

# Total Worker Health. What is It? Why is It Important. And How the CDC Says You Can Help Improve It.

**PAYCHEX**  
Business  
Series

Coronavirus



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## Full transcript

**Gene Marks:**

Hey, everybody. This is Gene Marks. Thanks for joining me on the Paychex Business Series. We have a really fun guest coming up, very energetic and animated and great conversation with Dr. Casey Chosewood, who is the Director of the Office for Total Worker Health at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**Gene Marks:**

Casey is going to talk to us all about what Total Worker Health is and there's really two big parts to it, he explains. There's obviously safety, you don't want people tripping and falling on the production floor and things that you can do to make sure that your place of business is safe. But then there's also mental health as well and the growing need to address these issues and how you can identify them and what you can do to help your employees as this issue itself continues to grow in awareness. So, Casey, thank you so much for joining us. I'm glad we're here to have this conversation.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Thanks, Gene. It's really great to be with you guys today. Really appreciate it.

**Gene Marks:**

Where are you talking from? Where are you right now?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

So, I'm joining you from Atlanta. Atlanta, as you know, is the headquarters for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And there are 10 centers at CDC. That's why there's the S on the word centers. And one of those centers is our National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. We're actually based, most of our staff, in laboratories around the country doing research and work their safety and wellbeing. And our director is in Washington because of the close relationship we have with the Department of Labor and OSHA.

**Gene Marks:**

Got it. All right, fine. So, Casey, you're the Director of Office for Total Worker Health. We're going to get into that and what you do and what that means, but let's first of all, do a quick recap. And I don't think you have to belabor the point that it's been a tough year. And obviously, as we're speaking right now, where you're at the end of April, offices are beginning to open up. My son works for one of those giant international accounting and finance firms, and they're already announcing, they're bringing back people during the summer and all that kind of stuff. So, what are your thoughts right now as business owners get back to bringing employees back to the office? What do you think it is? Is it safe? Is it not safe? Do you feel confident that we're going to be returning to a normal work environment anytime soon?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Yeah. Thanks for that question, Gene. Perhaps it's quite an understatement to say this has been a tough year and workers have been really on the front line of this challenge, right? You think about some of the essential functions that had to continue in our society, perhaps at the very top of the list, the essential workers in healthcare, right? And they have faced a tremendous uphill battle. Even before the pandemic, there were high rates of burnout, high levels of stress, a lot of turnover, challenges in healthcare. When you add on top of that, the tremendous demands that have come from the pandemic. It's no wonder that there haven't been a lot of people who've suffered and just the constant grief, the isolation from their families, the worry about their own personal safety, all those things mixed to make it very, very difficult here.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

The good news is that we can see the light at the end of the tunnel, hopefully. We're not completely out of the woods but things are looking better. We expect to continue to see improvement. We know that lots and lots of states are continuing to open more and more of their businesses and increasing capacity. I would direct folks to take a look at CDC's pandemic website, if you haven't seen it. It has some very specific tools, solutions, recommendations for small businesses. And I would say those are going to be very valuable. They are also updated regularly to take advantage of the evolving and growing evidence base that we have about how to protect ourselves best. And the other message I would say is the vaccinations are extremely valuable. They are working, they are changing their trajectory of this pandemic. So we would encourage business owners, the customers, staff leaders, to take a stand about vaccination in their own spaces so that we can increase the uptake of vaccines around the nation.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah, it's a really sticky point with some business people. And I get it. Some people have their issues about vaccinations and everybody, they can have their opinions and that's fair enough. I do think that it's a good thing to encourage your workers to do it. There's a tax credit that will reimburse you as employer if you give your workers time off to get the vaccinations. I'm not a big fan of requiring people to do it. Because I think there's issues there, but I'm fully vaccinated. Are you? Did you get yours?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Yes.

**Gene Marks:**

Yep. Thumbs up.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Two thumbs up there.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah, it's fantastic. So I have been outside dancing and clubbing every single night. It's been just one big party for the past two weeks. As usual, right?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Back to normal.

**Gene Marks:**

Let's talk about your Total Worker Health. So you're the Director of the Office for Total Worker Health.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Right.

**Gene Marks:**

What exactly does that mean?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

That's perhaps my favorite question. It's been really the last 10, 12 years of my life dedicated to this really new, emerging area within occupational safety and health. So perhaps, maybe just a short story to tell you, sort of the best way to understand what Total Worker Health is all about. So imagine three companies, the first company doesn't do really a good job in protecting their workers. It's not safe on the job. There are too many hazards. The demands of that work did not match the capabilities, the staffing levels, the safety protocols and programs in place. Well, those workers at the end of the day, they're going to go home with less health than when they arrived that morning. Now, obviously that's not good, right? That means that workers are trading their health for wages so it's not good for anybody.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

And eventually it won't be good for the business either. Then sort of the second company is one that does take care of the safety challenges that those workers face. And those workers at the end of the day, do go home with the same level of health that they arrived with that morning. Okay, they're following the law, they're doing what they have to do to keep their workers safe and they're getting the job done. But the best companies, the ones that people clamor to work for, the ones where there's lower turnover, the ones where there's a happier, more fulfilling work experience are those companies that keep their workers safe, but they don't stop there. They add to the workplace experience, they introduce policies, programs, practices that increase the opportunity for workers to become healthier. That might take a dozen different looks and sort of approaches and strategies depending on what the needs of those workers are.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

But the good news at the end of the day, with the Total Worker Health approach, people go home with more health than they arrived with that morning. And you say, "That's great for the worker. It's great for their families and their communities." But, they bring that additional level of health with them back to the workplace the next morning. And the organization benefits as well, in addition to the individual worker. People are more fulfilled, they're better at customer service, they have fewer injuries, they'd have fewer illness, fewer healthcare spending dollars go out the door. That's really the promise of Total Worker Health. Good for workers, good for organizations, good for our society as a whole.

**Gene Marks:**

Can you give me some examples of what companies should be doing? Just a couple of examples that would really increase workers' health. And if I can, Casey, use like a typical small business, a distributor, a landscaper, job shop, a manufacturer, something dirty, we get people on the production floor, you got people in the office. Just a couple examples, like what could they be doing?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Yeah, it's a great question. Oftentimes people say small businesses can't do this. This is the kind of Cadillac plan for the Fortune-500 companies. But we're here to say that some of the most successful companies that get it right are the small- and medium-sized companies. Oftentimes because there's fewer layers of decision-making for putting in better policies and better approaches. So, a lot of people automatically jumped, "Okay, we're going to build a gym at the office," or, "We're going to put in treadmills in the break room," or, "We're going to maybe give people healthier choices in the vending machines."

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Those are things that could work. And they may be exactly what workers want and if that's the case, go for it. But I would say I would back up and I would start the Total Worker Health approach by asking workers, "Hey, what do you like about your job and what do you don't like about your job?" So focus on the way the job itself is crafted as the first way you're going to make the biggest difference. We call that the participatory approach, asking your team, whether it's five people or 50 people or 2000 people. What are the pain points that you face every day? What are ways that we can solve problems for you both here at work? And don't be afraid to ask in your personal life as well. Because the boundary between work and personal life is going away.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

We need to find better ways to say, "It is a work-related issue if you're having a financial concern at home. It is a work-related issue if you have a substance use disorder or if you have an untreated mental health issue." Because we don't separate those parts of our lives. When I come to the office, I don't leave my issues in the parking lot or at home and vice versa. If I'm having a stressful day at work, I carry those issues home with me to my family and my loved ones.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

So, first of all, asking the question, "What is it you need?" And then taking steps to solve those problems. If it ails you as a worker, it is a Total Worker Health sort of focus that we should put our resources toward. We also think that changing policy and changing the challenges that workers face is more powerful than trying to fix an issue or build a sort of a worker with a harder shell or more resilience at the end of the day. Trying to decrease stressors that workers' face is really a way to help workers thrive.

**Gene Marks:**

Got it. It's funny, as you're talking about your worker health, I mean, there's really two big parts of it. And tell me if you agree or disagree with this, I mean, there's safety on the job. I mean like OSHA safety, like not slipping on the factory floor and breaking your neck and... That kind of safety. And then there's just mental health and reduction of stress, there's those two things. So, first of all, let me ask you, when you talk about Total Worker Health, does that encompass all of that. I'm assuming that it does.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Absolutely.

**Gene Marks:**

Okay.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

When the word total is in your title, there's kind of nothing that we leave off.

**Gene Marks:**

Okay. Mr. Scientist. All right. I got you. Right. Fair enough.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Yeah. It can be kind of challenging though, right?

**Gene Marks:**

It is and it's good. So let me break that down though. Okay. First of all, on the safety side of things, okay, I know this year, the Biden administration plans, a lot of changes to some of the safety rules, some upgrading. I know there's a lot of talk with OSHA will be coming out with some safety rules sometime this year. So just again, it's a Total Worker Health conversation. Where would somebody go, where would you recommend somebody, a business owner would go to get help, making sure that their workplace is safe? Who do you think they should talk to first? And then I want to talk about mental health, but I'm just kind of curious what advice you have.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Yeah. The good news is that the... What I would say are two the really best websites for this kind of information, that's really accessible to businesses of all sizes is [osha.gov](https://www.osha.gov) and our website, [niosh.gov](https://www.niosh.gov). And those two will allow you to drill down, through a really nice search engine, on hundreds of different topics and challenges that your workplace may be facing. Some people benefit from having sort of a safety consultant or a guide along the way, especially if they have high-hazard work.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

But we also have a series of workplace solutions documents that probably would mirror the vast majority of workplaces out there where you could actually say, "Hey, these are the top 10 common problems that people have in nail salons or on construction sites or in retail environments and coffee shops," and drill down into what those challenges are and how you can solve them. That level of detail is available. The good news is that while OSHA is regulatory NIOSH is not. So we're really all about the science. We're not a regulatory agency. We don't come in and make rules and issue fines. We're doing the science that really helps people improve the health outcomes, the safety outcomes of their workers.

**Gene Marks:**

That's great. That's great advice. Actually, I'm speaking to a group of manufacturers tomorrow, actually, and one of these topics is about worker safety. I was going to recommend [osha.gov](https://www.osha.gov), but NIOSH, so it's N-I-A-S-H.gov, am I saying the right site?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

NIOSH. N-I-O-S-H, standing for National Institute Occupational Safety Help.

**Gene Marks:**

Got it. Okay. So everybody makes sure you got the [N-I-O-S-H.gov](https://www.niosh.gov), correct, okay, that's great. Okay. So that's physical safety when you're in the office, super important obviously for lots of different reasons. Let's talk about mental health and stress. Talk to me about that. How big an issue is this? Why do we need to be concerned? What do we do about it?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Yeah. When we ask employers, "What are your main challenges? What are you hearing from your employees? What are your managers and supervisors struggling with?" Workplace stress and mental health concerns are oftentimes at the very top of the list. If they're not number one, they're oftentimes number two or number three. This is a critical issue. It's also, unfortunately, a leading cause of disability. Mental health disorders are very costly, long-term disability and it can be a challenge too, for people, especially if not treated, to return to work in a timely manner or ever to return to work. So it's a critical issue, a costly issue.

**Gene Marks:**

If you don't mind, if I can interrupt you, this issue has been on the rise, I know, over the past two decades. Am I right in saying that the issue is... I think these mental health issues always existed in businesses in even in the 1930s and '40s, but it's just now there's just much more awareness about it and people are more willing to talk about it. Does that make sense?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

I think it's a combination of both increased awareness and people's willingness to overcome some of the very strong historical stigma that has been around some of these issues like depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, the risk for suicide. Were all sort of encased in stigma, which slows down our opportunity to intervene. But I also think that the pace of our lives, the increased demands on our lives, the role of technology and sort of putting everybody on fast-forward. Some of our research actually looks at some of the future work challenges that may come about because of all these new technologies. Especially when people, humans are not at the center of the decision making process front for these new technologies. So I would say it's probably a combination of increased recognition, decreasing stigma, awareness building has made people more likely to talk about it and to say, "Yes, I really am suffering here."

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

But also the new demands of our modern economy, this sort of all on 24/7. There are also a lot of workers still with very challenging work experiences. Hazardous work is one thing but what about those workers who have to piece together multiple jobs just to make one income? My guess is that many of your small business owners have part-time workers. Most people can't live on a part-time income. So that worker who works 20 hours in your facility will also go and work 10, 15, 20, 30 hours at other facilities. That increases the stressors on those workers. It decreases their ability to spend time with those they care about, increases their commute. That kind of piecing together at work leads to a really significant drain on one's health, through the process called time poverty. I'm so busy earning a living, there's no time leftover for me to pursue any other healthy habits, activities, or behaviors.

**Gene Marks:**

Right. So listen, I mean, I think it's presumed that there is a certain percentage of our employees that either have or struggling with some degree of mental health issues. I mean, I think that's just a given. So if you're running a company with 10 employees or a hundred employees, there is going to be a percentage of them that have this issue. So what do we do as business owners? How do we become aware of this stuff? And what should we be doing?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Our research has shown that the workplace can be an excellent venue to help these workers not only manage and come through any kind of condition they have, but to thrive. And to become very valuable, dependable, very productive workers, especially if they have the right environment. And we call our approach to this workplace supported recovery. It's good for mental health issue. It's good for substance use disorders. It's good for people who've had any really underlying chronic challenge, whether it's diabetes or a back injury. If you have a workplace that's supportive of their recovery and their full return to work, most people will succeed in doing that. And probably exceeding expectations because they say, "Wow, my supervisor's so supportive. My workplace has made sure my benefits are in place and I'm not suffering financially. I've got paid leave when I need it."

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

All important Total Worker Health interventions, by the way. That when those things are in place, people feel a certain sense of connection of family relatedness to their employer. And that oftentimes pays itself back many times over through retention, through people feeling engaged. When people do more than they have to do to keep the job, that's engagement, right?

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

The sort of discretionary effort that people put in, because they're really pleased with the employment relationship they have. That is when you know your organization is thriving, when you have high levels of engagement. And when things go wrong, when things are tough, whether it's depression, diabetes, and injury, that's when we need more supportive supervision. We need more flexibility given to those workers. We need attention to wages, benefits, and leave policies. Those are really important Total Worker Health approaches to these really critical times.

**Gene Marks:**

All right, Casey. So we've only got about a minute left, but all the issues that you've raised are great issues and being aware of this stuff obviously is critical. The obvious question is privacy. And so how... Again, put yourself in the shoes of a person running a business, maybe they're aware or have some idea that their employees might be struggling with some kind of mental health issue. How do you advise reaching out to that employee without freaking them out because they feel like their privacy is being violated?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Right. Privacy and confidentiality are extremely important. There are legal reasons to keep people's personal medical issues and their workplace separated, so completely agree.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

What we like to say is we think supervisors should, for every employee, not just for those that they suspect have an issue, but open the door, have the openness, take steps to lower stigma, take steps to increase people's awareness, not only about conditions themselves, but about the solutions that are available. "Hey, let me tell you about the employee assistance program that we have available for all our employees who might have an issue or the financial counseling that we might offer," or, "Hey, we're going to start a peer support group. Supervisor doesn't need to know anything about it. Every Monday at work or somewhere else, we're going to have a peer support group for people who are struggling with this issue." Caregiver of a family member with dementia or a caregiver for someone who has a substance use disorder in the family or maybe it's for a personal issue. All of those ways are low risks that safeguard privacy and confidentiality that say, "We are willing to talk about these issues and help you if there's a problem and we'll protect your privacy and your job through the process itself."

**Gene Marks:**

Dr. Casey Chosewood is the Director of Office for Total Worker Health of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And Casey, again, that's N-I-O-S-H.gov, correct?

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

You got it.

**Gene Marks:**

Guide to his documentations. Thank you so much. You're awesome. I've a lot more questions and no more time but what we'll have to have you back. Obviously, the issues with mental health and total worker safety are not only not going to go away but they're going to increase in importance and priority over the coming years. And I think your role in all of this is, it's just fantastic. And you have a lot of great advice to give, so thank you so much.

**Dr. L. Casey Chosewood:**

Great Gene, super to be with you today. Thank you.

**Gene Marks:**

Hey guys, for those of you that are listening, if you need more tips and advice and help for running your business, please visit us at [paychex.com/worx](https://paychex.com/worx), that's W-O-R-X. Hope you guys enjoyed this conversation. My name is Gene marks. We will look to see you next time. Take care. All right, Casey. That was great. Thank you.

**Speaker 3:**

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