

Chapter 31

Social Services—Minimizing Absenteeism

1.0 MAIN POINTS

By February 2018, the Ministry of Social Services had partially implemented three of the four recommendations made in our 2015 audit regarding minimizing employee absenteeism and had further work to do on the remaining recommendation.

Since our 2015 audit, the Ministry has expanded its attendance management training, hired a disability management consultant, and is piloting a new program — *Be at Work*, which is under development by the Public Service Commission. In 2016-17, the Ministry's average sick leave usage per full-time employee was 10.19 days, about 0.2 days lower than the prior year.

The Ministry needs to do more in the following areas. It needs to encourage its supervisors to take available attendance management training. In addition, it needs to determine the causes of employee absenteeism, use targeted attendance management strategies to address those causes, and report to senior management on them.

Effective processes to minimize employee absenteeism support effective service delivery to the public, minimize costs, and support the well-being of public sector employees. Unplanned employee absenteeism like sick leave can also impact the Ministry's ability to deliver services to vulnerable citizens.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Social Services delivers various programs throughout Saskatchewan to help children be safe from abuse and neglect, and individuals to meet their basic needs and participate in their community. It has about 1,700 full-time equivalent staff. In 2016-17, it spent \$123 million on salaries and benefits (2017-18: estimated \$115 million).¹

Our *2015 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 39 concluded that the Ministry of Social Services had effective processes to minimize employee absenteeism, other than matters reflected in our four recommendations. This chapter describes our follow up of management's actions on those four recommendations.

To conduct this follow-up audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance* (including CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Ministry's progress towards meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. The Ministry's management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

We reviewed the Ministry's approved policies and procedures, and examined absenteeism documentation to assess their actions to minimize absenteeism. We also met with the Ministry's management as necessary.

¹ Government of Saskatchewan, *Public Accounts 2016-17 Volume 2, General Revenue Fund Details*, p. 188; Government of Saskatchewan, *17-18 Estimates, Vote 36 Social Services*, pp. 111 – 114.



3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at February 15, 2018, and the Ministry's actions up to that date.

3.1 Further Staff Training on Attendance Management Needed

We recommended that the Ministry of Social Services actively encourage supervisors to take available attendance management training and monitor participation. (2015 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 14, 2017)

Status – Partially Implemented

The Ministry has not actively encouraged its staff to take online attendance-management training or put in a process to monitor training participation.

As of February 2018, the Ministry was piloting some new attendance-management training initiatives. The Ministry approved funding in November 2017 for piloting mental health first aid training and the *Not Myself Today* program with some of its front-line staff.² The training is intended to create a better educated and responsive workplace for dealing with mental health challenges. Also, as of February 2018, the Ministry was one of four ministries piloting a new *Be at Work* program, with the Public Service Commission.³

The Ministry continued to make supervisors aware of online attendance management training offered by the Government of Saskatchewan. As of January 2018, over one-third of supervisors (i.e., 125 of 345 supervisors) took the attendance-support training online. The Ministry did not have a process to monitor who had not taken training, nor did it require supervisors to refresh attendance management training on a periodic basis.

Training promotes understanding of attendance-management expectations, provides guidance to supervisors to address absenteeism issues, and can increase awareness of programs and supports available to manage employee absenteeism. Awareness helps support a culture of attendance and compliance with policies.

² *Not Myself Today* is a workplace mental health training program designed to transform workplace cultures to be more knowledgeable, open, and supportive of mental health in the workplace. Tools include promotional materials, practical hands-on activities, and online resources.

³ The *Be at Work* program consists of integrated case management and a web application that supervisors have to enter data into (e.g., enter instances where an employee requires five or more consecutive sick days off due to non-work related illness or injury).

3.2 Identifying Causes of Absenteeism and Strategies to Manage at Initial Stages

We recommended that the Ministry of Social Services give all supervisors quarterly reports that identify employees with higher-than-average sick leave to help them determine the reasons for such absences. (2015 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 14, 2017)

Status – Partially Implemented

We recommended that the Ministry of Social Services, working with the Public Service Commission, develop targeted strategies to manage employee absenteeism based on an analysis of the causes for absenteeism. (2015 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 14, 2017)

Status – Partially Implemented

Although Ministry supervisors did not receive periodic reports to identify employees with higher-than-average sick leave, the Ministry undertook a few new initiatives to manage employee absenteeism since our 2015 audit.

From 2015 to 2017, Ministry supervisors did not receive any regular sick leave reporting from the Public Service Commission.⁴ Only in May 2017, Executive Directors of the Ministry received sick leave utilization reports from the Public Service Commission. These reports outlined employees with greater than 10 sick leave days.

In late 2015, the Ministry hired a Disability Management Consultant. The consultant does day-to-day disability consulting and oversees cases that involve disability case management. Consequently, the Ministry has seen a reduction in the number of definite medical leaves of absences. Definite medical leaves of absences reduced from 60 employees in June 2016 to 30 employees in September 2017.

The Ministry hopes that the *Be at Work* program will support supervisors in identifying and analyzing the patterns of those employees with higher-than-average sick leave and assist in developing action plans to reduce employee absenteeism. It expects the program to provide just-in-time training for handling medical accommodations or health-related absences.

Receiving timely and useable information on employees with higher-than-average sick leave and having access to support in managing employee absenteeism will allow supervisors to identify and take timely action to reduce future absences.

⁴ The Public Service Commission, as the central human resource agency, supports ministries on managing absenteeism. The Public Service Commission prepares and distributes absenteeism reports from the payroll system.



3.3 Monitoring of Attendance Management Strategies Needed

We recommended that the Ministry of Social Services give senior management periodic reports on the effectiveness of its attendance management strategies, including detailed analysis of the results. (2015

Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 14, 2017)

Status – Not Implemented

Ministry senior management did not receive sufficient reporting on strategies undertaken to reduce absenteeism between 2015 and 2017.

Since our 2015 audit, Ministry senior management continued to receive reports on average sick leave usage. The Ministry's average sick leave usage rate was as follows:⁵

- 2015-16 average sick leave usage per full-time employee: 10.40 days
- 2016-17 average sick leave usage per full time employee: 10.19 days

The Ministry has adopted the government-wide target of seven days of sick leave per full-time equivalent, which is the same sick leave target from our 2015 audit. The Ministry's sick-leave usage, while gradually reducing, had not achieved the target for overall absenteeism of seven days per full-time equivalent.

Senior management had been informed of the pilot *Be at Work* program but given its pilot status, they had not received reports on effectiveness.

Senior management receiving regular progress reports on attendance management strategies would help them understand causes for employee absenteeism and whether the Ministry's actions are effectively reducing absenteeism.

⁵ As of February 15, 2018, 2017-18 actual average sick leave usage data was not available.