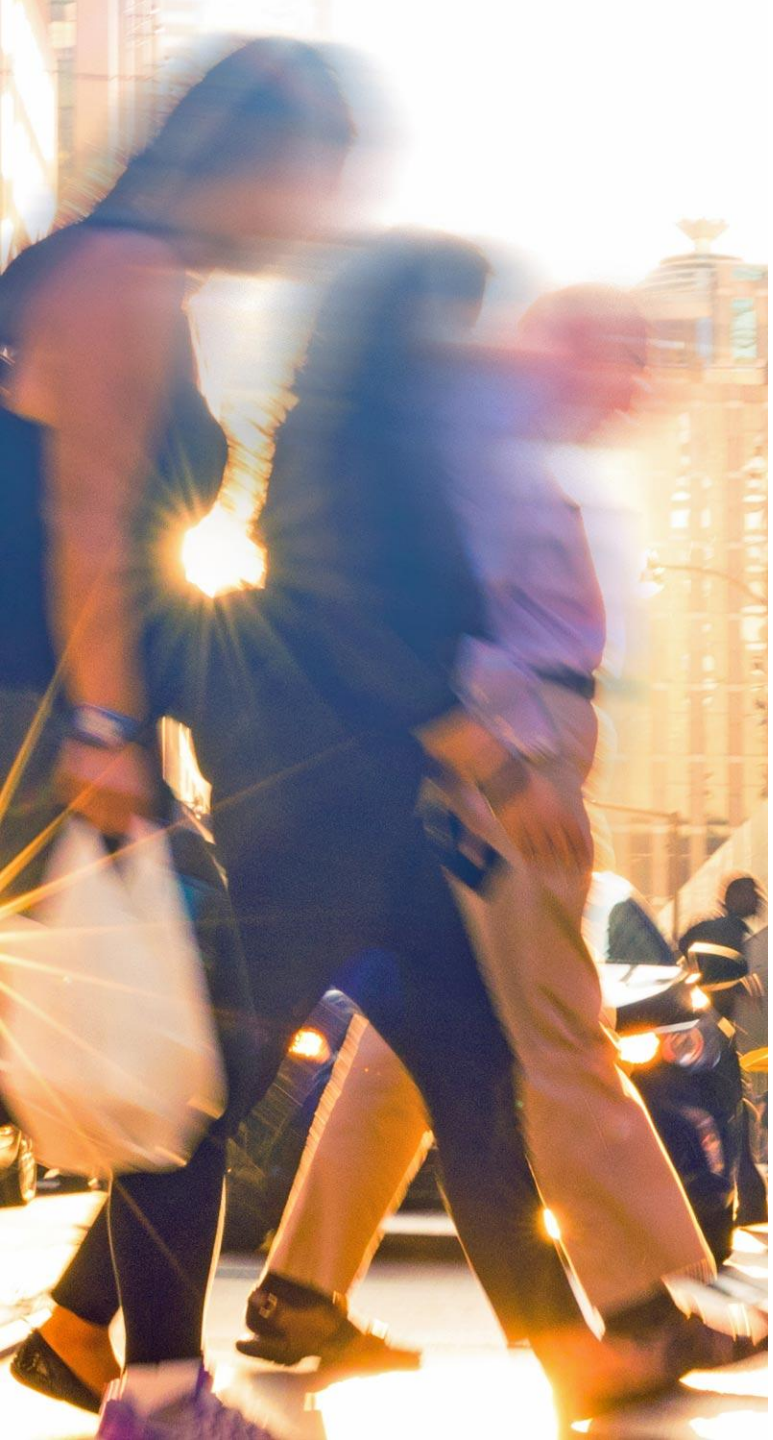

Employer perspectives on supporting public safety personnel's return to work after post traumatic stress injuries

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Acknowledgements

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Key insights

- Post traumatic stress injury (PTSI) is a complex occupational injury which requires timely access to mental health support and organizational initiatives that focus on supporting public safety personnel (PSP)
- Public safety employers have a maturing recognition of the challenges in supporting and accommodating PSP with PTSI and are implementing a range of internal practices to respond to these challenges
- Public safety employers emphasized the need for RTW processes that focus on reintegration which includes collaboration of all stakeholders, flexibility and creativity in accommodations, and social support
- Public safety employers expressed a strengthened recognition of gradual RTW and modified work roles as an important component of treatment and recovery
- Preventative approaches that promote mental health and building trust with PSPs are vital to preventive care and RTW

Study background

Background

- As of 2016, diagnosis of PTSD designated presumptive among first-responder occupations
- Incident in the range of 1,200-1,400 accepted compensation claims annually in Ontario
- Average claim durations are long: >40% on benefits for 2 years or more
- Limited mental health treatment capacity to meet the specific needs of first-responders with PTSD
- Speciality mental health treatment program established in 2021, with capacity to treat 400-500 first-responders annually (Trillium Health Partners)
- Formative evaluation of the mental health treatment program conducted over the period 2022-2024.

Background

First Responder employment in Ontario and the incidence of WSIB lost-time compensation claims for PTSI

	Fire	EMS	Police	Corrections	Total
Number of staff (Ontario)	11,000 (2)	14,000	26,000 (3)	12,000 (4)	63,000
Number of services	32 (5)	50	45	25 (6)	
Lost-time compensation claims, PTSI, 2018-20 (7)	127	384	648	405	
PTSI claim rate / 1,000 person-years	3.8	9.1	8.3	11.2	

(2) does not include 18,000 volunteer firefighters
(3) count of sworn officers, does not include civilian staff
(4) combines provincial corrections (9,000) and estimate for federal corrections in Ontario
(5) count of career departments, excludes 215 composite services and 194 volunteer services
(6) count of institutions, provincial
(7) excludes 161 PTSI claims in dispatch occupations across police, EMS and fire

Research objectives and methods

Research Objective

- Understand employer perspectives and experiences on supporting return-to-work (RTW) among public safety personnel (PSP) who experience post traumatic stress injuries (PTSI)*

*We define PTSI as “a non-clinical term that encompasses a range of mental health injuries, including some operational stress injuries, clinically diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression”

https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcs/pblctns/2019-ctn-pln-ptsi/index-en.aspx

Study Methods

Interviewees	Fire	EMS	Police	Corrections	Total
Employer	5	10	14	4	33
Union/Association	3	2	4	3	12
Total	8	12	18	7	45

- 28 employer organizations: fire (4), EMS (9), police (11), corrections (4)
- Participants roles: HR, claims and wellness leadership and staff; executive leadership; union/association leadership and staff
- Interviews focused on the perceptions of needs, challenges, and opportunities to accommodate PSP returning to work following a work absence for PTSI, and organizational practices in PTSI prevention and disability management

Findings

Broad themes and challenges related to RTW

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PTSI is a complex, individualized occupational injury

Successful RTW requires collaboration among all stakeholders

Organizational factors influence effectiveness of RTW

Communication and trust are foundational for successful RTW

Broad themes and challenges related to RTW

PTSI is a complex, individualized occupational injury

- Limited access to mental health assessment and treatment services
- Mental health stigma in public safety organizations
- Limited internal capacity and expertise in the recognition and management of PTSI

Broad themes and challenges related to RTW

Organizational factors influence effectiveness of RTW

- Insufficient internal human resources to provide support to PSP with PTSI
- Challenges related to maintaining communication between the employer and PSP during absence
- Limitations around identifying options for meaningful accommodated duties that match the PSP's limitations/restrictions

Broad themes and challenges related to RTW

Successful RTW requires collaboration among all stakeholders

- HCPs providing insufficient information on members' limitations and functional abilities
- Challenges with communication from WSIB case managers
- HCPs' and WSIB case managers' limited understanding of modified work roles and accommodations public safety organizations can provide

Broad themes and challenges related to RTW

Communication and trust are foundational for successful RTW

- PSPs disabled by PTSI often felt abandoned by their employer and no longer trusted their organization
- Rebuilding trust through prioritizing prevention, meaningful accommodations, and actively challenging stigma

Findings

Organizational practices to improve RTW outcomes

Organizational practices to improve RTW outcomes

Strengthening organizational capacity

Supporting organizational processes through third parties and stakeholders

Tailoring RTW processes to meet the complexity of PTSI

Managing external stakeholder relations to improve RTW

Organizational practices to improve RTW outcomes

Strengthening organizational capacity

- Creating dedicated wellness and ability management roles/teams
- Hiring specialized mental health personnel (staff psychologist) to support the mental health needs of PSP
- Training and education initiatives for supervisors and staff
- Safeguarding programs, attendance tracking, debriefing after difficult calls, peer support

“Once we understand they're considering or getting close to return to work, peer support reaches out right away, they set up a meeting with the employee without us, and they say, okay, you're going to have a meeting with management shortly to talk about return to work, this is what the process looks like, here’s what they're going to say, here’s the questions. And then we meet with the employee and the peer support member who has been assigned to that employee, then we start to talk about return to work. When they return to work, that person is assigned to them as their buddy, their supporter, their advocate, their confidante, their person that they can talk to as they go through that process.” (Fire employer, interview 20)

Organizational practices to improve RTW outcomes

Tailoring RTW processes to meet the complexity of PTSI

- Reintegration programs focused on understanding PSPs' needs and tailoring the pace and duties of RTW to meet these needs
- Creating individualized accommodations that meaningfully meet PSP's unique needs and limitations
- Graduated RTW with a recognition that RTW can often be overwhelming to a PSP recovering from PTSI

“So, the current process is that if your note says, once you're recertified, you can do two shifts a week, six hours a shift, riding third for two sets and then we can bump up to eights, whatever it says, then I work with the person individually to find them somebody that they feel comfortable with and that it can be somewhat consistent. Because they don't want to ride a with a different person every day, they don't want to tell their story to half of the service because it’s none of their business. We’ve found that we definitely see better progress and more success if the medic gets to choose someone they feel comfortable with.” (EMS employer, Interview 19)

Organizational practices to improve RTW outcomes

Managing external stakeholder relations to improve RTW

- Providing information packages to WSIB and HCPs outlining accommodation options, and inviting them into the organization to help build knowledge of the profession and the working environment
- Encouraging WSIB to consider expanding the circle of care, check efficacy of treatment options

"…part of the issue sometimes is physicians don't have an understanding of exactly what a police officer does and how they can be accommodated in the workplace. So, they see a police officer that is running from call to call to call, not having a break, just constantly on the go. But they don't have the understanding that that's not the only way somebody can work as a police officer. One of the things that we're doing is that we provide WSIB [and clinicians information about our] reintegration program and share with clinicians we have this program in place when this person or when this employee is ready to return. Consider utilizing our facilities to expose that member back to the workspace. We try to do a better job from our end of communicating through WSIB to the clinicians." (Police employer, interview 10)

Organizational practices to improve RTW outcomes

Supporting organizational processes through third parties and stakeholders

- Contracting a third-party disability management company to support the management of claims and RTW
- Partnering with community HCPs to provide transitional support for PSP looking for permanent mental healthcare providers
- Collaborating with municipalities or OPS to find appropriate accommodations when the PSP was unable to be accommodated within the organization
- Utilizing the important role that union representatives play in participating in RTW planning and supporting PSP

"…whenever there's an accommodation that needs to be implemented, we have medical information, but we also have a union rep and [a programme] trained person, manager, and the employee sit down together. And when they're creating a specific accommodation plan, it's collaborative. So, the union has buy-in, the manager, the union member, the employer and another [programme] representative which is usually another union member, sit together collaboratively and they figure out what accommodations are going to work best. I think the union is very helpful when it comes to that aspect, only because by nature if management might suggest something, there may be some pushback, but if the employee sees the union and management are in agreement with this is the accommodation plan that we're going to roll with, then there's not as much resistance to it." (Corrections employer, Interview 37)

Discussion

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- PTSI is a complex occupational injury which requires timely access to mental health support and organizational initiatives that focus on supporting PSP
- Public safety employers have a maturing recognition of the challenges in supporting and accommodating PSP with PTSI and are implementing a range of internal practices to respond to these challenges
- Public safety employers emphasized the need for RTW processes that focus on reintegration which includes collaboration of all stakeholders, flexibility and creativity in accommodations, and social support
- Public safety employers expressed a strengthened recognition of gradual RTW and modified work roles as an important component of treatment and recovery
- Preventative approaches that promote mental health and building trust with PSPs are vital to preventive care and RTW

Thank you

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