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FINAL REPORT

Island Health

Report of the Workplace Assessment Process for Westhaven

November 22, 2021

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Introduction

Jessica McNamara (ADR Education) was engaged to design and conduct a workplace assessment process for Westhaven, Island Health.

Leadership is committed to improving workplace relations and quality of life at Westhaven. To do so, an assessment and analysis of the issues, concerns and opportunities for improvement was undertaken. The intent of the process was to identify the main issues and problems to determine how staff can work together more effectively and efficiently. The workplace assessment process is therefore not designed to find fault, attribute blame, or criticize. Its purpose is to provide staff, supervisors, and management with an opportunity to reflect on the dynamics, challenges and issues that may be impacting Westhaven's functionality and wellbeing.

A process was designed that includes the following tasks:

- Conduct private and confidential interviews with staff on a voluntary basis
- Develop a list of consistent themes (dominant perspectives) about workplace challenges and issues needing attention and resolution
- Draft a summary report that describes the main themes requiring action and improvement, and provide a set of recommendations
- Present the report to the group and discuss its contents
- Provide strategic advice and assistance to senior management about how to move ahead with implementing the action plan

Thank you for taking the time to share your perspectives and insights. Your collective willingness to speak openly about your views and experiences is gratefully acknowledged. The responsibility for improvement and addressing unresolved issues rests with *all* team members, not just management or any single individual. It will require the commitment and participation of the group as a whole to implement positive changes. Strong leadership and support from senior management is required for moving forward effectively.

Nature of the Assessment

This workplace assessment is not an investigation. It is an enquiry by the assessor about the health of the workplace ***from the point of view of those who work in it***. The assessor's job is not to critically investigate the trustworthiness of anything that is reported to her nor to determine the factual accuracy of what was heard. On the contrary, the assessor is reporting on the opinions – perceptions, experiences, feeling and thoughts - of those who work in the workplace about its health and functionality. In total, 26 people (more than half of the total number working at the Site) were interviewed and input was received from both staff and management.

The assessment is made after completing the interviews and therefore offers an accurate reflection based on those who participated in the process.

Self-imposed Limits to the Report

Predictably, in some of the interviews the assessor heard participants' opinions about conflicts with staff and managers. The themes that emerged from these interviews are included in this report. However, the assessor is not commenting about individual staff or managers and the specific conflicts they may be experiencing. As mentioned, a workplace assessment is not an investigation and therefore not intended to be a tool to determine wrongdoing or expose alleged breaches of performance. Where there are consistent criticisms and concerns attributed to individuals' behaviour in the workplace, management is encouraged to pursue those appropriately. That could involve advice, coaching, training, and other remedies.

About this Report

This report aims to be concise and descriptive. It is composed by considering and analyzing all the information shared during the interview process. It captures consistent perspectives identified by those interviewed and does not highlight infrequently mentioned issues. Terms like "many", "some", "most", "a great majority" or "generally" will be used. Such terms are intended to give the reader an approximation of how broadly or narrowly a view or opinion was shared. The contents of the report are not a statement of fact nor are they designed to find fault or attribute blame. The report reflects the perceptions, opinions, views, and feelings revealed during the interviews. It describes and analyzes three main themes identified below.

These core issues need to be addressed for the workplace to move forward positively and improve its effectiveness and functionality:

1. Communication and Complaining
2. Lack of Teamwork
3. Roles and Responsibilities

In terms of format, first each of the themes is summarized and briefly analyzed. Direct, un-attributable quotes are included to contextualize the meaning of each theme. The quotes represent similar statements that were heard frequently and are sufficiently general that they could have been said by anyone who was interviewed. Next, a series of procedural recommendations are provided to address each major issue.

Overview and Current Situation

Westhaven is composed of highly qualified, dedicated, and motivated staff. It is generally

acknowledged that the community is a high-quality team of people who have extensive experience and are passionate about what they do. There is a strong sense that providing exemplary support and care for residents is paramount. However, there are concerns that degradation of staff relationships and lack of teamwork is negatively impacting resident care and the workplace as a whole.

It is important to note that the extra stressors and fatigue experienced because of COVID 19 contribute to the current situation at Westhaven. In addition, the Site has not had consistent on-site Leadership support for several years. There have been several different CNL positions filled and then vacated, and the lack of continuity has impacted the workplace.

Many people interviewed talked about Westhaven's reputation and that it was widely known as not a good place to work.

"It has a reputation of having a bit of a tough crowd."
"People talk about a toxic work environment at Westhaven."
"It had a bit of a reputation on the Island... not a good one."
"People will say Oh, you work at Westhaven? How is THAT going for you?"

Almost all of those interviewed described the workplace as unwelcoming and uncomfortable.

"It is not a supportive environment."
"It is very unwelcoming."
"It is not a welcoming environment."
"It is filled with a lot of negativity, you feel it as soon as you walk in the doors."

Although people working within the Site expressed serious concerns about how the workplace has been experienced and viewed in the past, many see recent changes being positive and a shift occurring. Participants largely attributed the positive shift underway to changes in staffing and the arrival of a new CNL.

"There is an amazing amount of hope right now."
"It has been pretty bad but we have a new CNL coming in and things are starting to feel better."
"I think we all want the same thing and if we can work together, we can get there. We just need to figure out how to do it."
"Things have improved recently, I'm not sure how much that has to do with individuals or what, but it is better."
"There are some good, new staff coming in and if we can treat them well, it will strengthen the team."

In sum, the Site is improving but staff relations are far from collegial and cooperative. There is widespread recognition that certain behaviors are frequently disrespectful within the Westhaven community. These can include communication and inter-personal treatment that

lacks professionalism and collegiality. Worse still are behaviors that are regularly experienced as aggressive, harassing, and unkind. Changing the Site's culture and climate is not a matter of whole scale transformation; rather it should concentrate on deliberate efforts and actions that clearly manifest core values and help to realize its strategic priorities and overall vision. Building greater social cohesion and relatedness (i.e., reducing the "us and them" dynamic) requires being more intentional about cultivating supportive and communicative relationships. There are a few key areas that need concerted effort to improve and enhance the overall culture and functionality of the Site. Attending to these areas will help ensure that its membership is well supported and able to provide excellent care to the Residents.

Themes

The following section describes and analyses the three core themes (main subjects) consistently identified through the interviews. They represent the main areas the Site should focus on to see improvements and move forward positively. As mentioned, the themes are based on the prevailing perspectives and impressions revealed during the interviews. They are framed and nuanced by the assessors' analysis of the information shared by those interviewed. Each theme is briefly described and analyzed, and includes direct, un-attributable quotes that help reinforce key messages.

1. Communication and Complaining

Currently workplace morale is relatively low but is reported to be improving. Frustration has been a regular experience for many employees and has resulted in a lack of respectful communication. The general experience of those interviewed is that a climate of uncivil or disrespectful communication has become the norm. Interpersonal communication dynamics in Westhaven were described mainly as negative, indirect, and disrespectful.

"There is so much talking behind people's backs, so unprofessional."

"There is such a tone of disrespect – eye rolling, dismissing people, withholding information, no common courtesy. Everyone is frustrated with everybody."

"There is a lack of basic civility, no one is initiating conversations."

"It feels so defeating. Sometimes you say good morning and no one will even turn around."

"Eye rolling, deflection, passive aggressive comments."

Effective communication requires intentional listening, acknowledgement, empathy, curiosity, and clear articulation of ideas and meaning. It is a major effort to demonstrate the core skills and attitudes necessary for effective communication. It is not unusual in any workplace to have differing tolerance levels for diverse styles of communication. However, the level of discomfort expressed by many of the interviewee's points to an issue that needs to be addressed.

The general experience of those interviewed is that venting and complaining is a common occurrence at Westhaven and that the communication pattern has become normalized and somewhat ingrained in the workplace culture.

“There is a lot of complaining about other people and even the residents, it is really unprofessional and exhausting.”

“Morale is low and people are often complaining about workload and individuals. It’s just a negative loop that is on repeat.”

“There has always been a lot of ranting, complaining - some people are extremely vocal and negative.”

“There is out loud bad-mouthing others. So inappropriate. Sometimes even when they are in the same room.”

Without a clear avenue for complaint handling, and agreement on what is appropriate to discuss at work, the negative tone of expression will continue and may deteriorate further. The Site needs to consider and establish its conflict and complaint handling philosophy and ensure that effective procedures are available to promote constructive engagement and problem solving. When conflicts and complaints are ineffectively addressed, it negatively impacts the Site’s reputation and overall wellbeing. Establishing increased conflict competence and capacity requires the integration of values and philosophy (attitude), with available approaches for constructive engagement (processes) backed by intentional behaviors and actions (skills and abilities).

2. Lack of Teamwork

As mentioned in the beginning of this report, the impact of COVID 19 has predictably contributed to the current climate at Westhaven. Chronic short staffing and overall burnout have created a situation where people are tired, and the extra workload is experienced as more onerous than usual. The current situation - Global Pandemic, changing Public Health Orders and mandatory vaccination requirements etc. - requires flexibility and teamwork in order to properly serve the Residents at Westhaven. Many of those interviewed reported a significant lack of teamwork (i.e., cooperation) and a reluctance to help.

“There is zero teamwork. People ask for help and are told no or that’s not my job.”

“If you are not liked, you are left on your own.”

“It’s so strange, if someone is asked to do something, or help, they refuse, or it becomes an argument.”

“There is no cohesive feeling of team. I think it impacts the residents.”

Specifically, almost every person interviewed reported an “us versus them” dynamic between the nurses and the care aids.

“There is very clear staff splitting.”

“There is a big disconnect between nurses and care aids.”

“There is conflict between the nurses and care aids.”

“There is this tension between the two groups. I’m not sure what it is about and I don’t know how to address it.”

“There seems to be a clash between nurses and care aids.”

The perception of an “us versus them” dynamic was mainly attributed to a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities (described below), poor communication and some historical leadership difficulties. These contributing factors have created a situation where some nurses are feeling disrespected and ganged up on, while some care aids are feeling undervalued and disrespected.

3. Roles and Responsibilities

As mentioned above, a perceived lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities has contributed to conflict which “shows up” as disrespectful communication and reduced cooperation and teamwork at Westhaven. Different expectations about how things are done, when they are done and whose responsibility it is to do them has created a situation where people are resentful and frequently default to blaming each other. Although everyone interviewed spoke about their own commitment to resident care, many people expressed concerns about how care is being provided by others.

“It doesn’t feel like it is patient centered.”

“It feels like there isn’t any respect for people’s roles and that creates a situation that impacts the residents.”

“We really need to be more resident focused, it feels like all the other stuff going on gets in the way of that.”

Many examples were provided that illustrated different expectations of what others should be doing and how it should be done. The examples included different perspectives on procedures/protocols, timing of resident care, substance of resident care and the severity of incidents. In a well-functioning workplace, a lack of structure is not necessarily problematic when people know what is expected and pitch in to make sure it gets done. When there is problematic communication dynamics and a lack of teamwork, role clarity is essential to ensure that people are on the same page about how and what needs to be accomplished. While there is a need for structure and clarity around roles and responsibilities, it must be balanced with the understanding that the group is a team and there will be times when individuals need to be flexible in their roles and assist others to meet the needs of the residents.

Recommendations

The following recommendations address the major issues described in this report and are intentionally procedural in nature. The specifics, including details about implementation and monitoring will be discussed with the group and finalized by management. The suggestions presented below do not represent an immediate solution or quick fix. However, taken together they can be implemented successfully in the relatively near-term provided the motivation,

resources and leadership exist to do so. It should be noted that while these recommendations are organized around the themes discussed above, there is overlap between them and they may contribute to more than one theme. The recommendations are primarily focused on the goals of:

- Improving communication and respectful relations
- Building and fostering a sense of team and enhancing cooperation
- Providing more structure and establishing greater clarity regarding roles and responsibilities

The recommendations should improve the situation at the Site provided there is supportive leadership and genuine commitment to change. The responsibility to move forward positively rests with the entire group. A Follow-Up Review (i.e., checking-in and monitoring progress) is part of the workplace assessment process and will be planned accordingly.

1. Communication

- a) Design and implement a workshop for all the staff, supervisors, and management to jointly develop a “Team Charter”. The Charter will consist of agreed upon expectations about behavior/communication in the workplace, a definition of teamwork, agreed upon processes for handling conflicts and procedural steps to be followed if the Charter is not adhered to.
- b) Conduct a “Communicating in Conflict” training session for all staff and supervisors to focus on skills and process for addressing conflict.

2. Team Building

- a) Opportunities for teambuilding should be actively sought out and implemented. They should be offered to all the Westhaven employees. This goes beyond formal team building exercises and should include any informal-type opportunity to bring the group together (e.g., for holidays and celebrations etc.).
 - ❖ Recognizing the current challenges that COVID 19 poses for conducting these kinds of activities, it remains important to action them when it is feasible and safe to do so. In the meantime, virtual ways to achieve, “the bringing together of people” should be explored.

3. Roles and Responsibilities

- a) Hold regular, mandatory staff meetings
- b) Create detailed checklists for shift duties
- c) Review and communicate protocols and procedures on a regular basis

- d) Review and communicate scope and responsibilities of each position at Westhaven
- e) Conduct regular performance reviews
- f) Create a standardized on-boarding process for new staff that includes assigned mentors or a specific person to assist with orientation, including the development and provision of an orientation package

A final recommendation, suggested by several participants, is to review the status of each resident at Westhaven. Some concerns were expressed that certain resident's needs have increased and that staffing levels, at certain times, are not adequate to meet them.

Follow-Up Review

A Follow-up Review is a necessary and important part of the workplace assessment process. It is intended to evaluate progress, monitor changes, and determine what further actions may still be required. Planning and organizing the Follow-Up is the responsibility of senior leadership and should be determined at their discretion.