

Workplace Communication Guidelines

Medical Leave of Absence

The Alberta Public Service's (APS) Vision and Values define how we as employees, supervisors, managers, and human resource professionals conduct ourselves in our daily work activities. How we communicate these Values - Respect, Integrity, Accountability, and Excellence – before, during and after an employee's medical leave of absence is paramount to ensuring our employees' commitment and engagement. The communication guidelines below support the APS' Vision and Values, and will provide a framework for planning the support and accommodation of employees off work or returning to work due to a physical or mental health condition.

Set the foundation

Setting the ground rules for how all staff will be treated if and when they are required to be off work due to a medical condition is an important step towards open and respectful communication. To begin, meet with your employees to establish the following workplace rules:

- 1. All staff, regardless of type of medical condition, will be treated the same.** This means there is no differentiation in the support we provide our employees who have physical or mental illnesses or conditions. Why? Because these are our employees and although disability caused by a mental illness or condition is not visible, it can be just as debilitating as a physical injury or disease. Statistics show that 35% of GoA employees receiving long-term disability income are afflicted by a primary mental health condition and as much as 75% of employees off work due to physical injuries or illnesses have a secondary mental health diagnosis.
 - Both physical and mental disabilities are protected grounds under the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act. This means that employees cannot be discriminated against due to their disability. Disabilities caused by drug and alcohol addictions are also protected under this Act.
- 2. We keep in touch with all employees while they are off work.** Communicating well with employees who are off work due to disability ties into our Vision & Values and makes returning to work from a medical leave much easier for the employees and the worksite. Employees also need to be aware that they are being missed at work and are a valuable member of the team. How do we keep in touch while maintaining respect for employees' recovery period?
 - Let employees identify how they prefer to be contacted at home (i.e. via email or telephone), and whether they would like to receive newsletters, staff announcements, or other email communications to keep them connected to their work unit.
 - Discuss and agree upon the frequency of contact that will work for both your employee and the worksite.
- 3. Employees off on medical leave are expected to keep in contact with the worksite.** Communication is a two-way process, and employees have an equal share of the responsibility to keep in touch with their worksite supervisor and/or Human Resources Consultant. Employees should be encouraged to communicate by calling in regularly to update how they are doing and update any return to work information available. Employees can provide this information without revealing their medical diagnosis.
- 4. Personal privacy is paramount in the workplace.** Respect and protect employees' privacy in the workplace. Individuals are not required to share personal medical details with co-workers or supervisors, and will set their own boundaries for what they feel comfortable sharing about a medical condition. As supervisors, we need to uphold high standards to protect our employees' privacy to maintain trust.
 - Strongly discourage speculation or gossip about an employee off work or just returning from a medical leave.
 - Ask employees what information, if any, they would like to be shared with co-workers about their absence.
- 5. Reject stigma of mental illness in the workplace.** Although many of us are personally impacted, either directly or indirectly, by mental health illnesses/conditions, an overwhelming majority of people feel their workplace relationships and career would be negatively impacted if it was known they had a mental illness diagnosed. The sad truth is that their concerns are valid and our challenge as leaders is to change our workplace culture regarding mental illness to one of knowledge and acceptance.

Set up an appropriate method for all staff to communicate concerns and special needs

- 1. Communicate non-confidential facts to the team when a team member is on medical leave.** Meet with an individual's direct working group to let them know a person will be away for a period of time and until the person returns, some work will need to be redistributed. Present ideas for redistribution of work and ask the group for their input. Re-affirm the workplace rules (as above).
- 2. Encourage all employees to share their concerns and job accommodation needs individually.**
 - Employees wishing to discuss the workplace impact of being short-staffed can meet with their supervisor, knowing their concerns will remain confidential.
 - Employees having difficulty performing their work duties due to a medical condition can safely communicate difficulties with their supervisor or Human Resources Consultant.
 - Employees returning to work from medical leave can meet with their supervisor and/or Human Resources Consultant to discuss special needs, accommodations required, and any concerns about their return to work plan.

Know, promote and access the supports available to assist you in the workplace

Ministry Human Resource Consultants can offer guidance and support to supervisors and managers while an employee is off work, and should be your first step to call for assistance. In addition, Workplace Health, Corporate Human Resources, has the following services and resources that can support workplace communication, positive health practices, and return-to-work planning.

- [Employee & Family Assistance Program \(EFAP\)](#)
- [Health Coaching](#)
- [Return to Work Guidelines](#)
- [Mental Health in the Workplace](#) 📄
- [Best Practices: Dealing with Suicide Threats in the Workplace](#) 📄
- [Reporting Workplace Injuries](#) 📄
- [WCB Tip Sheet for Supervisors](#) 📄
- [Life at Work Reference Guide](#)