

Essential Service Workers Are Not Immune to Mental Health Tolls

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We are living in extraordinary and stressful times.

In communities across Canada, people are in lockdown to help reduce the spread of COVID-19. Businesses, local economies and families are struggling. It's no surprise that Canadians are feeling anxious right now.

And while some of us can work remotely from home, many people continue to work on the front lines every day, ensuring that essential services are maintained. This includes the utility workers delivering power and natural gas to Canada's homes, hospitals and businesses.

Our sector often faces resiliency tests; just think about the ravaging weather Canada can experience, or debilitating cyber-attacks. And now we know that health threats can be equally, if not more, damaging.

Prior to COVID-19, Mental Health Research Canada estimated that one in five Canadians would experience mental illness, affecting their families, caregivers and communities. They also noted that in one week 500,000 Canadians would miss work due to their mental health.

According to the initial findings of their latest report released last week, the number of Canadians who say they're experiencing high levels of anxiety has quadrupled since the pandemic began. The survey asked 1,803 people about the state of their mental health and found that feelings of anxiety and depression are steadily rising.

There was no step-by-step guide to how best support our workforce. However, the trials of natural disasters, and emergency preparedness planning and exercises have better protected the sector and by extension, the security and quality of life of Canadians.

In November 2019, a tabletop exercise—an energy wargame, really—was hosted with government officials and electricity and gas utility CEOs to test the readiness of the sector's crisis action and communications plans, and strengthen response and recovery capabilities following a catastrophic emergency.

At about the same time in China's Hubei province, the first patients began experiencing symptoms of a new pneumonia-like illness. On New Year's Eve, the World Health Organization was alerted. By spring, COVID-19 had spread globally, prompting an unprecedented shut down of the economy and authorities to call for people to self isolate.

Our utilities have a culture focused on safety and resilience. Due to careful planning and preparations that have been years in the making, the energy sector was ready.

At the onset of COVID-19, electric and gas utilities implemented pre-designed management systems for monitoring, communications and decision-making related to the pandemic. Continuity planning was—and remains—critical.

Responding to the latest information available from public health authorities and governments, our members took immediate measures to keep staff and the public safe. Not only were protocols implemented and stringent health and safety measures added, we remained as agile as possible.

Since all employees' mental health, like physical health, can fall on a continuum from excellent to at-risk, policies and practices to address the unique challenges of this pandemic have been—and continue to be—updated and implemented. People across the utility sector are working together to share best practices and guidance to promote health and wellness. Healthy work environments that encourage openness and work/life balance continue to be fostered.

One thing remains constant: all our workers—those who can work from home and those who are in the field—are focused on keeping our communities functioning safely.

We recognize that working under these conditions has forced everyone to do things differently. Social-distancing policies are isolating people from each other and causing small businesses to collapse. Parents have turned into teachers as children are home from school. At every turn, the stressors are compounding.

For an industry delivering essential energy services to communities across the country, it is imperative for utilities to stay focused on safety and resilience of both their infrastructure and their workforce. It would be difficult to imagine our lives without the benefits that Canada's energy systems bring. Energy has become, in a word 'indispensable'. Both our social and economic prosperity depend on it.

It is this indispensability that makes energy such a strategic asset for our country.

Electric and gas utilities are a vital part of Canada's communities—small and large, rural and urban. These companies are working every day to ensure they can help manage through not only this pandemic but help deliver the fastest recovery possible, as well. As decisionmakers across the country determine how best to re-open the economy, it is clear there will be much to recover from: economically, socially, physically and mentally.

The communities we serve are only as strong as the members in them. And that includes the more than 100,000 utility employees across Canada. To keep communities healthy and thriving, people need to work together, now more than ever.

Energy is on the front lines when lives and businesses grind to a sudden halt, and communities confront the emotional aftershock of damage the storm left in its path. And it will continue to be there as our nation and economies rise again.