

## Exploring Industry Shifts Around Mental Health

Written by: Donna Laquidara-Carr, Ph.D., Industry Insights Research Director, Dodge Data & Analytics

### DATA DISPLAYS CONSTRUCTION'S RENEWED FOCUS ON EMPLOYEE CARE

The construction industry struggles with one of the highest suicide rates of any profession in the U.S., leading to a shift in how companies approach the mental health of their workers. New data from Dodge Construction Network's Civil Quarterly reveals that civil contractors are beginning to take the issues of mental health, company culture, and substance use seriously. However, the industry will still need to put more in place to fully address this issue.

The findings reveal 39% of contractors offer some mental health resources, but small and midsize firms struggle to provide the same support as large companies. Even among large companies, only 53% offer resources at all. About one-fifth (19%) of large contractors, though, are in the vanguard of mental health in the industry, providing resources, a supportive culture and leadership attention to this issue; only 3% of the small and midsize companies report the same.

A survey for the Safety Management in the Construction Industry SmartMarket Report (published in October 2023) suggests the low volume may be driven by not knowing how to proceed to tackle this issue. This survey examines a broad range of contractors, including those focused primarily on commercial and institutional projects in addition to those doing civil work; the respondents are nearly split between general contractors and specialty trade contractors. Strikingly, when presented with a long list of options that they would



like to be the focus of toolbox talks, webinars, infographics, and other ways of communicating information, by far the top option they chose is more information on mental health, suicide, and opioid overdose. Far more contractors select this than more typical safety topics like lifting/ergonomics, power tool, or ladder safety. This provides compelling evidence that the industry is seeking more resources to address these challenges.

It is useful, therefore, to see the top programs and types of assistance provided by other contractors. The Civil Quarterly survey reveals that some of the most common ones include:

- » Employee assistance programs
- » Information on where workers can access mental health assessment websites
- » Distribution of information on mental health programs and challenges


Notably, civil contractors also rank these approaches as the most likely to be effective to promote improved mental health. In addition, training for workers directly addressing mental health issues is also cited as one of the most effective means to take, although it is less widely adopted.

Currently, large companies offer all these means of addressing mental health far more frequently than midsize or small companies. However, apart from offering training, none of these require dedicated internal experts on mental health. Instead, the industry is utilizing many of the tools that exist externally, outside of their companies. This strategy could be more widely utilized by small and midsize companies, if they were more aware of these materials.

The report also features an interview with Dr. John S. Gaal, director of the worker wellness program, MO AFL-CIO's Missouri Works Initiative. In the interview, he discusses many external resources available to contractors. These include:

- » The website for the **Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention**, which offers an interactive training tutorial on suicide.
- » **CPWR**, which has free data and other materials available on mental health, substance use, and suicide prevention.
- » The **National Alliance on Mental Illness** and the **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention** both have useful materials that can be applied in construction.
- » The **Healthier Workforce Center of the Midwest** at the University of Iowa offers toolbox talks and industry guidelines on these issues.
- » The **United Way's 211 program** allows people to connect with resources available to them, including those addressing mental health. It can be accessed by phone, but also by computer.

One of the most challenging elements to address, though, is the culture at a company and the stigma associated with seeking mental health support. Out of the five strategies included in the survey to deal with this issue, even the most widely used – access to tools that can be used privately like webinars and assessment tools – is only utilized by 36%. Only 35% of the respondents report that their company leadership visibly prioritizes mental health. Wider adoption of these types of approaches could increase the ability of companies to support their staff effectively.

More encouragingly, the shift to a focus on mental health may already be bearing fruit. When civil contractors and engineers were asked to compare the state of mind/state of mental health at their organization currently with that of five years ago, 36% report that it is better, and only 15% believe it is worse. Hopefully, as more companies can utilize existing resources available to them and make them known to their employees, many more will be able to report improvement in the state of mental health at their companies. 



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### About the Author

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Donna Laquidara-Carr, Ph.D., is industry insights research director at [Dodge Data & Analytics](#), where she provides editorial direction to the SmartMarket Report Series, covering such diverse topics as world green-building trends, the business value of building information modeling, managing risk in the construction industry, the drive toward healthier buildings, building a safety culture, and lean construction. Her insights on these topics have been published in numerous industry publications, and she regularly conducts webinars and speaks about this research at events for diverse organizations, including the AIA National Conference, CMAA National Convention, AGC National Convention, the Lean Congress, Greenbuild, the inaugural WELL Conference, and BOMA.

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### About the Article

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