

Jump in calls to EAP from federal public sector following cuts announced in March budget

Justice Canada lawyer committed suicide in July after receiving 'affected notice'

BY AMANDA SILLIKER

IN THE PAST YEAR, the federal government's employee assistance program (EAP) has seen a significant increase in the number of overall calls and in calls from individuals deemed a suicide risk.

In 2011, the EAP received a record 41,000 calls. By the end of August this year, it had already received 30,000 calls, according to Health Canada.

In regards to cases with an identified risk of suicide, there were 167 cases in 2011 and 155 cases in the first eight months of 2012.

"It's been a steady increase in terms of calls over the last three years," said Francois Legault, director of the EAP program, in a *Globe and Mail* article. "We're seeing a spike this year, as we expected. They're probably related to the anxiety of budget 2012."

In April, when the budget cuts were announced, there was a 33 per cent jump in calls to the EAP over the previous year, said Health Canada in a CBC report. And there has been an 11 per cent overall increase in the months since.

The 2012 budget outlined a plan to cut 19,200 jobs or 4.8 per cent of total federal employment over three years.

Public servant's suicide highlights challenges

The issue of suicide risk among public servants surfaced in late September when the widow of a lawyer at Justice Canada spoke to Radio-Canada about her husband's suicide in July. He took his life three months after he received a notice that his job might be affected as part of the federal government layoffs. His department was cutting its staff of lawyers by two-thirds.

He was suffering from an anxiety disorder and depression and was deeply bothered by the threat of losing his job or keeping it at the

expense of others, said his wife.

"He couldn't sleep, he wasn't eating very much. He lost a lot of weight and he was worrying all the time," she said.

Layoffs are "absolutely horrible" and they can be very devastating for employees, said Dave Gallson, associate national executive director at the Mood Disorders Society of Canada in Guelph, Ont.

"People have house payments and car payments, so they have financial obligations. And when your financial security is taken away from you, you become very filled with anxiety, you can go into a depression, you can see your whole world crumbling apart," he said.

Employer support, communication needed

To reduce the negative impact of layoffs, employers should provide as much information as possible to employees, said Eric Rubel, national clinical director at Aspiria, an EAP provider based in Markham, Ont.

They should be given information about any restructuring that's going on, how it will affect people and what support will be offered, he said.

"I cannot emphasize enough how important open and transparent communication is for the mental health of not only the middle managers and staff but for the morale of the organization moving forward," said Gallson.

When it comes to advance notice around group or mass layoffs, the federal government sends out Work Force Adjustment notices — or affected notices — to employees in advance, letting them know they may lose their jobs.

"Some employers will inform staff ahead of time of impending layoffs and if that's possible, it's good because people will start to learn a little bit more about what's going on and they can talk more about it and prepare

more for it," said Rubel.

But advanced notice may not be the best practice, said Cynthia Kinsella, vice-president and general manager at EAP provider PPC Canada in Burnaby, B.C.

"Unless you use that time to start supporting employees and preparing them as a group that there is change coming, then you can be doing everybody a bit of a disservice," she said. "Generally, for everyone involved, little notice tends to work better."

Employers can seek professional assistance from their EAP provider who can go to the organization and speak with employees about what's going to happen and facilitate discussions around it, said Rubel.

Employers should first offer the option of voluntary layoff to employees and then move to involuntary, said Gallson. The middle of the week, such as a Tuesday or Wednesday, is the best time to tell employees they are being laid off, said Kinsella.

"They aren't going to head straight into a weekend, they're going to have a bit of time to adjust — the kids will be at school, they will have some time alone to adjust and maybe organize some appointments, they can chat with their spouse," she said.

Managers should receive training on how to inform employees they are being laid off, offer the appropriate support and be aware of signs of distress, said Kinsella.

If a manager is laying off an employee with known existing mental health issues, the employer should take additional steps to ensure it is handled properly, such as consulting with its EAP, said Rubel.

"Those situations need to be handled extra carefully because of the mental health issues, so it's definitely on a case-by-case basis," he said.

Outplacement services appreciated

Employers should also provide laid-off employees with financial assistance through a respectable severance package, said Gallson.

Outplacement services and career counselling are also very effective, said Kinsella.

“It can be anything from providing training for employees to go through resumés, provide them with interview skills — those kinds of things so they feel equipped to look for a job and that they’ll be successful — up to a very large platinum package with an outplacement firm for the more senior resources,” she said. “No matter what the budget, you can support employees.”

Laid-off employees should be given access to the company’s EAP for a few months after they have been let go to help them deal with

the transition, said Kinsella.

Offer support for remaining employees

It is also very important to offer support for employees who are staying at the organization and not being laid off.

“The people left in the workplace can almost experience a survivor’s guilt situation,” said Gallson. “‘My two colleagues in the same aisle as me are no longer working and going through all this pain and I have this job’ — they can almost feel bad, so that’s a huge component of some of these mental health issues employees are going through.”

Managers should boost their visibility, check in more often with employees and hold more team meetings to facilitate and encourage communication during this transition,

said Kinsella. And they should remind employees of the supports available, she said.

Employers may also want to set up peer support groups so employees can share what they’re going through with fellow colleagues, which helps them feel more comfortable and offers a group-therapy approach, said Rubel.

If employers handle a layoff situation well, they have the chance to build more loyalty than they had before, said Kinsella.

“When other companies are hiring, (the remaining employees) are still going to be devoted to your company because they believe in your company,” said Gallson. “If the layoff situation was handled in a bad way, that taste stays in the mouth of workers for many, many years and when they have the opportunity to move on, they will.”