

'We wouldn't accept a crane collapse; we shouldn't accept a suicide': Industry pressed to act on mental health

By **Mike Lewis** - December 4, 2025



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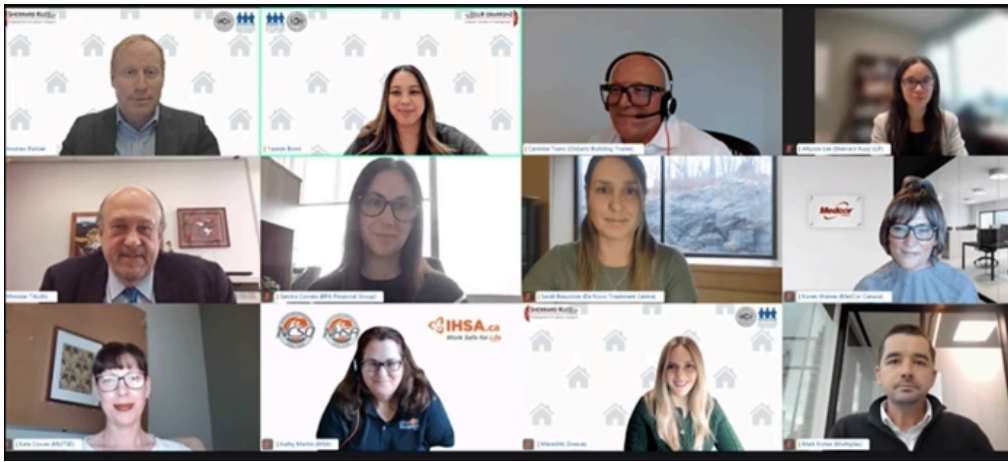
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Mental health supports for construction workers not only reduce the human costs of illness and addiction – but also mitigate against potential employer liabilities and the possibility of government-imposed regulations and testing, an online seminar has heard.

With construction workers accounting for a disproportionate number of suicides and opioid-related deaths in Ontario, constructors need to proactively implement policies that promote psychological well-being, health and safety experts told [RESCON's seventh-annual Mental Health and Addictions in Construction webinar](#) on Nov. 26.

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"We need to be honest with ourselves," said Mark Nolan, director of safety, health, sustainability and quality at [Multiplex](#), an international construction contractor whose employee benefits in Canada include up to \$3,000 in annual mental health coverage.

"While our physical safety systems are sophisticated, our systems for mental health have not evolved at that same pace. We need to treat the psychological hazards with the same rigour as the physical ones."

He told the webinar that constructors (those responsible and liable for construction projects) can't rely on awareness campaigns alone when it comes to psychological hazards caused by the demands of construction work.



Nolan, whose firm has been recognized by the Ontario government for its high safety standards, said employers need to act, verify results and hold leaders accountable.

He also suggested that daily risk assessments for construction projects should consider mental health, emphasizing stress-reducing work design, supervisor training for early intervention, and regular outcome measurement. "Just as we do for the critical tasks. If we wouldn't accept a crane collapse, we shouldn't accept a suicide."

Statistics Canada data shows that the construction industry has the second-highest suicide rate among major industries, after mining and oil extraction. And research by Public Health Ontario found construction workers made up approximately 30 per cent of employed victims of fatal opioid

overdoses in the province in 2020 as tradespeople turned to drugs to cope with injuries and pain in a culture where seeking help is often seen as a weakness.

In response, unions and health advocates formed alliances to push for improved access to treatment and supervised consumption services while Vijay Thanigasalam, Ontario's Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, told the webinar that the province has committed \$3.8 billion over ten years for mental health and addiction treatment. Data from the Office of the Chief Coroner, meanwhile, shows a downward trend in overall opioid deaths in the province last year and in early 2025.

Mental health service providers said tradespeople can face barriers to accessing help in the form of long wait times to see a counsellor, while Sarah Beaudoin, program co-ordinator at Huntsville-based [DeNovo Treatment Centre](#), which provides in-house substance abuse treatment for unionized construction workers, said a challenge for employers is the substantial resources it takes to maintain a mental health policy and treatment program.

Allyson Lee, an employment lawyer with webinar sponsor and Toronto-based employment law firm [Sherrard Kuzz LLP](#), said constructors considering investments in mental illness mitigation measures need to "cost it out," citing studies that found the opioid crisis has siphoned off billions in lost productivity, mostly in the construction industry.

Lee also noted that fines have ratcheted up under Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act, with repeat offenders facing \$500,000 in minimum penalties and possible jail time if a worker is killed or seriously hurt as a result of their employment.

According to the Act, constructors are responsible for ensuring workers' health and safety, which includes preventing impairment on the job, and may be held liable if they fail to show sufficient due diligence.

Recent Supreme Court of Canada decisions have also widened the scope of responsibility, indicating that even project owners who hire a contractor may be liable if they do not exercise sufficient oversight in contractor selection and monitoring.

To mitigate liability, Lee told the webinar that contractors should train supervisors to recognize signs of impairment early on and take appropriate action.

"For those who aren't converted by the human cost ... there is a significant amount of legal liability at stake if you ignore clear signs of mental health or substance abuse disorder among your workers."

And while she said non-punitive testing for drugs and alcohol may be appropriate following specific incidents and procedures, she warned against a "knee jerk" reaction where testing and removal of workers to administrative tasks invades privacy and creates a stigma for the employee.

"The courts are fighting back on that, and the boards are fighting back and the arbitrators" if there isn't a good reason for testing and people are moved out of jobs rather than given help.

Random testing is generally restricted in Canada, but courts have ruled that post-incident testing on reasonable grounds may be permissible.

Carmine Tiano, director of occupational services at the [Ontario Building Trades](#), which represents affiliated construction unions, said "if there is another Kipling Ave. (where a 2009 scaffolding collapse

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in Toronto killed four workers) that's high profile it (drug testing) will be forced upon us. I would
rather disarm the torpedo before it hits our ships."