The Impact of Industrial-Organizational Psychology on Understanding the Health and Well-Being of Federal Workers

The health of the American workforce, including federal workers, has been severely threatened under the COVID-19 pandemic. Health and well-being challenges are not new, however. American workers have experienced high rates of work-related illness, injuries, disease, and death over several decades. Prior to COVID-19, work stressors such as toxic working conditions, long work hours, unpredictable work schedules, job insecurity, excessive work demands, harassment, abusive supervision, and insufficient resources, among other factors, have contributed to poor employee and organizational outcomes. Without informed and consistent leadership support, mitigation approaches to reduce these stressors and improve worker health and well-being can stall due to cost considerations, the difficulty of changing organizational culture and systemic work design factors, and a lack of focus on worker health and well-being as a business priority.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented workforce disruptions and has compelled employers to make employee health a top priority. This is especially true for the federal workforce, which includes approximately 2 million full time employees. As the federal government continues to explore solutions for returning to work amidst the pandemic, one overarching question remains: how can workers return to work in a safe and productive manner while the organization recovers from operational shutdowns and deals with economic challenges? **As federal stakeholders consider policies, practices, and programs in response to these challenges, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) urges the application of evidence-based methods and best practices in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology to assist in protecting worker health, safety, and well-being.**

I-O psychology is the scientific study of work and work organizations, and the application of that science to workplace issues facing individuals, teams, and organizations. Collectively, I-O psychologists bring over a century of expertise in understanding, predicting, and modifying worker behavior in multiple contexts. They bring data-driven methods and solutions to respond to workplace problems through expertise in leadership, strategy, worker assessment, training, job performance, organizational culture, occupational health, and worker safety. Below are several of the challenges the federal workforce faces during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as ways I-O psychologists can help address these unique challenges.

- **CHALLENGE:** COVID-19 has highlighted the continued need for effective organizational leadership concerning safety and health issues, both for employees and for the customers and clients they serve. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) "provides human resources leadership and support to Federal agencies and helps the Federal workforce achieve their aspirations as they serve the American people" and has been the leading body in charge of coordinating the federal workforce's telework and return to work policies. Organizations, such as OPM, must promote employee safety, health, and well-being. They must create cultures in which employees believe their leaders value and support these outcomes. Efforts to create an organizational culture that values and supports psychological and physical health and safety may be hampered by employees' sense that this focus will not be rewarded, by the belief that a focus on health and safety detracts from employee productivity, or by employees or frontline

supervisors lacking the knowledge or motivation to fully design, implement, and evaluate the necessary initiatives.

I-O IMPACT: I-O Psychologists can help OPM (and other federal agencies and offices) develop and sustain organizational cultures that embed safety as a value and foster positive employee health and safety behavior. This may involve helping organizations develop leaders with the competencies needed to foster a safer and healthier culture; assessing the current organizational culture (e.g., through employee surveys, focus groups, critical conversations with leaders, or reviewing other data sources); developing, implementing, and evaluating safety/health-focused training programs; leading organizational change efforts in the areas of job/work/organizational design to enhance safety and health; identifying and removing potential barriers to successful culture change initiatives; and helping organizations increase employee awareness available resources to promote physical and psychological health and safety.

- **CHALLENGE:** Throughout the federal workforce, there are certain occupations, agencies, and worker populations that, by virtue of the inherent nature of their work and environmental exposures, place individual workers at greater risk of stress, injuries, poor health, and premature death. Risks to workers have been exacerbated significantly by the presence of COVID-19 in the U.S.

  I-O IMPACT: The theories, methods, and skills within the discipline of I-O psychology can be systematically applied to improve the health and well-being of federal workers who may need health and wellness services more quickly or more intensively than others. To do so, I-O psychologists: (1) use evidence-based practices (EBP) known to reduce stress, anxiety, burnout, depression, and substance abuse and to promote psychological health and well-being; (2) use best practices related to improving work culture and working conditions; and (3) through the above, identify emergent issues and develop innovative solutions and technologies to address those issues. I-O psychologists also have methods for identifying high-risk working groups and where concerted efforts at health promotion are most needed. For example, according to the OPM's Organizational Assessment Survey (OAS), various government agencies have consistently shown evidence of a relatively unhealthy work climate. I-O psychologists can apply data-analytic methodologies that integrate multiple data sources in order to help identify high-risk work populations and then apply science-based solutions to reliably address risk levels. Moreover, by continually assessing impact, I-O psychologists can help refine, adjust, and adapt programs for continuous improvement and sustained outcomes.

- **CHALLENGE:** COVID-19 has increased the challenges associated with balancing work and nonwork role demands, as workers must adjust to new ways of working (e.g., part-time or full-time remote work, new demands associated with COVID-19 risk mitigation, and new limitations on resources). Many workers are also challenged with dependent care and education uncertainties. These changes have implications for worker performance, health, and well-being.
  I-O IMPACT: For decades I-O psychologists have been at the forefront of studying and intervening to improve the dynamics between work and nonwork roles. Their expertise in work-nonwork issues can be used to identify ways that workers maintain productivity and well-being while simultaneously managing nonwork responsibilities. Moreover, their understanding of the changing nature of work can be used to facilitate worker adjustment during this time of uncertainty.

- **CHALLENGE:** The challenges organizations are facing during the current pandemic have required many leaders and decision-makers to take steps that mitigate operating losses. Within the federal workforce, furloughs can have a negative effect on workers both economically and psychologically. For many, job insecurity and uncertainty about the future have been paralyzing, exacting a significant toll on workers' mental health. Simultaneously, COVID-19 also has presented opportunities for organizations to rethink their operations and implement processes such as telework. Alternative work arrangements and remote working have revolutionized how work can be accomplished on a large scale, and how people can continue working despite the health risks imposed by COVID-19. I-O psychologists have knowledge and expertise that can help organizations mitigate the harm from economic and psychological challenges, and capitalize on these new opportunities to help promote worker health, well-being, and productivity.

  I-O IMPACT: I-O psychologists understand the psychological impact of uncertainty and job strain on workers and their families. They understand role clarity and ambiguity in non-traditional work settings, leadership strategies for workplace disruptions, and data-driven methods for helping workers meet their psychological needs at work, including social connection, effectiveness, and having control over their lives. I-O psychologists know how to address workers' loss of meaning and feelings of economic insecurity through community-building, social cohesion, and problem-solving and decision-making strategies based on fair process. Most importantly, I-O psychologists can anticipate the changes occurring within organizations as a function of major shifts in our society including pandemics, and can help organizations to develop strategies and solutions to meet emerging economic and psychological health needs with effective programs, policies, and procedures grounded in science-based methods and knowledge.

- **CHALLENGE:** The physical and psychosocial work environment can impact workers' physical health and well-being. There are many potential sources of work-related stress that may impact worker well-being, including excessive workload, time pressure, abusive supervision, ambiguity or conflict related to work roles, conflict between work and nonwork demands, job insecurity, social isolation, interpersonal conflict, and lack of psychological safety. COVID-19 has exacerbated workers' experiences with some of these sources of work-related stress. Work stress is associated with a number of negative outcomes, including physical health (e.g., cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, obesity, and sleep disturbances), psychological health (e.g., depression, anxiety), low job satisfaction, low productivity and work engagement, turnover intentions, and burnout.

  I-O IMPACT: I-O psychologists understand the impact of work-related stress on worker health and well-being. Additionally, I-O psychologists have the knowledge and skills to assess the work environment to identify potential work-related stressors and environmental hazards that may have a negative impact on worker's physical and psychological health and well-being, and identify and deploy evidence-based strategies to reduce work-related stress. I-O psychologists can also design jobs and work environments more broadly to prevent or reduce many work-related stressors to maintain or improve worker health and well-being.

SIOP is a community of nearly 10,000 members worldwide with a common interest in promoting the research, practice, and teaching of I-O psychology to enhance human well-being and performance in organizational and work settings. SIOP provides a platform for scientists, academics, consultants, and

practitioners to collaborate, implement, and evaluate cutting-edge approaches to workplace challenges across sectors.

SIOP has launched a new Advocacy Area on improving workplace health and safety. The Advocacy Area features a working group of I-O psychologists, including researchers and practitioners, with targeted expertise in relevant areas. The Advocacy Area will be available to provide evidence-based support to policymakers as they address the various challenges and opportunities related workplace health and safety reforms going forward.