Proposal for Action
Staff Mental Health Strategy for NYC OCME

BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

Mental illnesses and substance abuse conditions are extremely prevalent in the US, with significant associated personal, social and financial costs. Stress, especially chronic and traumatic stress, is a major contributor to the development of these illnesses.

Traumatic stress is a result of a direct or indirect exposure to anything that people may perceive as traumatic, a threat to life, or a threat to emotional or physical wellbeing; such as losing a job, a death of a loved one or experiencing a disaster. Traumatic stress in not part of normal daily life.

Most people experience only few traumatic events during their entire lifetime, but for some, like emergency rooms staff, first responders (police, fire and the EMS), soldiers and war journalists, and grief counselors; frequent trauma exposure is unavoidable part of their occupation. The scientific evidence of the harmful impact of repeated trauma exposure inherent to these jobs is numerous and strong, demonstrating an increased risk for exposure related mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance use disorders; as well highlighting the need to protect the menta health and wellbeing of those performing them.

Considering the nature of the work performed by the coroners/medical examiners offices, which investigate suspicious, violent, unexplained and unexpected deaths; the lack of research focusing on how this work affects staff's mental health and wellbeing is striking. Never the less the inherent mental health hazard of performing this work is clear, as it is difficult, physically, mentally, and emotionally draining, and often gruesome and sometimes dangerous work, with almost daily exposure to traumatic stressors, often for years .In fact, this work combines the most stressful and traumatizing aspect of those well studied occupations of first responders, war journalists and counselors. Research finding from these can be extrapolated, and indicate that unless mitigated and managed daily, the stress and daily trauma exposure of staff working in the coroners and medical examiners offices can negatively affect their health and performance, and it can become debilitating.

The need to better support the coroners/medical examiners offices staff's mental health and wellbeing is clear and urgent. Research into other similarly traumatizing jobs can guide this effort until occupation specific data becomes available. The NYC OCME can take a lead to instigate a change across the community by developing and implementing a local model to support their staff's mental health and wellbeing. As part of a public health agency, OCME can also advocate for mental health promotion and disease prevention across the community and help to build a research platform for collecting targeted data for developing guidelines, identifying best practices, and for obtaining funding for creating a more supportive work environment. This proposal is a formwork for action to achieve this.

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SOLICITATING BUY IN FOR ACTION

Providing a psychologically safe workplace is becoming a less and less optional. Changes in labor law, occupational health and safety, employment standards, workers compensation, are all highlighting the need for employers to provide a psychologically safe workplace. The 20 questions below for leaders about workplace psychology can help you review possible exposures to risk or potential for improvement in your organization.

1. Is employee psychological health and safety a stated priority in our organizational policy statement?
2. Do people in our organization have a common understanding of a psychologically safe workplace?
3. Is our management team familiar with the legal and regulatory requirements and expectations related to workplace mental health and psychological safety?
4. What is the cost of stress-related illnesses - both physical and mental - to our organization?
5. Is there a system in place to measure the rates of both absenteeism and presenteeism (being unproductive while present at work) in our organization and what percentage of these may be related to psychological health and safety issues?
6. What percentage of your disability claims do you believe are related in whole or in part to mental health issues or workplace conflict issues?
7. Do our policies align with occupational health and safety, labor law, tort law, contract law and employment standards with respect to psychological health and safety?
8. Is there a process in place to encourage frontline managers to provide a psychologically safe workplace through such measures as performance indicators and evaluation methods?
9. Are those whose position includes managing, supervising or supporting employees, adequately trained, skilled or competent to make sound decisions?
10. Do the leaders and management in our organization recognize and respond to conflict in a timely and effective manner?
11. Are the leaders and management in our organization trained to identify the difference between a mental health problem and a performance issue?
12. Does our organization have a policy on work-life balance?
13. Does our organization work to prevent physical, relational or emotional harassment, bullying or aggression?
14. Does our organization help prevent discrimination by providing all employees with a basic level of knowledge about mental health issues?
15. Do we have crisis response policies and processes in place for issues such as suicide, violence, threats of violence or emotional breakdowns at work?
16. Does our organization have a process allowing for open communications between managers, supervisors and employees that assist us to address the needs of co-workers who are traumatized by personal or workplace issues?

17. Do we have a return to work policy that takes into account the emotional, psychological and interpersonal challenges and allows union/employee representatives a role to play in the return to work process including having the opportunity to provide input on the return to work process?

18. Do we know how to reasonably accommodate those with a mental health disability at work?

19. What resources in our organization and/or community exist for employees struggling with mental health issues?

20. Is our organization exposed to complaints concerning the duty to reasonably accommodate persons with mental disabilities, which may include depression or anxiety-related disorders?

With appreciation to the Workforce Advisory Committee of the Mental Health Commission of Canada for their review of this document.

PROPOSAL FOR ACTION: STAFF MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY

A three-pronged approach, Start Locally (I), Engage the Research Community (II), and Advocate and Collaborate for Change (III), is being proposed to bring about a comprehensive and lasting change in the culture, policies and practices affecting the mental health of staff preforming various duties at the NYC OCME, with special attention to those whose work involves repeated, daily exposure to trauma as an unavoidable part of their duties.

The proposed approach allows starting with implementing highly needed changes locally to improve the psychological work environment at the NYC OCME, then share the experience with similar establishments as scalable and adaptable framework for action, and as feasible engage the research and the larger medicolegal community to establish shared standards for supporting the mental health of staff working in the coroners and medical examiner's offices across the country and beyond.

I.   STAFF MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY: START LOCALLY

A. Understand the Baseline
B. Support Staff Mental Health and Resilience
C. Build a Supportive Organization

The first, line of action should focus on identifying and implementing workplace policies and strategies in the NYC OCME that will help better understand the mental health impact associated with medico legal work and related support needs, offer education to change the culture of denial and stigma, improve self-care and build resilience; and establish ways of direct and practical support to individuals and teams. The overall goal is to maintain and improve existent levels of mental health, eliminate risk factors which lead to poor mental health, and reinforce those which contribute to good mental health and wellbeing.

A. Understand the Baseline

Goal
Implement steps to gain clear understanding of the organization's current psychological work environment, including mental health framework, strengths and weaknesses, and needs to address.

Rationale
A clear understanding of the agency's current psychological work environment can help develop an action plan which is target and needs specific and addresses the unique needs of staff working at the NYC OCME and potentially other coroner's and medical examiner's offices.

Activities

- **Establish a representing group with a mandate**
  Establish a *Mental health wellbeing committee* to lead the effort in the NYC OECME, representing all sections of the agency. Clearly identify its mandate and role within the agency.

- **Establish a baseline and assess needs**
  Assess the agency's baseline measure of psychological health and safety and support needs.
  - Assess current framework, policies, practices, resources. Use existing data (e.g. Turnover, complaints or grievances, Disability, benefit, absenteeism,)
  - Assess employee -staff and leadership- needs, preform a comprehensive, confidential assessment related to psychological health and safety.

- **Develop a plan**
  Guided by the assessment draft and implementation a plan for actions with clear targets and objectives, including short-term and long-term outcomes, and a plan for evaluation.

B. Support Staff Mental Health and Resilience

Goal
Develop and implement policies, programs and initiatives aiming to promote and support staff mental health and increase resilience against everyday stressors and against the repeated exposure to trauma, inherent to forensic/medicolegal work.

Rationale
- Professions involving repeated exposure to trauma has been associated with high levels of burnout, vicarious traumatization, decreased functioning, low morale, high staff turnaround and mental health problems such as depression, post traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, substance use disorders and suicide.
- Programs and services which support staff mental health and increase resilience are associated with improved wellbeing are numerous health-, job-, family-, and economically-related benefits; including effective functioning, higher retention rates, and prevention of potentially debilitating mental health disorders.

Activities
Develop and implement policies, programs and services which increase awareness and educate (a) and provide resources for staff (b).

(a) Educate staff
Educating staff involves all activities aiming to increase awareness, improve knowledge, and build skills. These should include:

- Psychoeducation
  - Display information in common areas, including posters, leaflets, tips and information sheets.
  - Create staff wellbeing page on the NYC OCME intranet offering relevant information- engage subject matter experts (SME), staff and peers in creating and maintaining it
  - Offer regular/daily/weekly emails with tips on mental health, resilience and wellbeing
- Trainings & Events (see Table 1.)
  - Develop policies regarding mandatory and optional trainings
  - Offer online and classroom-based trainings, workshops and presentations aiming to protect staff mental health and help them perform their tasks with compassion safely and effectively
  - Organize and support mental health and wellbeing events, discussion forums, workgroups, conferences, to share knowledge and experiences.

Table 1. TRAININGS FOR ALL STAFF

Focus area	Topic
Preventing stress and traumatic stress	▪ Stress one-on-one ▪ Trauma one-on-one ▪ Disaster mental health ▪ Mental health and wellbeing
Mitigating & managing stress and traumatic stress	▪ Stress management ▪ Conflict resolution ▪ Anger management ▪ Trauma related mental health illnesses ▪ Preventing burnout and vicarious traumatization ▪ Crisis management and suicide prevention ▪ Stigma, seeking help and peer support
Increasing resilience	▪ The pillars of resilience ▪ Self-care ▪ Happiness for mental health and wellbeing ▪ Taking on new challenges successfully
Improving skills for effective and safe functioning	▪ Psychological First Aid (PFA) ▪ Crisis counseling ▪ Interacting with grieving loved ones ▪ Death notification: Compassion and selfcare ▪ Improving face to face communication ▪ The art of communication on phone and via email

(b) Provide resources

Providing resources includes developing, offering and supporting access to tools and services which support staff mental health, wellbeing, and effective functioning.

Table 2. RESOURCES FOR ALL STAFF

Resource type	Resources
Wellbeing monitoring tools	▪ Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale" ▪ "Screen for Mental Health"- vendor managed web-based psychological self-assessment tool for ddepression, suicidality, anxiety, PTDS and substance use disorders ▪ Stress and burnout and Work-life balance scales
Peer support network	▪ "In house" peer support ▪ "External" network of peers
Professional mental health support	▪ Mentha health providers/trauma experts- list ▪ Neighborhood and shared resources -trauma experts
Other support groups	▪ Suicide, Substance use, Trauma etc. support groups ▪ Employee Assistance Program (EAP) ▪ Unions and other official employee support groups
Crisis and disasters response support	▪ NYC Well ▪ Mobile crisis teams ▪ DOHMH -REST (Resilience and Emotional Support Team)
Wellbeing resources	▪ Healthy breaks ▪ Staff teams for leisure activities ▪ General wellbeing activities

Additional currently available resources for adaptation for OCME staff support:

- **At Work support:** Being a Mindful Employee, Healthy Break Activities, Helping Troubled Co-Workers, Ideas for Resolving Conflict at Work, My Boss is Stressing Me Out, Peer Supporters, Protecting ourselves against bullying, Retiring Well, Requesting Accommodation, Return to Work Support, What if I can't work?, What is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)?, Independent Professionals, Working Through It — Virtual Peer Support

- **Personal Well-being support:** Exercises for Stress Reduction & Deep Relaxation, Mental Health Apps, Personal Development, Plan for Resilience, Self-Assessment Tools, Stress Management Tool

- **Family & Friends support:** Approaches to Wellness, Being a Health Advocate, Depression, Anxiety and Other Conditions, Mental Health First Aid, Significant Life Stressors

C. Build A Supportive Organization

Goal
Develop and implement policies, programs and initiatives aiming to build a supportive organizational structure with strong and caring leadership, where staff mental health and wellbeing is a priority.

Rationale
- A welcoming and safe workplace is key to people's mental health and wellbeing, and workplaces have the responsibility to create a psychologically safe and supportive workplace environment. It is also an economically sound investment, as it will enable and empower employees to do their best, increasing their engagement and productivity. It will also reduce absenteeism and staff turn around.

- While the work of many at the coroners and medical examiners offices is highly stressful with repeated trauma exposure, increasing their risk for developing mental health problems; stigma often prevents open discussion about mental health concerns and as result of it, taking actions to address problems.

- To effectively promote and protect staff mental health and wellbeing at the coroners and medical examiners offices, changing the culture to reduce stigma, and engaging leaders and staff in creating a psychologically safe and supportive work environment must be a priority.

- Supportive leadership can help mitigate the risks of daily and work-related chronic traumatic stress on the mental health and well-being of their staff and has been strongly associated with the ability to recruit and retain talent and employee well-being.

Activities

Create a psychologically safe and supportive work environment by stablishing a mental health strategy for action (a), and by building a strong and caring leadership (b).

(a) Establish NYC OCME mental health strategy for action

Establishing a mental health strategy for building a psychologically safe and supportive workplace environment in the NYC OECM is essential, and it requires a culture change, with everyone involved.

- Change the culture by embracing trauma-informed principles and developing policies which support this change. Trauma-informed principles for mental health policy development supporting destigmatization and culture change:

    o Commit to workplace mental health and resilience across all sections of the Agency, and keep them on the agenda
    o Identify stressors and acknowledge trauma exposure and its impact as real and legitimate
    o Commit to self-care to counteract the effect of stress and chronic trauma exposure
    o Eliminate any subculture of stigmatization and bullying
    o Build and maximize team spirits and collegiality and establish a peer support system
    o Support help seeking and establish clear leadership guidelines for staff mental health support

- Develop mental health strategy action plan with short- and long-term goals, specific action steps, resource needs and expected outcomes, complete with milestones for reaching them.

- Identify and engage as appropriate all potential internal and external partners in planning including Health and Safety, HR, EAP, Employee legal services, Unions, mental health care providers and support groups, employee support groups, peer support groups, and others.

- Implement mental health strategy action plan, monitor progress, and use corrective actions as needed.

(b) Build a strong and caring leadership

Leaders play an important role in initiating and facilitating a culture change that reduces mental health related stigma at their work place and set a good example for others. When seen to care about mental health, they can help de-stigmatize the discussion around it, and encourage employees to speak up and seek assistance.

Leaders need to be prepared and have the skills to effectively promote and support their employees' mental health and wellbeing, and lead and motivate their staff to help address mental health issues and create a psychologically safe and supportive work environment.

Leaders should attend classroom and take online mandatory and optional knowledge and skill building trainings, workshops and presentations, pertinent to their staff's and their own mental health and wellbeing. Resources, such as tip and information sheets, checklists and guide books, that can help leaders create a stigma free, psychologically supportive and caring work environment should be identified and developed as needed. In addition, leader should attend trainings mandatory for their staff.

Table 3. LEADERSHIP KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL BUILDING TRAININGS

"The Agenda- Mental Health in the Workplace" training series offers a model, which can be modified and presented by a SME to appropriately and address the unique learning needs of leaders working in NYC OCME and other coroners and medical examiner offices.

Psychological Support	A work environment where co-workers and supervisors are supportive of employees psychological and mental health concerns, and responds appropriately as needed	▪ Improved overall employee mental health and wellbeing ▪ Successful and sustainable return to work ▪ Reasonable workplace support during time of emotional distress, crisis or upset ▪ Understanding and awareness of mental health
Organizational Culture	A stigma free work environment characterized by trust, honesty, support and fairness	▪ Higher job satisfaction and morale ▪ Decrease in bullying and stigmatizing behavior ▪ Open discussion about mental health issues ▪ Increase utilization of staff support resources ▪ Greater teamwork ▪ Enhanced retention and recruitment ▪ Increased pride in work ▪ With positive public and community image
Clear Leadership & Expectations	A work environment where there is an effective leadership and support that helps employees know what they need to do, how their work contributes to the agency and about impending changes	▪ Clear expectations job responsibility and roles ▪ Positive morale and high resilience even during high stress times ▪ Trust in management ▪ Low frustration, less conflict
Civility & Respect	Help create a work environment where employees are respectful and considerate in their interactions with one another, as well as with other colleagues and the member of the public	▪ Effective teamwork and positive morale ▪ Less conflict among colleagues ▪ Effective resolution to conflicts ▪ Respectful leadership at all levels
Psychological Competencies & Requirements	A work environment where there is a good fit between employees interpersonal and emotional competencies and the requirements of their position	▪ Enhanced work performance and overall productivity ▪ Greater job satisfaction ▪ Increased retention of skilled staff ▪ Enhanced recruitment success

Table 3. LEADERSHIP KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL BUILDING TRAININGS- cont.

Growth & Development	A work environment where employees receive encouragement and support in the development of their interpersonal, emotional and job skills	▪ Increased employee competence ▪ Greater retention of skilled staff ▪ Effective succession planning/internal promotion
Recognition & Reward	A work environment where there is appropriate acknowledgement and appreciation of employees' efforts in a fair and timely manner	▪ Enhanced employee satisfaction, loyalty and motivation ▪ Improved teamwork and positive morale ▪ Increased retention and recruitment of skilled staff ▪ Enhanced employee and/or labor relations
Involvement & Influence	A work environment where employees are included in discussions about how their work is done, and how decisions are made	▪ Greater employee satisfaction and motivation ▪ Employees take an active role in addressing challenges at work ▪ Positive employee/labor relations
Workload Management	A work environment where tasks and responsibilities aca n be accomplished successfully within the time available	▪ Reduced staff stress and burnout ▪ Fewer job-related errors, incidents, accidents or injuries ▪ Increased employee retention
Engagement	A work environment where employees feel connected to their work and are motivated to do their job well	▪ High employee morale and motivation ▪ Enhanced recruitment and retention of skilled employees ▪ Improved public relations
Balance	A work environment where there is a recognition of the need for balance between the demands of work, family and personal life	▪ Greater staff recognition and morale ▪ Reduced staff stress and burnout ▪ Reduced absenteeism and disability
Psychological Protection	A work environment where workers feel able to put themselves on the line, ask questions, seek feedback, report mistakes and problems, or propose a new idea without fearing negative consequences to themselves, their job or career	▪ Reduced conflict ▪ Fewer job-related errors, incidents, accidents and injuries ▪ Enhanced compliance with legal and regulatory requirements ▪ Bullying and harassment is not permitted ▪ Ability to detect and respond suicidality

II. STAFF MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY: ENGAGE THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY

The second line of action is to instigate research, specific to forensic medicolegal death investigative work through collaboration with academic and other research bodies. This can help collect and share data needed to establish the scientific evidence base for identifying best practices and developing guidelines for creating a psychologically healthy and supportive work environment in corners and medical examiners offices. Due to the many large-scale disasters which occurred in NYC and the country in the past two decades, there is a large local and national academic community with trauma focused research interest, and DOHMH has a long-established good relationship with some, which maybe useful for soliciting interest for collaboration from this community.

III. STAFF MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY: ADVOCATE AND COLLABORATE FOR CHANGE

The third line of action is to advocate for the mental health and wellbeing of all staff working at coroner's and medical examiner's offices across the country and beyond. Collaboration and coordinated effort is needed to bring into the spotlight the highly traumatizing nature of the important work performed by thousands, so needed support becomes available. Creating a psychologically supportive and safe work environment for them must become a national mental health priority, with programs which empower, educate and support.

The NYC OCME can lead this change by developing and implementing a local model to support their own staff's mental health and wellbeing, sharing it with the community, and encouraging others to follow suite.