



General Assembly

Distr.: General
2 January 2024

Original: English

Seventy-eighth session
Agenda item 141
Joint Inspection Unit

Review of mental health and well-being policies and practices in United Nations system organizations

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled “Review of mental health and well-being policies and practices in United Nations system organizations” ([JIU/REP/2023/4](#)).



I. Introduction

1. In its report entitled “Review of mental health and well-being policies and practices in United Nations system organizations” (JIU/REP/2023/4), the Joint Inspection Unit examines organizational approaches to addressing the mental health and well-being of personnel while bearing in mind that both business models and mandates shape internal cultures, risk profiles and operational requirements. The specific objectives of the review are: (a) to examine strategies, policies and practices relevant to the mental health and well-being of personnel in United Nations system organizations; (b) to analyse organizational structures and functions to ensure that preventive and protective measures are in place; (c) to review relevant system-wide mechanisms and workstreams and inter-agency initiatives; (d) to identify good practices and lessons learned within and across United Nations system organizations.

II. General comments

2. Organizations welcome the review and commend the Joint Inspection Unit for the timely and useful report and for the efforts made in gaining a deep understanding of the mental health and psychosocial well-being of United Nations personnel across the system. The report contains an outline of the current issues, supported by diverse data points, and compelling recommendations for the organizations of the United Nations system.

3. Organizations appreciate the methodology utilized by the Inspectors allowing for the collection of different stakeholders’ views and therefore obtaining a holistic view of mental health and well-being policies and practices. The comprehensive analysis and demonstration of the impact, including costs, of psychosocial risks at the United Nations organizations’ workplaces, is insightful, and the integrative approach to addressing mental health and well-being-related risks at the policy level is valuable.

4. Organizations recall their endorsement of the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy for 2024 and beyond at the forty-sixth session of the High-level Committee on Management of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, held in Copenhagen in October 2023, and confirm their commitment to creating an inclusive and sustainable working environment where mental health and well-being is embedded in the organizational culture and systems.

5. In addition, organizations stress that employees’ well-being remains cross-functional and interdisciplinary and that it implies a coordinated partnership between headquarters, divisions and country offices (whenever applicable) to support the individual employee in their shared responsibility, requiring collective effort.

6. Organizations largely support the proposed recommendations, even though some of the timelines for implementation may not be feasible or the recommendations are deemed too prescriptive. Context-specific limitations, including budgetary constraints, will be taken into consideration in their implementation as highlighted in the comments below.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of those United Nations system organizations that do not already participate on the Implementation Board of the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy should nominate a representative to serve on the Board by its first meeting in 2024.

7. Organizations support the recommendation and the implementation of the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy for 2024 and beyond through their representation on the Mental Health and Well-being Strategy Implementation Board. The Board's increased membership will allow it to address systemic issues and provide a deeper understanding of the adequate support needed for mental health and well-being across the United Nations system.

Recommendation 2

Executive heads of United Nations system organizations, who have not already done so, should define an evidence-based and data-driven organizational approach to the mental health and well-being of their personnel and design, by the end of 2025, a workplace action plan and reflect its principles in their enterprise risk management process, their occupational health and safety framework and their human resources strategies.

8. Organizations support the recommendation and value an evidence-based and data-driven organizational approach to the mental health and well-being of their personnel.

9. The Mental Health and Well-being Strategy Implementation Board has developed an implementation guide and identified indicators in the Strategy for 2024 and beyond to assist organizations in developing an action plan. This includes the development of tools for leaders and managers and recommendations related to mainstreaming mental health and well-being into relevant frameworks and strategies. The importance of focusing on impact, in addition to activities in the strategy scorecard, is voiced by some.

10. To some organizations, the recommendation as phrased seems restrictive, as they value their ability to define the key principles in relevant strategic frameworks.

Recommendation 3

Legislative and/or governing bodies of United Nations system organizations should request that executive heads provide, by the end of 2026, an update on the development and implementation of the mental health and well-being workplace action plan developed according to their evidence-based and data-driven organizational approach on the matter.

11. Organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to the legislative and/or governing bodies.

12. The Mental Health and Well-being Strategy Implementation Board has developed a scorecard and identified relevant indicators that will enable the implementation of this recommendation.

13. Irrespective of the importance of accountability and reporting, some find that the proposed recommendation encourages Member States' involvement at a granular level of implementation details (i.e., action plan) and that their respective legislative

or governing bodies have the freedom to request the information that they consider relevant from the organizations.

Recommendation 4

By the end of 2024, executive heads of United Nations system organizations should review the rules governing the return to work of personnel, including provisions for granting accommodations to facilitate the return process, in order to ensure the inclusiveness of mental health-related considerations, and develop standard operating procedures that clearly identify roles and responsibilities, including decision-making.

14. There is a high level of support for this recommendation, and this need has been highlighted since the launch of the previous United Nations Mental Health and Well-being Strategy in 2018. The Mental Health and Well-being Strategy Implementation Board has identified key actions that can be taken to ensure that this recommendation is implemented. Concurrently, reference to the existing reasonable accommodation process within the United Nations system organizations is made by some, who suggest assessing the need to have a separate process for return to work focused on mental health.

15. However, it may be necessary to carry out a more detailed assessment as to the feasibility of completing this by the end of 2024. Organizations, in particular new Board members, are concerned at the short implementation timeline. The importance of aligning the availability of budget and resources to accommodate some of the recommended activities is also underscored.

Recommendation 5

By the end of 2024, executive heads of United Nations system organizations should assess and identify any gaps or areas to improve their counselling function in their organizational context, using the guidance on professional standards for counsellors prepared by the United Nations Staff/Stress Counsellors Group and endorsed by the Human Resources Network of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, as well as key elements highlighted by the Joint Inspection Unit in the ... report.

16. Organizations support this recommendation and support the implementation of the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy, as well as the application of United Nations Staff and Stress Counsellors Group criteria endorsed by the Human Resources Network of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination for the counselling function. The guidance on professional standards for counsellors, prepared by the United Nations Staff/Stress Counsellors Group, cognizant of the ever-evolving contexts, has been included in the scorecard for the implementation of the Strategy for 2024 and beyond.

17. While appreciating the importance of this recommendation in a wider United Nations common system context, some organizations highlight that the staff counsellor function in each organization is largely influenced by the specific context and mandate of the organization. Thus, not all elements included in the guidance on professional standards for counsellors document will be relevant to all organizational contexts. The implementation of this recommendation by the organizations will also be dependent on the availability of resources and consideration by the respective governing or legislative bodies.

Recommendation 6

The Secretary-General should request the High-level Committee on Management of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination to explore and report on, by the end of 2024, options to ensure that a mental health practitioner is posted to all countries with D- or E-category duty stations.

18. Organizations partially support this recommendation, noting that it is addressed to the Secretary-General. While being appreciative that the importance of mental health and psychosocial well-being of United Nations personnel in hardship duty stations is being recognized, organizations share caution about the generic nature of this recommendation. While agreeing with the need for a mental health practitioner in countries with D or E category duty stations, organizations would like to see more flexibility in implementation so that they can tailor actions to the realities on the ground.

Recommendation 7

The General Assembly should consider, by its eightieth session, the conclusions of the High-level Committee on Management of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination regarding resources to support the posting of a mental health practitioner to countries with D- or E-category duty stations.

19. Organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to the General Assembly.

20. Organizations also note that this recommendation should be considered exclusively with respect to the budgetary requirements of the United Nations Secretariat in connection with the implementation of the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy for 2024 and beyond and that, with respect to the budgetary requirements of the United Nations system specialized agencies, funds and programmes, these may be considered by the respective governing bodies of such organizations.

21. Additionally, organizations raise other comments and concerns that require further clarifications, including: the management for such positions at each duty station; the clinical accountability pathway for such positions and their integration into the respective mental health and well-being programmes; the role of the resident coordinator and the United Nations country team; and how to manage the technical oversight and prioritization in an inter-agency context.

Recommendation 8

Executive heads of United Nations system organizations should ensure that their organizations collaborate on the mapping of psychosocial support capacity available in all locations and consider the system-wide capacity when designing their workplace action plans, capitalizing on shared services, cost-sharing and other models for cost-effective and efficient delivery.

22. Organizations agree with all efforts that lead to creating efficiencies, inter alia through shared services and cost-sharing, and note that is an important evolving field where collaboration is key.

23. However, there appears to be an assumption in the text of the recommendation that shared services and cost-sharing are already occurring at the country level in the area of psychological support services. Whereas this is important for future planning, neither the report nor the recommendation specify how organizations would operationalize shared services or cost-sharing. In paragraph 153 of its report, the Joint

Inspection Unit raises some issues and questions on shared services and cost-sharing and notes that more work is required in this area, including recognizing differences between United Nations funds and programmes and specialized agencies at the country level.

24. Organizations partially support the principles of this two-part recommendation, noting that it is acceptable for organizations to collaborate on the mapping of the psychosocial support capacity, particularly if this will be led by a central inter-agency body or group, and would not stop at counting the Staff Counsellors at duty stations but would also include the level of training and accessibility (i.e., type of contract, hours and location) that the United Nations health-care professionals have on mental health and psychiatric care, especially in the field, where there is limited access. Mapping of access to care should also include health insurance coverage for all staff across the system.

25. Sharing such functions needs to take place with several other parameters in mind, including, for example, the staff/counsellor ratio, the scope of the system-wide counselling role and clinical accountability in that setting, types of psychosocial risks within individual organizations and risk management processes.

26. Considering the results when designing workplace action plans would appear logical and feasible for posts focused primarily on emergency response, as critical incident protocols and the use of an evidence-based approach should be similar across all organizations.

27. Cost-sharing and other models for cost-effective and efficient delivery would be of benefit. However, outside of this emergency response role, the counselling roles supporting the mental health and well-being of staff in each organization tend to be contextually based and varied in terms of culture and policies, so implementing shared services or other models may not be the ideal option to support each organization's workplace action plans.

28. The staff counsellors in each entity will also need to have a formal reporting line to their respective organizational leads/heads of mental health and well-being, to ensure consistency and uniformity in the implementation of their programmes.

Recommendation 9

Executive heads of United Nations system organizations should ensure that their workplace action plans on the mental health and well-being of their personnel, to be designed by the end of 2025, identify barriers to accessing psychosocial support services, including prioritizing stigma reduction through mental health literacy initiatives, outreach and health-promotion measures.

29. Organizations support this recommendation and note that, in the scorecard for the Strategy for 2024 and beyond, actions are identified that can be taken to implement it.

30. While agreeing on the broader principle, one entity would have preferred less prescriptive language that would allow for the development of such proposed strategies within a broader occupational safety and health framework and not as a stand-alone strategy.

Recommendation 10

To maximize return on investment, executive heads of United Nations system organizations should, by 2026, ensure that well-being programmes and activities are embedded in and complement the evidence-based and data-driven approach of the organization to mental health and well-being and are routinely monitored and assessed.

31. Organizations support the need to measure impact and maximize return on investment; however, some challenges in the implementation of this recommendation remain, as expressed under recommendation 2.

32. Organizations recognize that each organization must establish baseline measures that will be used to track progress – a point also highlighted in the United Nations Mental Health and Well-being Strategy. An indicator scorecard has been developed by the United Nations Mental Health and Well-being Strategy Implementation Board, although more guidance and collaboration are needed to develop meaningful indicators that would serve as valid evidence to support a truly impactful data-driven approach to assess the effectiveness of mental health and well-being initiatives, beyond counting activities.

33. Setting up a data system to monitor and assess the programmes and activities might trigger some budget concerns which might delay implementation and may require consideration by the organizations' respective governing or legislative bodies.

Recommendation 11

Executive heads of United Nations system organizations should explore integrating, by the end of 2024, mental health and well-being considerations into training programmes, in particular for managers, as a means to provide opportunities for facilitated discussions and enhanced learning and to support employees with mental health conditions.

34. Organizations support this recommendation and find it of utmost importance, for all employees, in particular those with managerial responsibilities, to partner with the staff counsellors to support the mental health and well-being of their staff.

35. The proposed integrated approach has been one of the main tenets of the United Nations Mental Health and Well-being Strategy since its inception.