THE CATALYST

Bringing Purpose to Work

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) is thrilled to be the 17th charity – and the first in 34 years – invited to sit at the HealthPartners' table. The MHCC's Vice President, External Affairs and Development, Allison Cowan, sat down with Kimberley Hanson, CEO of HealthPartners, to talk about the work of HealthPartners and why workplace giving makes a difference.

By: Allison Cowan | Posted: October 15, 2024

The power of optimism

When I sat down with Kimberley Hanson to talk all things HealthPartners, I was curious to understand her optimism about the future of workplace fundraising.

"Charities are being asked to do more, with less. Illnesses are on the rise, but pocketbooks are stretched. What do we do?"

Kim smiled, a knowing expression on her face. "That's the million-dollar question. According to Statista, charitable donations were down 371.7 million dollars from 2021 to 2022.[1]

She went on to say, "We're living in polarizing times. And people are feeling pessimistic about the future. This bears out in surveys, and it's no wonder. The pandemic is still casting a long shadow. Cost of living is up. The health-care system is stretched to the breaking point. And yet, I remain an optimist."

Kim's glass half-full outlook comes, in large part, from the work she does to bring awareness into workplaces across the country about the irreplaceable contributions of HealthPartners' charities.

"They fill tremendous gaps. These charities are focused on the needs of people today – education, advocacy, services, and supports – and they are committed to finding better treatments and cures for tomorrow. We will all likely need their help at some point – whether that's due to cancer, heart and stroke, ALS, the list goes on – and we will certainly know someone who does," said Kim.

Collateral benefits

Given the importance of these issues to people in Canada, by bringing these charities to work, employers signal that they understand and are creating an opportunity for employees to conveniently learn more and contribute to something meaningful.

By engaging volunteers, HealthPartners provides access to those with lived experience to share their personal stories. The power of their first-hand accounts is two-fold.

They bring home the profound importance of the work carried out by HealthPartners' charities, while empowering employers to foster a culture of generosity and social responsibility.

It's in doing this double duty where the magic happens.

"It's an antidote to pessimism. And it's got tremendous collateral benefits. We're seeing participating workplaces move the needle on accommodations, as just one example. Hearing about a person's struggle to disclose, say, arthritis or anxiety…fearing a dismissive 'pull up your socks' attitude, can create fresh awareness and empathy. A light bulb goes on, and employers start asking themselves: How could we improve the experience of our own employees who might be struggling?"

Rejecting the machine mindset

Kim went on to explain further.

"Employees aren't automatons. They come to work with their whole being. And they're largely motivated by finding meaning – not just in their tasks and responsibilities – but in being part of a social fabric that aligns with their values. In short, why I am here, beyond the paycheck? Employees who feel that their employers were highly committed to their communities were two times likelier to be satisfied with their job. Employees who participated in donating and volunteer programs at work were 2.3 times as likely to stay at their job for the next two years.[2]"

This is borne out in employee engagement and retention, decreased absenteeism, and higher productivity. In fact, surveys conducted by HealthPartners on the heels of workplace campaigns show upwards of 95 per cent of employees are onboard with workplace giving, and 91 per cent would do so again.[3]

A shared language

Given the average adult spends a third of their life at work, Kim believes workplaces can be foundational in changing mindsets and dispelling myths.

I reflected that the MHCC made normalizing mental health at work a cornerstone of our stigma-busting efforts, sharing the belief that what gets talked about around the watercooler trickles down to the dinner table.

A great example of this is MHCC's Opening Minds workplace training, which gives employees the tools and shared language to talk openly about mental health problems and illnesses, challenges and changes negative attitudes, and ultimately, reduces stigma. Both in the workplace, and beyond.

And stigma is hardly exclusive to mental illness.

In fact, many HealthPartners' charities have heard from their communities that tackling stigma is top of the priority list.

Kim heartily agrees. "If I could wave a magic wand to make a major change within our health-care system, it would be the eradication of stigma. It cuts across virtually all our partners. It prevents people from seeking help. It contributes to the misallocation of funds. And it seeps into the unconscious bias of health-care providers themselves, which can compound or worsen the

outcomes of illnesses."

Kim has experienced stigma's long reach first-hand. At 20, she began losing an alarming amount of weight. Her doctor dismissed her concerns, despite the hard-evidence of a blood-glucose test pointing to diabetes. Sadly, she didn't present as a "typical" diabetes patient, so her concerns were roundly dismissed.

"That bias cost me two years of my life," said Kim. "But by addressing stigma and the flip side of the coin, discrimination, we can make access to care more equitable."

The collective advantage

Kim described the knock-on effect of collective action as being the secret to advancing changes that benefit everyone more rapidly.

When she worked for Diabetes Canada, for example, Kim set her sights on a National Diabetes Framework. She was told she'd never get buy-in from other health charities, focused as they were on their own needs.

But as a patient, and an advocate, Kim rejected this failed logic.

"This is not a zero-sum game," said Kim, who forged strong alliances across the sector in pursuit of what she knew to be a mutually beneficial goal.

"I have diabetes, so that naturally puts me at greater risk for a host of other conditions: cardiac, kidney, depression…so whatever we can do to help people better manage or ward off the development of diabetes, will naturally be good news across the health-care spectrum. And that applies to many other illnesses as well."

To a member, each charity is looking for ways to delay or prevent the onset of illness, where possible. And, when the cause of illness remains a mystery, as it often does, no stone is being left unturned in the pursuit of greater understanding.

Given the irrefutable comorbidities that link the communities of so many HealthPartners' charities, a 'better together' approach makes sense, both morally and practically.

A holistic shift

"We aren't walking organs," said Kim. "For far too long we've treated people's symptoms in isolation. A nephrologist for kidneys. A cardiologist for heart disease. You get the idea. But when something malfunctions in a complex system, what are the chances that another element of that system might fail? High. So, we need to start treating the whole person."

And, Kim emphasized, that includes giving people with lived experience a voice at the health-care system decision-making table.

It's this humanistic approach that sets HealthPartners apart.

Through workplace fundraising campaigns, it recognizes that employees are complex and multi-faceted, many spurred on by a drive to make a positive difference.

And via the health charity partnerships it forges, it highlights that differences don't preclude common ground. Ultimately, it's this powerful collective that will create a more responsive, inclusive, equitable health-care system – for all of us.

In the absence of a magic wand, Kim will continue to roll up her sleeves in service to this work.

- https://www.statista.com/statistics/478794/total-charitable-donations-in-canada/ ??
- Imagine Canada 2019, *Profit, Purpose, Talent*: https://imaginecanada.ca/sites/default/files/2019-11/Profit_Purpose_Talent_WEB_EN.pdf ??
- To be published in HealthPartners annual report – March 2025 ??

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