Like many in the aviation industry, Monty Cook struggled with anxiety and depression following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The problems became severe enough that he eventually went on short-term disability leave.

Cook, a manager for NAV CANADA, which is Canada’s civil air navigation services provider, returned to work after several weeks and recovered. In 2012, when NAV CANADA put out a call for volunteers to act as supporters for its new peer support mental health program, Cook wanted to be involved.

“This is something that’s personally very important to me because we never had this program when I ran into issues of my own,” he said. “The single biggest thing it could have done for me would be to have somebody that I could relate to, who could just provide a little bit of hope.”

Cook is one of 50 NAV CANADA employees who are supporters in the company’s Light the Way peer support program. Cook, based in Kamloops, British Columbia, is a district manager for the British Columbia interior, supervising about 54 air traffic controllers, flight information center specialists and flight service specialists.

Light the Way is the newest addition to NAV CANADA’s mental health offerings. The company first developed a mental health strategy in 2009 and saw positive results, said Lyne Wilson, director of human resources and employee relations. “We saw that employees were opening up more about mental health and talking about it,” she said.

NAV CANADA already had two longtime peer support programs for critical incidents and substance abuse, and leaders were interested in starting a program targeted at employees returning to work from mental health-related leaves.

“We, like many other companies, were starting to see our costs of short- and long-term disability around employees with mental health issues increase,” said Richard Dixon, vice president of human resources. “We were also seeing people getting lost in those programs because they weren’t able to get the kind of treatment that they needed.”

In its study *Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada*, the Mental Health Commission of Canada estimated 21.4% of the Canadian working-age population was living with a mental health problem in 2011. The study estimated the cost to businesses at $6 billion in lost productivity resulting from absenteeism, presenteeism and employee turnover.

Dixon formerly served on the Mental Health Commission of Canada’s Workforce Advisory Committee and got connected with Stéphane Grenier, who started a peer support program at the Department of National Defence.

“We decided that we needed to put in place a program that not only would support employees when they returned...
from sick leave but also be preventive and offer support while they were still at work,” Wilson said.

NAV CANADA contracted with Mental Health Innovations to help implement the program. After developing the guidelines for the program, NAV CANADA put out a call for volunteers in April 2012, and 100 people applied. “They were volunteering their own stories about what types of challenges they had gone through and were willing to help others,” Wilson said.

The company interviewed volunteers and selected 50 from sites across the country. Volunteers attended five days of training conducted by Mental Health Innovations in September 2012, and the program launched the next month.

The peer supporters created short profiles of their own experiences along with contact information that appears on NAV CANADA’s intranet and external Live Well website so that any employee can look at the list and make direct contact.

Employees who seek support are assured of confidentiality, which was one of the training topics. Other training included instruction in talking and listening as well as boundaries, suicide intervention and legal aspects.

The company built a small awareness campaign about the new program during Canada’s Mental Illness Awareness Week—letting employees know that peers were available if they were having challenges and wanted to reach out. “We...
made sure that people knew that it did not replace professional counselling, because this is not the point at all of peer support," Wilson said. "The whole focus is about giving them hope that, yes, they might be going through a difficult time, but people get through it with that peer help and support.”

The peer supporters don’t direct participants to seek counselling but make sure they know how to access resources, whether it’s NAV CANADA’s employee assistance program (EAP) or other medical resources.

The length and depth of the relationship is up to the peer supporter and the employee seeking help. They might talk only once or they might touch base for a few minutes every day. Supporters described connecting with participants over the telephone, receiving late-night text messages and connecting at their worksites.

So far, NAV CANADA knows that at least 200 employees have reached out for support, and the number is growing. The range of issues includes Asperger’s syndrome, depression, anxiety, postpartum depression and others. Employees might be experiencing the problems themselves or might seek help because they have loved ones who are struggling.

The company gathers limited data from the peer supporters such as whether they had an interaction, how much time was spent and whether it was during or outside of work hours.

It’s difficult to measure success, but EAP usage has increased significantly in the last two years, Wilson said. The company also has seen a significant decrease in mental health-related long- and short-term disability cases.

The company is now recruiting additional peer supporters for the program. Because of lessons learned, the company also is taking a slightly different approach to its return-to-work planning for employees off because of mental health issues. Now there is a plan in place for both the employee coming back and the rest of the team, she said.

Companies interested in implementing a similar program should make sure they have buy-in from executives and the support of a union in a unionized environment, Wilson said. Eight unions represent about 90% of NAV CANADA employees. Another important element is a willingness among employees to talk about mental health, she said.

Kristina Walsh, an air traffic controller in St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, sees openness about mental health increasing at NAV CANADA. Walsh, a peer supporter, struggled to deal with the suicide of a close friend 13 years ago.

“It was something you weren’t sure that you could share with people around you,” she said. The peer support program gives her and others the reassurance that they’re not alone, she said.

“I think it’s just being able to recognize what they’re going through on the same level,” Walsh said. Even though others can be sympathetic, “until you’ve actually been in those exact same shoes, you don’t quite fully understand what it feels like.”

Cook thinks Light the Way will have a far-reaching impact at NAV CANADA. “I believe, when all is said and done, we’ll actually reduce sick leave, we’re going to improve retention and we’re going to improve employee engagement,” he said. “There’s no end to the benefits of a program like this.”

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