

## Niagara Health System, unions launch new back-to-work strategy



NHS interim president and chief executive officer Sue Matthews (right) talks about a new back-to-work program launched Monday. With Matthews is Dianne LeClair, of the Ontario Nurses Association. Bullet News photo by John Robbins.

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NIAGARA – The Niagara Health System and its unions have launched an innovative back-to-work program aimed at improving outcomes for injured and ill workers and reducing multi-million dollar sick-time costs.

The project, which was developed in collaboration with the Ontario Worker Safety and Insurance Board, was unveiled during a press conference held at the NHS's Ontario Street site, in St. Catharines Monday.

“The Return to Work and Primary Prevention program is aimed at preventing injuries and illnesses by maintaining a safe and healthy workplace and helping injured employees return to a productive and safe work environment,” said Sue Matthews, the health system’s interim president and chief executive officer.

“Such efforts are critical in a time in health care when resources are scarce and the dollars spent on lost sick time can skyrocket into the millions.”

Sick-time costs cost the NHS about \$10 million last year, not including additional overtime costs.

Previously, the NHS did not have a comprehensive and integrated method for tracking and managing cases.

Work to develop the new system began two years ago after the Ontario Nurses Association suggested a pilot project.

What followed was intensive discussions between the health system, ONA, Service Employees International Union, Ontario Public Sector Employees Union and other agencies with expertise leading up to a written agreement.

In preparation for the launch of the program, a return-to-work committee was established and a team of more than 40 return-to-work “coordinators” participated in five-days of training.

The NHS has also put in place a central hotline for employees calling in sick, which will help the team to better keep track of workplace illness and injury, the reasons for lost time and any systemic problems that need to be addressed.

Involving union reps, managers and frontline staff in the assessment process will help to ensure there’s follow up on issues and that preventative measures and education extend across all seven of the health system’s sites in the region.

Beginning this month, all NHS employees will be educated about the program through in-service training and videos.

With the help of WSIB, baseline data has been collected, against which future performance will be measured to determine how successful the program is.

“I’m really excited about the project,” said Lisa McCaskell, senior health and safety officer with OPSEU.

McCaskell said she believes the program will help to reduce workplace accidents, find out why they occur and help people get back to work faster.

Research shows that employees recover more quickly and successfully when they return to productive safe duties as early as possible.

All of the parties involved have a stake in reducing illness and injury and therefore recognize they “have got to grab hold of the program and make it work,” she said.

Sharleen Stewart, president of SEIU Local 1 Canada, said accidents and illnesses do happen, but there will be “added comfort” in knowing there will be this extra support to help injured and ill workers.

Stewart said she believes the NHS project has the potential to be a “model for the rest of the province’s health-care” sector.