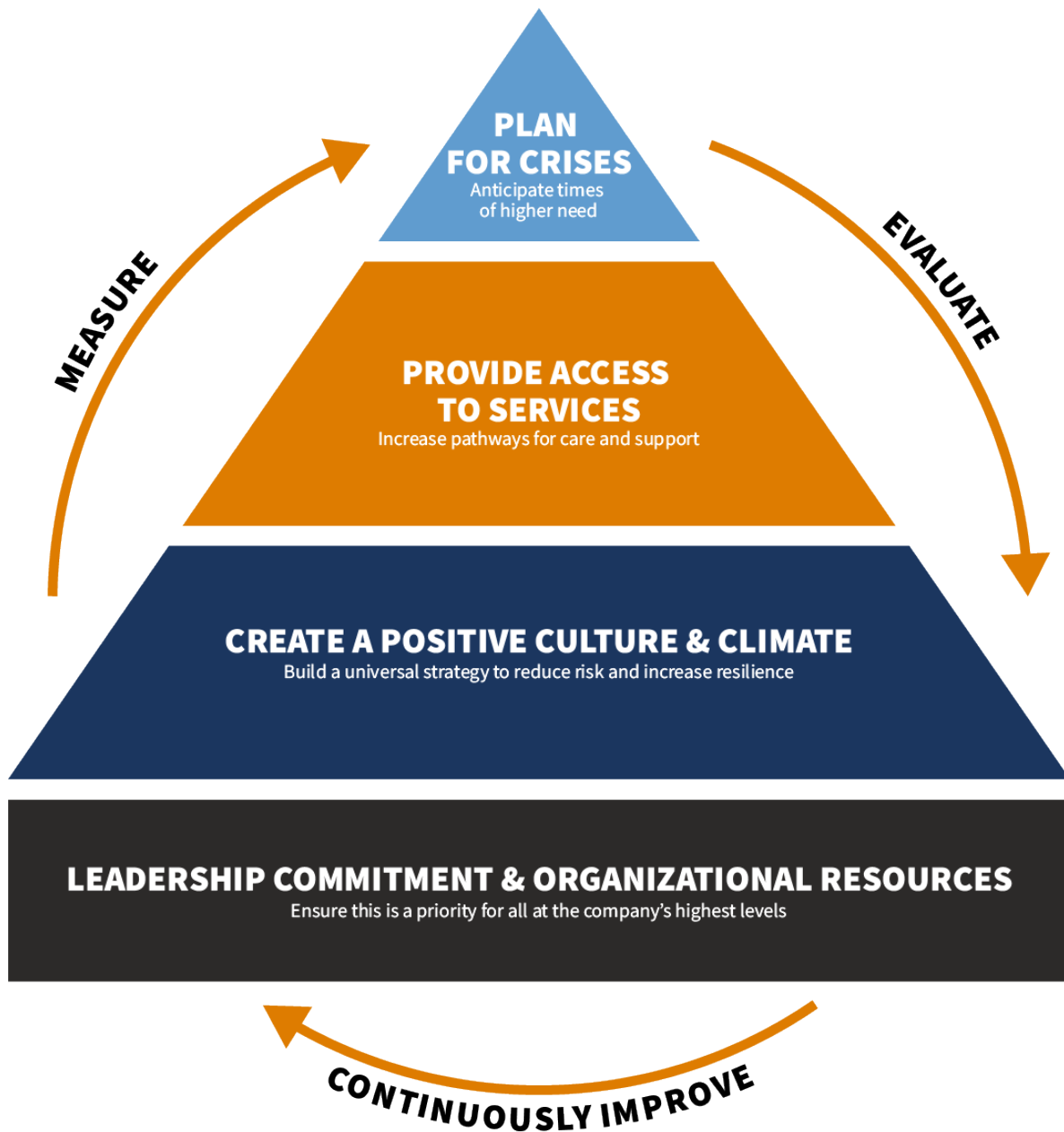# STANDARDS FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

Nearly one in five Californians face an unmet mental health need. To make progress in addressing these needs – and in preventing them – the state must promote mental health and wellbeing in the settings where Californians live, learn, work, and play. The workplace, where working-age adults can spend as much as a third of their time, is a key setting for supporting mental health. Increasingly, employees report that their work environment harms their mental health. Burnout, depression, and anxiety are on the rise. Employers are responding with new strategies to support the mental health of their workforce. To make the most of these opportunities and ensure they reach as many Californians as possible, policymakers should pursue a range of pathways, as outlined in this report, to support employees and employers.

A Framework for Understanding Employee Needs

Our mental health exists on a continuum and fluctuates based on the circumstances in our lives. Depending on where we are on the continuum, different support mechanisms are needed. Strategies to address employee mental health should consider needs across the continuum.

STANDARD 1

Leadership and Organizational Commitment

Workplace mental health initiatives are driven by senior leaders and supported by organizational resources.

Empower leaders to prioritize and destigmatize mental health.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Encouraging leaders to model healthy behaviors by setting clear boundaries between work and personal life and prioritizing their mental wellbeing

→ Supporting leaders who help to reduce stigma by exhibiting openness and vulnerability in talking about personal experiences with mental health, and who share information about organizational policies or programs that may have supported them during challenging times

→ Providing tailored, comprehensive mental health training to leaders and supervisors that promotes "soft skill" capabilities such as communicating appropriately about mental health

→ Appointing a senior leader to sponsor workplace mental health initiatives

Build and dedicate resources towards an organization-wide strategy to prioritize mental health.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Assigning a budget line item to employee mental health initiatives

→ Dedicating sufficient resources, such as budget, staff time, and technology, to workplace mental health efforts

→ Bringing in outside experts when necessary to ensure that policies and procedures reflect best practices in workplace mental health

→ Identifying and monitoring key indicators that will support management accountability, and addressing any indicators that signal risks for employee mental health

→ Communicating commitment and regular updates to leadership, such as boards of directors

STANDARD 2

Positive Workplace Culture and Climate

Practices that promote wellbeing and prioritize mental health are embedded into everyday aspects of the work culture.

Cultivate workplace practices and norms that support a psychologically healthy workplace.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Encouraging and training managers to foster the creativity and autonomy of their team members

→ Creating concrete opportunities for employees of all levels to participate in organizational decision making

→ Providing employees with increased flexibility regarding when, where, and how they work

→ Understanding how employees want to be supported when they experience mental health challenges and setting expectations for the kind of support that can be provided at work

→ Offering programs and financial or other support for employees to drive their own professional development

→ Offering monetary or non-monetary rewards, such as applause awards or designating managers as champions of mental health, to recognize employee achievements

→ Encouraging employees to express gratitude and appreciation to one another

→ Evaluating company policies and programs to ensure best and current approaches to equity, diversity, and inclusion, including supporting people of color, LGBTQ+ populations, people for whom English is a second language, and people with disabilities

Create a culture that rejects stigma and openly communicates about and recognizes mental health challenges.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Developing employee resource groups or similar safe places to create a culture in which employees support one another and share experiences

→ Creating space for an honest and supportive dialogue regarding current events that may be affecting a team's wellbeing, such as hosting team conversations on timely topics to share perspectives and promote courage

→ Conducting regular mental health awareness programs and training supplemented with awareness campaigns, such as World Mental Health Day programming

→ Including mental health education in staff onboarding and professional development

STANDARD 3

Access to Services
Employees have access to mental health support and care and know how to navigate these services.

Deploy tools that can identify potential employee mental health challenges and enable early intervention.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Providing mental health literacy training that is sensitive to diverse cultural and sociodemographic perspectives

→ Offering training, such as the Mental Health First Aid program, that helps employees and managers build awareness and skills for identifying and responding to mental health challenges

→ Developing a mechanism, such as a periodic web-based form, to screen employees for mental health challenges, and identifying dedicated people to follow up with individuals who require support or interventions

→ Ensuring that mental health services encompass primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention strategies

Use Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to provide employees with a "one-stop shop" to access a variety of services and resources.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Ensuring that any new or existing EAP or related program is robust and evidence-based

→ Reviewing EAP offerings and ensuring that a diverse group of mental health professionals has been enlisted to meet the needs of employees with diverse identities and backgrounds

→ Communicating the availability and scope of EAP benefits to employees, including information about employee privacy when using EAP services

→ Understanding current EAP utilization and performance and considering adjustments if necessary

Communicate to employees about the services and benefits available to them.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Providing mental health information and resources through multiple channels such as email campaigns, manager-led conversations, and benefits websites; if appropriate, information should be presented in multiple languages

→ Creating opportunities, such as an annual organization-wide benefits webinar, for colleagues at all levels to understand the mental health services and benefits available through their work

→ Educating both HR staff and managers on the spectrum of available offerings provided by your organization so that they can accurately communicate these resources to all employees

Strive for parity in coverage across mental and physical health.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Reviewing current medical health and mental health plans for gaps in mental health coverage; the Department of Labor's "warning signs" checklist and self-compliance tool can identify potential parity violations

→ Following best practices developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration for implementing the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act

→ Working with vendors to adjust plan benefits as needed to comply with parity requirements, such as adding in-network benefits for out-of-network behavioral health providers

→ Going beyond compliance by asking insurers or third-party administrators for data on wait times, limitations on insurance coverage, cost sharing, and the availability of culturally competent care; mental health advocates have created a model data request form to aid these inquiries

→ Conducting a periodic – and ideally anonymous – survey of employees about their satisfaction with their mental health coverage

→ Choosing a plan with out-of-network mental health benefits so that employees can access clinicians who may not be in network

Tailor services and resources towards employees' unique backgrounds and roles, with a focus on equity.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Integrating workplace mental health initiatives with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives

→ Surveying employees about their unmet mental and social needs, such as childcare support, and designing services and supports in response to those needs

→ Offering tailored supplemental support for employees in roles with high-risk factors for mental health, such as roles that involve a high degree of exposure to trauma

Offer virtual mental health services as part of benefits packages to provide employees with increased flexibility.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Ensuring that health plans offer the ability for employees to obtain virtual mental health services, including adding this option if it is not available

→ Communicating the availability and benefits of virtual mental health services to employees

STANDARD 4

Crisis Preparation, Response, and Recovery
Organizations are prepared to respond to workplace crises and support employees in high-need circumstances.

Individual-level strategies for employers include:

→ Offering work-directed care plus evidence-based mental health clinical care (such as the Collaborative Care Model) to support recovery and reduction of mental health symptoms

→ Providing return-to-work programs or partial sickness absence leaves

→ Deploying recovery-oriented strategies that enhance vocational skills – including, but not limited to, supported employment

Organization-wide strategies for employers include:

→ Instituting procedures and protocols for supporting employees during critical incidents, such as through individual check-ins or by circulating information about EAP resources

→ Ensuring that comprehensive aftercare and safe transitions are available to employees following a crisis or trauma, such as after hospitalization or incarceration

→ Establishing suicide prevention and postvention plans and ensuring that sufficiently trained individuals are in place and prepared to address suicide that impacts employees

→ Developing a process for acknowledging traumatic news or world events that may impact employee wellbeing, such as communicating empathy and support through all-hands meetings, video messages, or social media channels

STANDARD 5

Measurement, Evaluation, and Continuous Quality Improvement
Organizations measure, track progress, and make changes based on performance metrics related to workplace mental health.

Identify and track key performance metrics to monitor progress and inform data-driven decision-making.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Assessing your organization's mental health initiatives, processes, and metrics and agreeing which metrics to track; the metrics could be absenteeism, turnover, EAP utilization, claims data, self-reported employee wellbeing, or other measures

→ Generating a baseline measurement of the agreed-upon metrics

→ Requiring providers and insurers to report on key metrics; such a requirement can be a part of your contracts with these groups

→ Continuing to collect data and analyze it at quarterly or other regular intervals, re-visiting and adjusting the list of tracked metrics as needed

Practice continuous quality improvement to assure sustained impact over time.

Specific strategies for employers include:

→ Creating a forum to review metrics and develop a plan to improve performance based on the metrics

→ Communicating the performance plan to the broader employee population and providing a mechanism for feedback to ensure that employees feel connected to and have a voice in the process

→ Revisiting the plan and related outcomes, such as metric results, on an ongoing basis to track success and identify areas that require follow-up

Visit **mhsoac.ca.gov/initiatives/workplace-mental-health/** for more information on the standards