

Chapter 43

Social Services—Minimizing Absenteeism

1.0 MAIN POINTS

By July 2020, the Ministry of Social Services had implemented two and partially implemented two of four recommendations originally made in our 2015 audit related to minimizing employee absenteeism.

The Ministry provided supervisors with quarterly reports identifying employees with higher-than-average sick leave. The Ministry also worked with the Public Service Commission to implement multiple strategies to address employee absenteeism. For example, the Ministry implemented the “Be at Work” program, and mental health training and programs.¹

While the Ministry continued to make supervisors aware of online attendance management training available, it did not actively monitor who had taken the training. At July 2020, one-third of Ministry supervisors had not taken the online attendance management training. Training promotes understanding of attendance management expectations, and provides guidance on addressing absenteeism issues.

Furthermore, Ministry senior management did not receive any reports on key causes of employee absenteeism, or strategies undertaken to reduce absenteeism or address the key causes. Rather, Ministry senior management continued to receive reports on average sick leave usage annually. Senior management receiving regular reports on attendance management strategies would help them understand causes for employee absenteeism, and whether strategies are effectively reducing absenteeism.

The Ministry’s average sick leave usage has remained relatively unchanged over the past three years at 10.42 sick days per full time equivalent for 2019-20. It has over 1,800 employees (including non-permanent staff).²

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Social Services delivers various programs in the areas of income support, child and family services, supports for persons with disabilities, and affordable housing. Annually, the Ministry spends over \$120 million on salaries.

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 report describes our second follow-up of management’s actions on those four recommendations.³

¹ The “Be at Work” program is an integrated case management IT system the Ministry and the Public Service Commission use to manage (e.g., accommodate) employees off work for more than five consecutive days due to illness or injury.

² Workforce Indicators information provided by the Ministry of Social Services.

³ Our first follow-up audit can be found in our *2018 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 31, pp. 299 – 302.



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 interviewed Ministry staff.

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 July 31, 2020, and the Ministry's actions up to that date.

3.1 Further Training on Attendance Management Needed

We recommended the Ministry of Social Services actively encourage supervisors to take available attendance management training and monitor participation. (2015 Report – Volume 2, p. 273, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 14, 2017)

Status—Partially Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services continues to make attendance management training available to supervisors, but does not have a mechanism to monitor who has taken the training. At July 2020, over one-third of Ministry supervisors had not taken the available attendance management training.

The Ministry expects supervisors, including managers to monitor levels of sick leave usage by employee and take appropriate and timely action to correct absenteeism issues. The Ministry has identified attendance management as a key performance initiative for managers. Expected actions include building awareness of attendance management and developing targeted plans for employees with above average sick leave utilization.

The Public Service Commission continues to offer on-line training for Ministry supervisors, including attendance management training.⁴ The Commission also provides a presentation to new supervisors on health and wellness, including information on several different programs offered (e.g., “Be at Work” program, Employee and Family Assistance Program).

The Public Service Commission does not provide the Ministry with periodic reports that summarize participation of its staff in attendance management training. At our request, the Commission generated a report that showed 64 percent of the Ministry's supervisors (222 out of 348) took the attendance management training between 2015 and April 2020.⁵

⁴ The Public Service Commission, as the central human resource agency for ministries, provides ministries with guidance on managing absenteeism.

⁵ At January 2018, over 30 percent of Ministry supervisors had taken attendance management training online.

Training promotes awareness of attendance management expectations, and provides guidance to supervisors to address absenteeism issues. Actively monitoring participation in training would enable the Ministry to focus its promotion efforts on supervisors who have not received the training.

3.2 Quarterly Sick Leave Reports Provided to Supervisors

We recommended 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, p.274, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 14, 2017)

Status—Implemented

During 2019-20, the Ministry of Social Services provided quarterly reports to supervisors identifying employees with higher than average sick leave.

Each quarter, the Ministry emails sick leave data to Ministry division heads (e.g., Executive Directors).⁶ The emails highlight employees with higher than average sick leave (more than eight days of sick time). At December 31, 2019, the Ministry had 544 employees (about 30 percent) with more than eight days of sick time.

We found the division heads share the sick leave emails with directors and managers (supervisors). In the emails, division heads encourage supervisors to develop targeted plans to address excessive absenteeism, and, if needed, to seek support from their Public Service Commission HR Business Partner as well as the Ministry Disability Management Consultant.

Giving supervisors regular information on employees with higher-than-average sick leave increases the opportunity for supervisors to take timely action to reduce future absences.

3.3 Strategies Used to Manage Employee Absenteeism

We recommended 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, p. 274, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 14, 2017)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services, along with the Public Service Commission, uses multiple strategies to address employee absenteeism.

The Ministry's Disability Management Consultant, hired as an employee in 2015, continues to provide day-to-day disability consulting, and oversees cases involving disability case management.⁷ Consequently, the Ministry continues to see improvement in reducing the number of definite leaves of absence. As at March 31, 2020, the Ministry had 44 employees on definite leave (June 2016: 60 employees on definite leave).⁸

⁶ The Ministry receives sick leave data on quarterly basis from the Public Service Commission.

⁷ Disability case management, including accommodating employees back to work, does not focus on absenteeism where the leave is attributed to a known extended illness or situation (e.g., surgery).

⁸ The 2016 figure comes from 2018 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 31.



Since 2018, the Ministry also implemented the “Be at Work” program to help manage employee absenteeism.⁹ Ministry management received training on the program in 2019. We found, in July 2020, the Ministry was using the program to manage over 40 active cases.

The Ministry continues to offer the Employee and Family Assistance Program—a confidential and voluntary program offered through the Public Service Commission.

The Ministry’s analysis of Employee and Family Assistance Program statistics determined mental health and personal relationships are prevalent issues its employees and their family members face; it is aware these issues contribute to employee absenteeism.

As a result, the Ministry and the Public Service Commission implemented the “Not Myself Today” program to build knowledge, understanding, and start conversations about mental health. In addition, the Ministry undertakes an ongoing healthy workplace initiative to promote awareness on how to recognize psychological health and safety concerns among employees.

Developing multiple strategies to address the causes of employee absenteeism, in turn, assists in encouraging actions to reduce employee absences from work.

3.4 Reports on Effectiveness of Attendance Management Strategies Needed

We recommended 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, p.276, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 14, 2017)

Status—Partially Implemented

While senior management of the Ministry of Social Services continued to receive reports on sick leave usage, they did not receive periodic reports about whether its strategies reduce absenteeism.

Each year, Ministry senior management receive reports on average sick leave usage. Over the past three years, the Ministry’s average sick leave usage rate per full-time employee has remained relatively unchanged (2017-18—9.98 days; 2018-19—10.08 days; 2019-20—10.42 days).

The Ministry continues to assess its actual sick leave rates against the ministry-wide target of seven days of sick leave per full time equivalent. This target is unchanged from our 2015 audit. The reports senior management receive did not give reasons for differences between actual sick leave usage and the target, nor include any assessment on strategies undertaken to reduce employee absenteeism.

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 successfully reducing absenteeism.

⁹The “Be at Work” program is designed to coordinate workplace injuries, medical accommodations, and health-related absences between the Ministry and the Public Service Commission.