

# HEALTH, SAFETY & SECURITY IN A HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT

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AWCBC Security  
& Emergency  
Management  
Committee

## a. Introduction

With the arrival of COVID-19 to Canada in March 2020, organizations across the country, including all Workers Compensation Boards (WCBs), were forced to pivot from the usual ‘five days per week in the office’ to an initial work-from-home model for most employees, with very short notice.

Over the last four years, WCBs, as with many other government and private sector organizations, have developed hybrid work models, allowing employees to work remotely for part or all of their work week. A return to the pre-COVID work model of full-time working from the office appears unlikely for many organizations, especially in the short term.

Although most provincial health and safety regulations do not include employee residences in the definition of a workplace, WCBs have a responsibility to assist in ensuring the health, safety and security of their employees when working from home as part of a hybrid work model.

This document discusses some key considerations raised by AWCBC Security and Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) members in their regular update meetings over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. While not exhaustive, there are some key issues for consideration in developing a WCB-specific hybrid work model.

## b. Health and Safety

a. Working from Home: An example of a working from home (WFH) health and safety checklist is from WorksafeBC, with their Workstation Inspection Checklist [<insert link, get approval to use and final draft>](#). In addition to requiring the WFH employee to annually review the organization’s Office Ergonomic Standard, the checklist covers:

- Desk and Chair
- Keyboard and Mouse
- Lighting and Monitor
- Work Area
- Electrical Safety
- Emergency Preparedness
- Personal Safety & Security

- Confidentiality

WCB Alberta has a similar checklist [<insert link, get approval for use>](#), and includes a WFH presentation [<insert link, get approval for use>](#) with tips for:

- Work/Life Balance
- Ergonomic Tips
- Safety Tips
- Electrical Safety Checklist
- Information Security and Confidentiality Tips

- b. COVID-19 and Infectious Disease Protocols: The Coronavirus is still circulating, and it is important to have organizational protocols for identifying, reporting and dealing with cases of COVID-19 or other infectious diseases. As government agencies, WCBs should strongly consider following (or exceeding) guidelines issued by their province and the federal government. COVID-19 test kits should be made available to employees, who should also be encouraged to be regularly vaccinated for COVID-19, seasonal influenza, etc.
- c. Mental Health and Employee Assistance Programs: The Mayo Clinic notes that “Surveys show a major increase in the number of U.S. adults who report symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia during the pandemic, compared with surveys before the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic may have brought many changes to how you live your life, and with it, at times, uncertainty, altered daily routines, financial pressures and social isolation. You may worry about getting sick, how long the pandemic will last, whether your job will be affected and what the future will bring. Information overload, rumors and misinformation can make your life feel out of control and make it unclear what to do.”

All WCBs have contracted Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and should remind employees of their access to a variety of services at no charge to the staff member. An example of EAP provider services can be found on the [Morneau Shepell website](#).

- d. Lone Worker Safety: In a hybrid working environment, employees will often be working from home, and have limited contact with their supervisor. WCBs should have check-in procedures,

including a process for ‘missing’ employees, and it is important that personal information and emergency contacts be up-to-date.

Ontario’s WSIB, for example, has a missing employee checklist [<insert link, obtain permission to use>](#) which includes the involvement of their Security Branch and escalation to the third-party security guard service provider (for a mobile patrol visit to the employee’s residence), and eventual police involvement if necessary.

Manitoba Public Insurance, another SEMC member, has a Flexible Work Arrangement document [<insert link, obtain permission to use>](#) which includes “Do you have a work alone check in plan established with your leader for regular contact by email, telephone, or text at least at the beginning of the day and the end of your shift? If you cannot be reached, your leader will attend your virtual location or send someone to check on you.”, “If there are any unusual risks for violence in your work environment, have you discussed this with your leader?” and “Is your personal information and emergency contacts up to date in MYHR?”

Several WCBs provide working alone devices or apps for their lone workers. In Ontario, for example, all staff conducting field visits to employers are equipped with devices from third-party service provider [Blackline Safety](#), and at least one other SEMC member provides the [Aware360](#) lone-worker app to some of its employees.

- e. Fire Safety: In a hybrid work environment, all WCBs identified the difficulty with being able to ensure that an adequate number of trained fire wardens would be on hand to assist with safe building evacuation during an alarm and being able to confirm that all employees in the office during emergency had safely arrived at the muster point. Various solutions were identified, including an on-line attendance sheet for managers to input the names of employees attending on a given day, for roll-call in the evacuation assembly area, and designating all managers to be floor wardens, as they were more likely to be represented in the office on a given day. More reliable solutions remain a discussion point for the SEMC.

## c. Physical Security

- a. Client Disruptive Behaviour: Due to the nature of the workers' compensation business, disruptive behaviour from clients is sometimes encountered. Several WCBs reported an increase in instances of abusive or threatening behaviour from clients during COVID. Suggested reasons for the increase include frustration with offices being closed for in-person client visits, and general stress caused by the pandemic and its effects.

Regardless of the employee's work location, whether at home or in the office, a robust protocol and education program for dealing with client disruptive behaviour is recommended. Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) developed a Threats Protocol, in place since 2005, which details step-by-step procedures for employees to take when confronted with client abusive behaviour, threats, criminal harassment or violence. The Protocol includes contacting police in certain instances, and well as criteria for informing third-parties (e.g. service providers) when a security incident may potentially pose a threat to them. The WSIB Threats Protocol has been shared previously with the AWCBC SEMC as a template if desired.

- b. Social Media Safety: Employees should also be educated on social media safety e.g. to avoid posting information on social media platforms such Facebook which could assist a disgruntled individual in locating the employee's home address or identifying family members.
- c. Telephones: Employees working from home should be provided with company-issued phones, vs. using their home line to avoid issues with disruptive clients. Call blocking of the caller ID function is possible if using a home phone for business calls, but this must be done on a call-by-call basis, and the employee may forget to do so. As well, clients may also choose to avoid answering 'unknown caller' calls. (Employees may also consider having an unlisted residential number.)

## d. IT Security

WCB Information Technology (IT) departments have a key role in enabling a hybrid work environment, and their involvement could be the subject of a separate and detailed document.

In such a working environment, the risk of loss or theft of electronic equipment and confidential information increases, as the employee travels between home and office. IT policies need to include education of staff on topics such as password management, identifying malicious attempts to access the company network such as phishing, and immediate reporting of loss / theft of equipment or information, and the capability to track company-owned equipment and to disable / scrub lost devices to prevent access to confidential information. Organizations may wish to investigate enhanced security containers such as the [Eversafe](#) line of products, which could prevent loss / theft or provide extra time to locate or scrub a lost device of confidential information.

At least one agency implemented a geo-fence, which blocked on-line access remotely except in trusted locations. Log-in requests from countries known to be home to cyber attackers (e.g. India, Pakistan, China, Russia, several countries in Africa/Middle East) were automatically blocked.

WCB Alberta's WFH slide deck [<insert link, get approval for use>](#) includes some information security and confidentiality tips, including avoiding printing work-related documents at home, shredding any documents that need to be printed, storing notes in a secure location such as a locked filing cabinet, and avoiding having confidential phone calls on speaker.

## e. Conclusion

As noted in the Introduction, a return to the pre-COVID work model of full-time working from the office appears unlikely for many organizations, especially in the short term. WCBs have a responsibility to assist in ensuring the health, safety and security of their employees when working from home as part of a hybrid work model.

While not exhaustive, this document has raised some key considerations discussed by AWCBC SEMC members in their regular update meetings over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The SEMC meets on a regular basis, in addition to the All Committees and Learning Symposium events, and will continue to discuss and provide solutions to enhance health, safety and security for a hybrid working environment.