



March 17, 2021

Chair Cowles, Chancellor Malhotra, and Members of the Board:

As we discuss vaccines and what is on the horizon once we eventually achieve herd immunity, one effect of this pandemic that will not quickly “return to normal” are the mental health challenges we are seeing in alarming numbers. In October 2020, The American Psychological Association reported that we would face a second pandemic of long-term physical and mental health issues long after the imminent threats of COVID-19 are addressed. Fast-forward to February 2021, and those warnings are coming true according to their latest report:

Survey responses reveal that physical health may be declining due to an inability to cope in healthy ways with the stresses of the pandemic. Many reported they have gained or lost an undesired amount of weight, are drinking more alcohol to cope with stress and are not getting their desired amount of sleep. This is particularly true of parents, essential workers, young people and people of color. These reported health impacts signal many adults may be having difficulties managing stressors, including grief and trauma, and are likely to lead to significant, long-term individual and societal consequences, including chronic illness and additional strain on the nation’s health care system. (<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2021/one-year-pandemic-stress>).

In a recent survey of ASF members which yielded a response rate of more than a 60%, I believe we have a mental health crisis on our hands that mirrors what the APA has warned:

- **49.8%** reported personally experiencing any/an increase in mental health challenges **because of COVID-19 and all its complications** which has impacted their work
- **35.7%** reported personally experiencing any/an increase in mental health challenges **due to their work environment** which has impacted their work (*not necessarily related to COVID-19*)
- **34.1%** reported personally experiencing any/an increase in mental health challenges **due to their workload** which has impacted their work (*not necessarily related to COVID-19*)

But statistics can only tell you part of the story. It’s the anecdotes that my members shared which truly demonstrates that the onset of this second pandemic isn’t going to just “go away” when everyone returns to campus. I have members experiencing major depression and anxiety and are on maximum dosages of medication, physical manifestations of stress resulting in eating disorders, and feelings of intense grief and guilt due to family members who passed away in nursing homes and they couldn’t say good-bye. While these situations may sound extreme and not unlike what we heard about in the media, they are the reality of members of our own Minnesota State community.

The results of the damage to people's psyches and how they are reacting is alarming. There are award-winning ASF employees who are loved by their students who are seeking employment outside of Minnesota State as they just can't take it any longer. Long-term dedicated ASF employees who have become disenfranchised due to a constant lack of trust by their supervisors and administrators by being told that productivity is too low. And committed ASF employees who live in a constant state of fear that impending budget cuts will mean that layoffs/reductions will only increase their insurmountable workload.

I know that ASF is not alone in voicing these concerns. Over this year, you've heard from my IFO and MSCF colleagues of mental health challenges that their faculty have reported as well. As the main employees on campus who are there to ensure our students are successful and supported, trying to support students who we know are struggling while we are facing our own mental health challenges is not a recipe for success for anyone. We realize that we are fortunate that we did not face layoffs or furloughs like other public employees across the state, and we should be happy to just have a job. But these mental health challenges have a significant impact on quality of life both at work and at home. If we want to ensure that we are addressing major initiatives like Equity 2030, the Next Gen rollout, and Guided Learning Pathways with clarity and precision, employee mental health needs to become a priority. Offering words of encouragement and high fives and reminding employees of the Employee Assistance Program is not enough any longer. Real focus and attention need to be given on both a campus and system level. The first step is to actually ask employees how they are doing and what they need.

I am excited to see what the Chancellor's Fellow on Mental Health will take on during their 9-month appointment, but I know they are only one person whose primary focus will be on student mental health. I implore you as the leaders of Minnesota State...let's be pioneers in the state by focusing time, attention and most importantly—resources—to employee mental health. With one-time COVID relief funds coming from the federal government, we actually have an opportunity to direct resources that no one was really anticipating to something that absolutely everyone would benefit from. What greater signal can we send to current and potential employees that Minnesota State is, and continues to be, a great place to work?

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tracy Rahim', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tracy Rahim
State ASF President/Grievance Officer