIT Framework)

VI. Key recommendations

Regardless of the size or focus of the organization, TWP made five key recommendations in most consultative sessions with employers:

1 Develop a business case to advocate for workplace mental health that reflects organizational priorities

Gaining leadership support can be achieved by developing a business case that reflects business priorities and explains the value that a new program will bring to an organization. Whether your organization is new to developing workplace mental health programs or has a deep portfolio of programs on which to build, vocal and visible support is essential to initiating a positive culture and promoting participation in mental health programs. Studies show that the behaviors of leaders influence the actions of employees, and that paying attention to positive leadership behaviors and environments can help promote employee mental health.

2 Broadcast a Workplace Mental Health Mission Statement that focuses on improving access and utilization of mental health care

Issue a workplace mental health mission statement to lay the groundwork for new programs or policies. The mission statement makes a commitment to achieving those goals and builds accountability at all levels of the organization.

3 Create achievable and aligned workplace policies to promote a mental health-friendly workplace

Clear policies and expectations about topics related to work-life balance can help to create a mental health-friendly workplace. While most organizations have written policies documenting norms, very few policies are consistently enforced. Participating employers shared several reasons for this inconsistency: policies are written in legalese and it is unclear how the rule would apply in real life settings; people may not be aware of policies or available services; or the reality of office culture is very different from written policy. Change takes time, but consistent implementation can facilitate shared understanding of policies and values and accelerate culture change, particularly for a potentially sensitive topic like workplace mental health.

4 Develop manager skills to support employees who are struggling or who may have mental health issues

Managers play a critical role in creating an emotionally supportive workplace through relationships with their direct reports, and as leaders, influencing the organization's operations and culture. However, middle managers also face the unique challenge of balancing their structural role in an organization as both supervisor and employee, simultaneously receiving directives from supervisors and carrying out those duties with the people who work beneath them. Organizations can prepare managers to support employees who are experiencing mental health issues by teaching managers how to identify signs and symptoms of distress, employ supportive communication strategies, and connect the employee to appropriate resources.

5 Develop opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and support

Colleagues play an important role in supporting each other and creating a culture of health. Research has shown that employees who feel strong social support at work experience better health and wellbeing. There are a variety of programs that provide opportunities for peer-to-peer support such as Employee Resource Groups, Employee Champions, Peer Navigators, or Employee Health Promotion Groups. As more employees begin to work remotely because of COVID-19, the workplace becomes an essential source of social support and prioritizing peer-to-peer connections is more important than ever.

Endnotes

1 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Workplaces that Thrive: A resource for Creating Mental Health-Friendly Work Environments. SAMHSA Pub. No. Po40478M. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2004.

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3 World Health Organization (September 2017). Mental health in the workplace. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/mental_health/in_the_workplace/en/.

4 Center for Workplace Mental Health. Making the Business Case. Retrieved from <http://workplacementalhealth.org/Making-The-Business-Case>

5 Business Wire, “New Data From Ginger Shows Nearly 70 Percent of Workers Feel More Stressed During COVID-19 Than at Any Other Point in Their Entire Professional Career” Web. Accessed July 3, 2020. <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20200409005169/en/New-Data-From-Ginger-Shows-Nearly-70-Percent-of-Workers-Feel-More-Stressed-During-COVID-19-Than-at-Any-Other-Point-in-Their-Entire-Professional-Career>.

6 Harvard ManageMentor (October 2017). Business Case Development. Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/product/business-case-development-harvard-managemmentor/5678B-HTM-ENG>.

7 Black, Indigenous and People of Color



