

## Chapter 24

# Social Services—Minimizing Employee Absenteeism

### 1.0 MAIN POINTS

By August 2022, the Ministry of Social Services implemented the two remaining recommendations first reported in our 2015 audit related to minimizing employee absenteeism.

The Ministry actively encourages supervisors to take available attendance management training, monitors completion, and regularly provides senior management with information about staff absenteeism. In addition, the Ministry recently assessed the effectiveness of its attendance management strategies and planned to report the results to senior management in fall 2022.

Training promotes understanding of attendance management expectations, and provides guidance to supervisors to address absenteeism issues with their staff. Reporting on attendance management strategies helps senior management understand causes for employee absenteeism and whether actions taken are successfully reducing absenteeism.

### 2.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Social Services delivers various programs and services in the areas of income support, child and family programs, affordable housing, and support for people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Annually, the Ministry spends over \$120 million on salaries.

In 2015, we assessed the Ministry's processes to minimize employee absenteeism. Our *2015 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 39, concluded that the Ministry of Social Services had effective processes to minimize employee absenteeism, other than the matters reflected in our four recommendations.<sup>2</sup> By July 2020, the Ministry fully implemented two recommendations and partially implemented two.<sup>3</sup> This chapter describes our third follow-up of management's actions on the two outstanding recommendations.

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

To carry out this follow-up audit, we discussed actions taken with management and examined the Ministry's training and absenteeism reports.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Social Services, *Annual Report for 2021–22*, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *2015 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 39, pp. 267–277.

<sup>3</sup> *2018 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 31, pp. 299–302 and *2020 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 43, pp. 303–306.



## 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 August 31, 2022, and the Ministry's actions up to that date.

### 3.1 Attendance Management Training Encouraged and Monitored

***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**—Implemented

The Ministry of Social Services requires supervisors to take attendance management training and monitors training completion.

The Ministry expects supervisors to complete online attendance management training provided by the Public Service Commission and continues to work toward a 90% completion rate.<sup>4</sup> At May 2022, over 83% of the Ministry's supervisors have taken the attendance management training. This compares to a 64% completion rate at the time of our 2020 follow-up audit.

Annually, Ministry staff email training completion data to senior management, along with a reminder for senior management to follow up with their staff who have yet to complete the required training. The Ministry's last communication occurred in May 2021, and it expected to do so again in fall 2022. For two quarters, we found the Ministry's quarterly sick-leave usage emails to executive directors also included a reminder to encourage staff to complete the required attendance management training.

Training supports understanding of attendance management expectations, and provides guidance to supervisors to address absenteeism issues with their staff. Actively monitoring training participation enables the Ministry to focus its efforts on supervisors who have not taken the training.

### 3.2 Reports on Attendance Management Strategies Provided

***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**—Implemented

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

The Ministry of Social Services' staff regularly provide senior management with information about staff absenteeism. It recently assessed the effectiveness of its attendance management strategies and planned to report the results to senior management in fall 2022.

Senior management continues to receive quarterly reports on average sick leave usage. The Ministry's average sick leave usage rate per full-time equivalent employee, including medical leaves, has remained relatively unchanged since our 2020 follow-up audit (2019–20: 10.42 days; 2020–21: 7.68 days; 2021–22: 11.19 days).<sup>5</sup>

We found the Ministry continues to work toward a target of seven days of sick leave per full-time equivalent employee. The Ministry acknowledged its target is aggressive and difficult to achieve given the type of client situations (e.g., poverty, addictions, family violence) staff in the human services field generally encounter.

We found Ministry staff also provided senior management with a presentation about attendance management and medical accommodations in March 2021. The presentation included statistics about sick leave utilization since 2014–15, along with the number of staff on definite leaves of absence.<sup>6</sup> We found the presentation provided explanations for changes in the data (e.g., a reduction in sick leave utilization during 2020–21 partially due to staff working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and conducting less services in the community, which may have reduced their exposure to stressful situations). The presentation also highlighted the Ministry's return-to-work and accommodations strategies, such as it staffing a disability consultant and using the "Be At Work" program.<sup>7</sup> The Ministry indicated it expects to provide a similar presentation to senior management in fall 2022.

In April 2022, the Ministry prepared an ad hoc report assessing the effectiveness of the attendance management strategies it implemented to minimize employee absenteeism. We found the report included both qualitative and quantitative assessment on the various strategies, along with recommended improvements (e.g., improving awareness of the "Be At Work" program). The Ministry indicated it expects to present this report to its senior management in fall 2022.

Reporting on attendance management strategies helps senior management understand causes for employee absenteeism and whether actions taken are successfully reducing absenteeism.

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<sup>5</sup> The Ministry's 2021–22 average sick leave usage rate per full-time employee, excluding medical leaves, was 7.46 days (2020–21: 6.47 days).

<sup>6</sup> At June 30, 2022, the Ministry had 37 employees on definite leaves of absence, compared to 44 employees at March 31, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The "Be At Work" program is designed to coordinate handling of workplace injuries, medical accommodations, and health-related absences between the Ministry and the Public Service Commission.

