



Reduce harmful work stressors.  
Improve job quality and health.

# Healthy Work **Strategies**

## Government labor inspectors' role in protecting workers' mental health in Quebec

In Quebec, Canada, as recently as ten years ago, it was difficult for workers, employers, and union representatives to report, prevent, or otherwise deal with factors at work that can cause mental health problems. Government occupational health and safety inspectors responsible for identifying and reporting such factors did not always have clear guidelines or standards to support their recommendations. Although a 2004 law in Quebec seemed to protect workers from psychological harassment, government inspectors had to rely on interpretations of the **general duty clause** to justify their findings and recommendations (the “general duty” of employers to provide a safe and healthy workplace).

### Research study on workplace mental health and the law

Researchers in Quebec, in a 2011 study, reviewed existing laws and court cases, and interviewed 22 union representatives. At the time, existing laws did not include specific mention of mental health issues, and there was no specific material about preventing sources of stress at work. The researchers focused on two types of factors that could cause mental health problems: **harassment or bullying**, and **computerized monitoring** (called “voice picking”) that issued orders, evaluated employees' productivity throughout their work day, and emitted a beeping sound every ten seconds through a headset that workers wore.

Among the barriers that government inspectors faced when trying to resolve workers' complaints about harassment at work was the common belief that mental health problems could not be scientifically measured, and the lack of a clear government regulation for preventing mental health problems at work. Workers were challenged when they tried to refuse work that could cause psychological harm, based on lack of documentation or evidence. Also, there were few guidelines on the training of government inspectors, which could impact the way a complaint was handled. Some union representatives described complaints that went unresolved because of inspectors who were more concerned with reviewing and revising company policies than with recommending steps to address a given problem.

## One inspector's success at addressing the stress of computerized monitoring

One labor inspector (an ergonomist) was originally asked to investigate musculoskeletal symptoms among order preparers in a food products warehouse. The inspection service had also received complaints about mental health issues from two workers at that workplace. Between 2006-2007, the inspector met with management and union representatives, spoke with workers, reviewed documents, and made a video of the work of six employees. She found that workers felt isolated, because they spent hours only interacting with the mechanical voice transmitted through their headsets. Workers rarely interacted with other workers, were constantly reminded of their productivity rate by supervisors, and had no chance to make decisions about their own work.

When the inspector reported that the monitoring "constitutes a risk to the workers' mental health" and issued a list of recommendations, warehouse managers initially challenged her conclusions, but then decided to address the issues. Along with improvements to physical safety, the inspector recommended fewer interactions with the mechanical voice, breaks from the technology, and ongoing monitoring of work stressors and mental health issues. Other improvements included giving the order preparers more responsibility for organizing their work without instructions, and removal of the beeps.

After the project ended, two other companies requested such an evaluation, and the inspector reported that employers who had thought about using voice picking were reconsidering. At the time, it was uncommon for a labor inspector to make recommendations about sources of stress at work, but the inspector's report was well received, and was distributed throughout Quebec.

### References:

1. Lippel, K., Vézina, M., & Cox, R. (2011). Protection of workers' mental health in Québec: Do general duty clauses allow labour inspectors to do their job?. *Safety Science*, 49(4), 582-590. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/>.
2. Rossard, M., 2007. Les hommes-robots des entrepôts. *Santé au travail*, 60, 20-21. Retrieved from <http://www.sante-et-travail.net/>.