

Rochester nonprofits address workplace mental health challenges

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Summary:

- 62% of employers report stress and burnout concerns
- NCADD-RA offers free workplace wellness workshops
- NAMI Rochester provides mental health awareness training
- Compeer Rochester promotes volunteerism for mental health

From caring for children and aging parents to managing financial pressures and rising workplace demands, many workers today are navigating stressors that extend well beyond the office. Here, Rochester-area nonprofit leaders discuss how these pressures are affecting employee mental health and what employers can do to foster more supportive workplace cultures.

DePaul's National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence-Rochester Area

Jennifer Faringer, director of DePaul's National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence–Rochester Area (NCADD-RA), says one of the strongest predictors of employee well-being is whether workers feel connected and supported within their workplace culture.

"The employee feeling a sense of connection and belonging or having coworkers and supervisors who communicate well and support each other is huge," Faringer said.



Jennifer Faringer

Through a federally funded workplace wellness initiative, NCADD-RA spent the last several years researching the impact of stress, burnout, mental health, and substance use challenges within workplaces across the region. The organization interviewed community leaders, conducted focus groups, and surveyed employers throughout multiple counties.

Among the findings: 62% of employers reported stress and burnout as major workplace concerns, while roughly half identified mental health and substance use challenges as significant factors affecting employee well-being and productivity. Sleep issues and fatigue also emerged as common concerns.

Faringer says many employers estimated they were spending a substantial portion of their time responding to workplace issues connected to stress, burnout, mental health, and addiction.

At the same time, Faringer has seen a growing willingness among employers to approach these issues from a more supportive rather than punitive perspective.

"We used to get calls that sounded like, 'I'm concerned my employees are using. What policies can I put into place?'" Faringer said. "Now we try to reframe that conversation toward early intervention, support, and awareness of resources."

NCADD-RA currently offers an extensive menu of free workplace wellness workshops and trainings through its "Team Awareness for Workplace Wellness" initiative, which focuses on team building, stress management, resilience, healthy coping strategies, and workplace culture.

"We don't want it to be one and done," Faringer said. "We want people to take these tools back to their families, their workplace culture, and their community."

For employers unsure where to begin, Faringer encourages them to simply start the conversation and connect with local organizations that can help.

"What employees often say after these trainings is, 'I feel honored that my employer cared enough about us to give us this time,'" she said. "That alone can make a real difference."

NAMI Rochester

June White, director of operations for NAMI Rochester, says stress, anxiety, burnout, depression, and isolation continue to be some of the biggest mental health challenges affecting today's workforce, many of them intensified by financial strain and outside pressures.

"We're definitely seeing stress, anxiety, burnout, some depression and potentially isolation depending on the working arrangements," said White, who noted that the scaling back of employees at some companies has been a contributing factor.

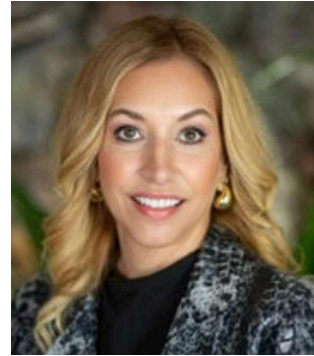
White also believes stigma surrounding mental health still prevents some employees from seeking help or speaking openly about their struggles.

At the same time, she is seeing employers becoming increasingly aware of the connection between mental health, productivity, absenteeism, and overall employee well-being. As a result, NAMI Rochester has seen growing interest from businesses seeking presentations, mental health awareness training, and leadership guidance on how to better support employees.

"I think they're really recognizing that well-being, including mental health, is just as vital as physical well-being," White said.

White encourages employers to normalize conversations surrounding mental health through initiatives such as employee resource groups, workplace speakers, and educational webinars.

NAMI Rochester offers several free, peer-led workplace programs, including "End the Stigma" and "You Can Ask Anything," both designed to encourage open conversation and improve understanding surrounding mental health. The organization also offers support groups and referrals to additional community resources when needed.



June White

For employers unsure where to begin, White recommends forming a cross-functional, multi-generational team to identify stressors, gaps, and employee needs within the organization before partnering with local nonprofits for additional support and training.

"It used to be, 'Leave work at work and home at home,' but you bring everything with you to work because you can't help it," White said. "That mindset shift is vital."

Compeer Rochester

"Considering the timing of significant world events that have taken place over the last decade, we have young people entering the workforce who were impacted by the isolation of COVID during their school years," said Sara Passamonte, CEO of Compeer Rochester. "And we have aging workers who are experiencing the need to continue working to support themselves financially while they care for children, parents, siblings, and others."



Sara Passamonte

Passamonte also points to chronic stress and heartache related to global tensions, economic strain, and uncertainty about the future as contributors to the number of people experiencing challenges at home, in the workplace, and in other day-to-day settings.

Simultaneously, she is seeing greater interest among employers in learning about mental health and getting involved with programs that help build community, including volunteerism.

"Compeer focuses on the art and science of helping," she said. "The act of volunteerism has both a ripple and boomerang effect, benefiting the helper as much as the person they set out to help."

A 2025 study published in the peer-reviewed academic journal *Frontiers in Public Health* found that volunteering is associated with reduced depressive symptoms, a greater sense of purpose, improved coping abilities, and stronger social connections.

Passamonte said Compeer helps employers see the value in offering volunteer opportunities to their staff and provides a training curriculum covering the basics of mental health, relationship building and boundaries, self-care, and cultural responsibility for those who become volunteers.

"We're on a big mission this year to try to get in front of employers," Passamonte said. "We want people to contact us. We want people to think of Compeer when they're talking about wellness initiatives for their staff."

Passamonte also highly recommends that employers and employees attend a Mental Health First Aid training session. The Monroe County Office of Mental Health offers in-person training throughout the year, teaching attendees how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges.

AFSP Western NY

"There is no single cause for suicide," said Samantha Standing, Western New York area director for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP). "Often, stressors and health issues come together to create feelings of hopelessness and despair."

Standing says workplace environment factors — including customer interactions, productivity expectations, scheduling demands, and pace of work — continue to impact the mental well-being of working-age adults across the country. And, because many adults spend a significant portion of their lives at work, employers are uniquely positioned to help support mental health and suicide prevention efforts.

"Workplaces are crucial communities to reach people with lifesaving resources," Standing said.

According to AFSP, an estimated 10% of workers experience depression, substance use disorders, or other psychological conditions that can significantly affect daily functioning and productivity. Lost productivity tied to mental health conditions costs the U.S. more than \$100 billion annually, yet only one in five people with a mental health condition receives the care they need.

"Embedding mental health promotion into organizational policies and procedures is an impactful way for employers to send a message of care and concern for the health of their employees," Standing said.

Among the practical strategies she recommends are creating workplace wellness committees, promoting mental health as part of broader wellness campaigns, offering flexible accommodations for therapy or mental health appointments, and providing educational opportunities for both employees and leadership.

"Rochester has so many great resources, including AFSP of WNY's Talk Saves Lives program, and employees need to know that they are never alone," Standing said.

AFSP's Talk Saves Lives presentation can be offered virtually or in person and provides education on suicide prevention, warning signs, risk factors, and available resources. The organization also offers versions tailored specifically to the LGBTQ community and the construction industry, both of which face disproportionately high rates of suicide risk.

Standing says awareness surrounding mental health and suicide prevention has improved in recent years. A 2024 Harris Poll conducted for AFSP found that 92% of respondents believe employers have a role to play in supporting mental health and suicide prevention.

Still, she says stigma and fear continue to prevent many people from reaching out for help.

"Many people are reluctant to seek help through services offered by their employers," Standing said. "They may worry about confidentiality, fear that admitting their need for help will jeopardize their employment or believe that their problems will resolve on their own."

Mental Health Association of Rochester/Monroe County

"One of the biggest challenges I see is that many people are carrying a great deal of responsibility both inside and outside of work," said Kelly Hoodak, director of development and communications for the Mental Health Association of Rochester/Monroe County.

"Employees are often balancing demanding jobs while also managing financial pressures, caring for children or aging family members, navigating personal challenges, and trying to maintain their own well-being."

Hoodak says conversations surrounding stress, burnout, and difficulty maintaining healthy boundaries between work and personal life have become increasingly common. While awareness surrounding mental health has grown significantly in recent years, she believes stigma still prevents many employees from reaching out for support.

"Mental health challenges don't stop when someone walks into work each morning," Hoodak said. "People bring their full lives with them, which is why creating supportive workplace environments is so important."

According to Hoodak, one of the most meaningful ways employers can support their teams is by creating workplace cultures where mental health is treated as an important part of overall well-being rather than something employees feel pressured to hide.

"Support can look different across organizations, but it often starts with open communication, empathy, flexibility when possible, and leadership that models healthy boundaries and self-awareness," Hoodak said.

She also encourages employers to increase awareness of available mental health resources, offer educational opportunities and trainings, and normalize seeking help before employees reach a crisis point.

"Creating a mentally healthy workplace does not require perfection," she added. "It requires consistency, empathy, and a willingness to listen."

Hoodak says the Mental Health Association of Rochester/Monroe County has seen growing interest from employers looking to better understand how mental health impacts workplace culture, employee retention, morale, and overall engagement.

"We've seen growing interest in trainings, educational presentations, wellness initiatives, and conversations focused on reducing stigma and creating healthier workplace environments," Hoodak said.

The organization offers a variety of community-based programs, trainings, and educational opportunities focused on mental well-being, suicide prevention, peer support, and stigma reduction. Hoodak says the goal is to help organizations create workplace cultures where employees feel supported, connected, and comfortable seeking help when needed.

For employers unsure where to begin, Hoodak recommends starting with simple, consistent actions that help employees feel psychologically safe and valued.

"Even small actions, such as checking in with employees, encouraging use of available resources, promoting work-life balance, or offering educational opportunities, can help create a more supportive culture over time," Hoodak said.

If you or someone you care about is having thoughts of suicide or is in crisis, call or text 988 to reach the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, 24/7.

Caurie Putnam is a Rochester-area freelance writer.