

How unions can help promote mental health for their members

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How unions can help promote mental health for their members

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For Men's Health Network

Labor union leadership and members continue to play a significant role in improving mental health, both on the job and outside the workplace. This is particularly true in the COVID-19 and post COVID-19 economy.

For example, United Auto Workers (UAW) President Rory Gamble has expressed his growing worries about the high rates of suicide and overdoses among union members.

That's why, Gamble said, he will press his successors to continue to push the Detroit BIG Three automakers in the 2023 contract negotiations, to provide for extended mental health and financial counseling benefits as part of any early incentive plans the companies offer union members to leave their jobs.

Three recent studies on mental health issues in the workplace bear out Gamble's concerns. Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, found that autoworkers who left their jobs had a higher risk of suicide or overdose than those who continued to work. And those workers who left before retirement age had higher rates of suicide or overdose deaths than those who left after, suggesting that leaving work early may increase the risk of mortality, the study said.



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The study, called "Suicide, overdose and worker exit in a cohort of Michigan autoworkers," was published in the November 2020 issue of the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health. (Read it at <https://jech.bmj.com/content/74/11/907.full>.) It studied a sample of individual-level data from 26,804 UAW members, all men, at three GM plants in Michigan using employment records from 1970 to 1994 and mortality follow-up from 1970 to 2015.

Its findings were consistent with another study linking employment with mental health, suicide, and deaths by overdose.

Published in the March 2020 issue of the American Journal of Industrial Medicine, it found that higher state-wide union membership was associated with lower rates of both suicide and death by overdose. Specifically, the study found that a 10 percent increase in union membership was associated with a 17 percent decrease in overdose and suicide deaths. called "Solidarity and disparity: Declining labor union density and changing racial and educational mortality inequities in the United States," which you can read here:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ajim.23081>.

A project in Minnesota found that low emotional well-being and stress affect the workplace in a variety of ways: suboptimal performance, sometimes called "presenteeism", (70 percent of respondents); higher absenteeism (68 percent) and conflicts at work (50 percent).

A coalition of Minnesota public and private employers, Minnesota Health Action Group has convened a multi-stakeholder Mental Health Guiding Coalition (MHGC). It will integrate mental health care to improve outcomes for patients with depression and anxiety, whether as a standalone condition or as a comorbidity. The project was funded by the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI).

This focus was chosen based on the prevalence of depression and anxiety, the fact that employers pay for care, that it is evidence-supported, and the project team has the capabilities to measure, report, and improve outcomes. Learn more about the Minnesota project here: <https://www.pcori.org/research-results/2019/mental-health-guiding-coalition>.

Like the UAW's Gamble, other unions' leadership have begun to push for more extensive mental health benefits for their members as they negotiate new contracts.

In England and Canada, however, where union membership is more common, unions have been more aggressive about members' mental health.

Teamsters Canada, representing more than 120,000 members in the transportation, production, hospitality, construction and service industries, launched a documentary web series on mental health issues facing young workers. The seven episodes featuring stories from courageous young workers who faced or are facing mental health issues can be viewed at www.makeitmandatory.ca. The videos feature appearances by Canadian Prime Minister Justin

Trudeau, retired politician Tom Mulcair, and former Green Party leader Elizabeth May as well as hockey stars Sheldon Kennedy and Brian Burke.

In the United Kingdom, Usdaw is one of Britain's largest trade unions, with more than 402,000 members nationwide. It has launched a campaign called "It's Good to Talk" to help union representatives start conversations with their colleagues to reduce the stigma of talking about mental health.

"For too long, mental health has been a taboo subject and individuals were often, and unfairly blamed for their condition," the union said in launching the campaign. "The shame and secrecy around mental health can have devastating consequences. Usdaw wants to change that while accepting that it is a complex and sensitive area."

You can watch a short video on the campaign and download materials at <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/Help-Advice/Health-Wellbeing/Mental-Health>.

Meanwhile, union representatives and members can help in many ways in the workplace, including:

- Encourage a workplace culture of respect and inclusion, teaching workers to value one another
- Help workers who may be experiencing mental health issues find resources and expertise in the community
- Help workers identify and suggest solutions to help them stay well and continue to contribute at work
- Learn and teach methods to resolve disputes in non-confrontational ways
- Ensure confidentiality and respect the worker's wishes about which information should be kept private
- Check in with both workers and employer to ensure that any accommodation is working

One of the key areas of the work for Men's Health Network (MHN) is to support programs, particularly at the community level, that address the mental health issues that men face. MHN has received funding from PCORI to develop informational material on this important topic, and to identify key actions that help community leaders, including those in the workplace, address this growing problem. MHN will publish a free report on this topic later this spring. You'll find this report and more at www.MensHealthNetwork.org.

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Men's Health Network (MHN) is an international non-profit organization whose mission is to reach men, boys, and their families where they live, work, play, and pray with health awareness messages and tools, screening programs, educational materials, advocacy opportunities, and patient navigation. Learn more about MHN at www.menshealthnetwork.org and follow them on Twitter @MensHlthNetwork and Facebook at www.facebook.com/menshealthnetwork. Consider donating to MHN at www.menshealthnetwork.org/donate.

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