

Intro:

Welcome to Pulse of the Region, brought to you by the Metro Hartford Alliance. The Metro Hartford Alliance collaborates with investors and partners to elevate the Hartford region through economic development work, convening the community around shared challenges and providing local chamber support. Learn more about their mission and how to get involved at MetroHartford.com. Pulse of the Region is produced in partnership with Oak Hill, originally founded as a school for the blind in 1893. Oak Hill has provided holistic person-centered services for individuals with disabilities for over 130 years. With empowerment and independence as its guiding principles, Oak Hill works in partnership with the individuals it serves to provide residential, education, and enrichment opportunities. Learn more at OakHillCT.org. Now here's your host for Pulse of the Region, Kate Baumann.

Kate Baumann:

Welcome to Pulse of the Region. I'm your host, Kate Baumann. So excited to have you here today. We are here recording in the iHeart Media Studios, which I love to call the "Candy Cane Building" here in our capital city of Hartford. It's great. I have two smiling guests who are going to be joining us here on the show today. Today we are getting the pulse about wellness in the workplace and strategies your organization can take to create a positive culture for your employees, so a topic which is a very hot topic now and certainly has been for a while now. So, excited to dive deeper into the conversation with our two guests that are sitting there patiently for me to introduce them.

First, from Mental Health Connecticut is Jackie Davis. She is their Director of Workplace Mental Health and DEI. Jackie, welcome to Pulse of the Region.

Jackie Davis:

Thank you for having me.

Kate Baumann:

Of course, of course. Great to have you here today. And second, a repeat guest, which we didn't scare you off the first time, which I'm very excited about, is she is from FCP Euro. It is Nicole Batista, and she is their Wellness and Engagement Manager. Nicole, welcome back to Pulse of the Region.

Nicole Batista:

Thank you for having me again. And Jackie, thank you for inviting me.

Jackie Davis:

Of course.

Kate Baumann:

Fantastic. Well, first things first, I always like to do some introductions when we can. Jackie, why not, we'll start with you. If you could talk a little bit just on explaining who is Mental Health Connecticut?

Jackie Davis:

Sure. Mental Health Connecticut, we are a statewide nonprofit. We've been around 115 years celebrating this past May.

Kate Baumann:

Wow. Congratulations.

Jackie Davis:

Thank you very much. I've been with the organization just about nine years. It's one of the best work environments I've ever been to. One of the things that we do at Mental Health Connecticut is that that we're trying to inform other organizations and guide them into making their workplaces the best places that they can be with a focus on mental health and DEI as well so that we have inclusion, you have safety, you have belonging types of environments where people can come to their places of work and not just punch their time card and do a good job, but they actually are in an environment that's going to support their long-term health and wellness. Because we do spend a lot of our time at work.

Kate Baumann:

It's like you're in my mind. I'm thinking, I go, yeah, I go, we spend so much time at work. This is the way we should be approaching this.

Jackie Davis:

The average American, if you look at your work week, you're spending 60% of your time at work.

Kate Baumann:

Wow.

Jackie Davis:

That's a lot of time. If you're not happy, if you don't feel safe, if you don't feel included, that's not a good environment and that ripples out to the rest of your time, your life. So you bring that home to your kids, you bring that home to your spouse, your family, your friends. We are focusing on workplaces and making sure that that environment is a good, safe environment, it's healthy so that it can make that impact out in the world. We do have a plethora of other programs, but today we're talking about the workplaces. That's a big part of why I'm here today.

Kate Baumann:

That's great. No, very excited about this conversation. It was actually this week I was talking, a couple of people asked me "What's on the show this week?" And it was sharing the topic on wellness in the workplace. Every single person, I swear to you, literally said like, "Oh my gosh, I need to listen to that episode." Certainly something on people's minds. Nicole, it was so great, we were talking before we came into the studio and where you were last in probably in December on the show, talking again about wellness and really excited to expand today on that. But first, if you don't mind reminding listeners about FCP Euro and just who you are as a company and what you guys do.

Nicole Batista:

Absolutely. FCP Euro stands for Foreign Car Parts European, which helps kind of set the context for what we do as an organization. We are an e-commerce retailer of European car parts. Basically, we have a website where we sell car parts for different makes, like BMW, Mercedes, Audi, Volvo. There's other ones that I'm missing, but I want to give them credit so I don't get in too much trouble with my teammates. We are based in Milford, Connecticut. That's where our distribution center is.

Before we became an e-commerce retailer, we were a brick and mortar location in Groton. It was a small family owned business. The son of the two parents who owned that is still our president, so it's still family owned, but it's grown to what we are today, which is an e-commerce company. We've been on the Inc 5,000 Fastest Growing Companies list for 10 years now. We've been able to sustain that growth. That's kind of the bread and butter of what we do along with really focusing on empowering our community in the DIY space. We have a lot of YouTube videos of how to fix your own car with the parts you can buy from us. We have build series and a lot of fun stuff in that realm as well.

Kate Baumann:

Nice. Very nice. What kind of brings you here today? I'd love if you could share about the partnership between FCP Euro and then also with Mental Health Connecticut.

Nicole Batista:

For me personally, I am our Wellness and Engagement Manager. My background is actually in public health, but I found myself in the HR space at this organization really focusing on building an employee wellness program. I was the first one of my position at the company. I came in with a relatively large task. We're just under 250 employees. I'm sure as we'll talk about, workplace wellness is such a broad, really, term. There's so much that falls under that. When I came onto the team and spoke with our leadership, it was very clear to me that mental health and support of our team members in that way was a really important component of what we wanted wellness to mean at our workplace. My expertise is not mental health, but there's so many people like Mental Health Connecticut and Jackie, and other people who do have that expertise. I don't actually know how I found it. It was probably a very ferocious Google search.

Kate Baumann:

I love the honesty,

Nicole Batista:

I came across Mental Health Connecticut's website and I saw that they were launching this workplace wellness program called the MHC Collaborative. It was almost exactly what I was envisioning in my head that I wish this existed, how can I find this? Which basically was kind of an expert in mental health looking to support organizations who want to focus on that in the workplace. And so, I reached out. We ended up partnering for a six month assessment where we worked with the person in Jackie's role and she talked to maybe 10 or 12 of our employees across different departments about where are we supporting mental health really well, where are there opportunities for us to support differently? Then they compiled all of the findings and recommendations for us about not only "Here are the opportunities that we know are best practices, but also getting to know your team and talking with you. Here's what we think would be really great for you all to prioritize to make the most impact."

Kate Baumann:

Nice. That's fantastic. Would love Jackie, I'm going to ask kind of a big question to you to start things off, but really what is the importance of creating a culture of workplace mental health? Which, sorry, you could probably sit here and we'd need 10 hours to really fully answer that question, but a high level just to kind of tee off the conversation. Would love your thoughts there.

Jackie Davis:

Yeah, as you mentioned earlier, it is a big hot topic right now. A lot of people are paying more attention to their mental health. Unfortunately, because of COVID, a lot of us took a big self-assessment time. We had the quarantines, we were locked down, we had nothing else to do but to sit with our thoughts.

Kate Baumann:

For good, for better and for worse, I guess.

Jackie Davis:

For better or for worse. But I think that really did open up the doors and broke a lot of the stigma around mental health and bring it into different environments like the workplace. As I mentioned, we spend a lot of our time at work. It's important to have those environments that are going to support our long-term health and wellness, which is our mission at Mental Health Connecticut. We partner with individuals, families and communities to create those environments, which is why we love partnering with FCP Euro. We love partnering with all these organizations so that we can help share those best practices and create those environments for the leadership for their staff. Then it ripples out into the communities and the people that they serve. It really does make a very strong impact. When we're talking about mental health, we're talking about people. That's really what it comes down to.

It's about caring for individuals as people, as human beings. We're not robots. We're not this production machine. When we go into work, we're not a number. We are living, breathing people with emotions. We have experiences, we have different backgrounds. We have our strengths, we have our weaknesses. The more that we get to know people and support them, the better they're going to be, the more productive, they're going to be... The more that they look forward to coming into work. As you said, I could talk about this for hours and hours, but what it really boils down to is just treating people as people, meeting them where they are, giving them the supports that they need so they can be their best.

Kate Baumann:

I love that. Perfectly said, and thank you so much for letting me throw the big question. I promise the rest will be easier.

Jackie Davis:

Oh, good.

Kate Baumann:

You're like, thank goodness. With that too, is could you tell us about as you have the Mental Health Connecticut collaborate assessment process, correct. Am I saying it hopefully properly?

Jackie Davis:

MHC Collaborative. Yes.

Kate Baumann:

Fantastic. Could you talk a little bit about this process?

Jackie Davis:

Yes. As Nicole mentioned in her experience, there was interviews that happened with staff members, employees kind of picking everyone's brains to say, "How is the work environment? What benefits are you receiving? What does the culture really look like?" Because we can't just put a Band-Aid on something. There's no universal best practice. I wish there was, to say "Just follow these five things and you'll be great." We do follow certain measurements and assessments. For example, the US Surgeon General's Five Essentials for Workplace Mental Health and Wellbeing, Mental Health Americas Bell Seal for Workplace Wellness.

We use these best practices to guide us, but we still need to customize them down, again, meeting people where they are. We need to understand the population. We need to understand the workforce in order to make the best impact. While we can say, "Yes, you should have a DEI initiative. Yes, you need to have time off, flexible work hours," these are all great things to have, but it has to make sense for your environment. We do that assessment. We look at policies, procedures, handbooks. We have one-on-one conversations. We can hold focus groups. Again, whatever the organization might need.

If they're a small group, it might be easier to do the one-on-one. With someone that has thousands of employees, we can do a focus group just to really pick their brains and say, "What is it like now and where would you like it to go?" Then we get that information, we balance that against those best practices that I talked about, and then really figure out what's going to work best, and then have that conversation and that presentation to the organization to say, "Here's where you are. Here's where we think that you want to go based off the feedback. Here are the steps to get there."

And then not telling them "This is what you need to do," we say "This is what you could do and this is the potential that you have." Then it's up to their leadership team to make those implementations if they decide to, or even just prioritize them over time. Because unfortunately you can't change culture overnight. I'd love to snap my fingers and have everyone have a healthy workplace, but it takes an investment in time and funds and getting that buy-in from everyone. It is a process, but we're there to guide those organizations through that.

Kate Baumann:

Nice. That's great. I appreciate giving the space to do it, setting goals, guideposts and things of that nature. Nicole, I'd love to hear a little bit, you kind of talked about the program a little bit higher level. If you could talk a little bit more in depth, what were those processes and those next steps and where are you guys at today within the process?

Nicole Batista:

Yeah, absolutely. As Jackie mentioned, there were individual conversations with team members. We also had a leadership focus group. There were conversations with us as an HR team looking over our benefits guide, a lot of our policies and procedures and really combing through what are the uniquenesses of our organization, where we're already really strong and where are there opportunities. As Jackie mentioned, there's so much that could be done, even if you're doing this really well and even if you're focusing on this as an organization.

Some of the recommendations that came out of that for us specifically include continuing to invest in a training called Mental Health First Aid, among others that had to do with our core values. There were what they called through lines, which is kind of the things they heard from numerous employees or things that they continued to hear in all of their conversations. In addition to the Mental Health First Aid, there was talk about our culture. There was conversation about scheduling. We are a distribution center at large. That's the majority of our population.

To Jackie's point, something like flexible scheduling is a little bit harder in that type of environment. And so what does that look like? How do we honor the essence of that in this environment? There were a lot of through lines and a lot of recommendations about, "Hey, long-term, here are the things that I think are opportunities for you specifically as an organization." But we decided right now, at this moment in where we are, Mental Health First Aid was what we really wanted to focus on. That is a well-researched, longstanding training for helping people know how to understand, identify, and respond to somebody with a mental health challenge.

What we took out of the assessment was that we decided the goal for us was anybody who has a direct report, so anybody who's a people manager, has to go through Mental Health First Aid training. We have a long-term strategy towards that. We've had to date this year, we've had 23 managers go through it. We have just under 50 total who are our people managers. We have two more for the year scheduled in October, which is a nod to a World Mental Health Day, which is on October 10th. We have two more scheduled for the year with another 23 managers signed up. That was our really big push in 2023, was to get all people managers through that training.

Then moving forward, we will do quarterly trainings as well. Then a uniqueness that we're bringing is also ongoing support sessions. Every quarter, any manager who has gone through this training can come. We have mock scenarios, mock conversations. We have them role model with us how they would handle it. We let them ask questions, "Hey, what benefits specific to FCP Euro could help in a situation like this?" So really, that's where I see this having become a part of our cultures is now all managers have a common understanding and then they know that it's a collaboration between them, us as the HR team. We will loop in Mental Health Connecticut in the future, I'm sure, to continue helping with that. That's really where we've taken the assessment and the recommendations.

Kate Baumann:

That's great. What's been the feedback so far that you've received from managers who have gone through this program? Let's start there.

Nicole Batista:

We have had amazing feedback. Not to sound too biased because I do run the training.

Kate Baumann:

[inaudible 00:16:02] you say that just so for all the listeners with a huge smile, that bridge just brightened up your face, so you really mean that.

Nicole Batista:

Yeah. We have had amazing feedback, I think because at the end of the day, as Jackie mentioned, people are people at work and people who are in manager positions want to help their people, whether that's in a performance situation or a personal situation. The lines are not clear cut. I think what managers have gained from it is a little bit of a framework to help manage and work through these sometimes gray situations. What I say to managers is, "Hey, I know these conversations can be hard. I know the stakes can feel really high, but here's a toolkit so that you don't flounder through them when they happen." It's not an if. We know one in five adults in the US will experience a mental health challenge in their lifetime.

I often open up the training with, "Hey, raise your hand if your team is more than five people." Getting them to understand that it's not an if, it's a when, and reducing that stigma around that. I think we've

had such great feedback because they feel like it's giving them a tool in their toolkit to be the best manager they can be.

Kate Baumann:

Fantastic. No, this sounds incredible. Appreciate the way to look at it short term and then also longer term as well. Jackie, I would love for you to chime in too, just to talk a little bit too on how else are you partnering with companies. Here's one great example with FCP. I need to... Oh, my goodness, it's one of those days.

Nicole Batista:

It's a tough one.

Kate Baumann:

One of these... F one. There we go. Perfect. Is how you're working with them in this specific way? How are you working with some other companies that may be looking to address their wellness in the workplace?

Jackie Davis:

We're at a unique position where we're just ramping up. FCP Euro went through our pilot of the program, which we called a cohort. It was a six month process for most of the groups that participated in that. We kind of used their evaluations and their feedback to continue to grow the program. We're now at a place where we're opening it up to a membership model where it's a full year investment. As a membership, you start off, you go through that whole assessment, but you also tie in those trainings like Mental Health First Aid that Nicole brought up.

We also have customized trainings that we give to organizations around things like psychological safety, mental health 101 to kind of just do an overview of what does this actually look like in the workplace? We do a lot of DEI trainings as well, diversity, equity and inclusion, which I'm very pleased to be able to provide those personally to staff. Actually, I was just working with an organization out in New York and providing a DEI in the workplace training to their staff. We were able to do that virtually and have about 20 to 30 people on the Zoom call and just go over what does this mean in the workplace? What are some of the barriers that they were facing? And started to focus on things like generational diversity because in their workplace they had people from their twenties all the way up to their seventies, and sometimes there would be some clashes between the generations of all of those-

Kate Baumann:

Geez, I'm shocked.

Jackie Davis:

Those young ones don't get it, or that's not how you're supposed to do it, and vice versa. You just have those stereotypes and butting heads. So kind of break it down to say, "Okay, across the generations we each went through these major life events at pivotal times in our development process." If you look at, I believe it's Ericson's Philosophy of Development, in your adolescent stage between ages 10 to 19 or so, you're asking yourself, "Who am I?" That's the process of how you're building who you are. So what happens to you in those times when you're 10 to 19 years old?

When I was 19 year old, the Twin Towers fell. That has a massive impact on my life and my outlook on life and everything that happened since there with the war on terror, and certain individuals were getting targeted wrongly just for the color of their skin and their faith. I just saw the world completely different because I was still asking myself, "Who am I in this world?" And so trying to open up those conversations to say, "Okay, let's look at people as people again, not just, oh, those millennials or those Boomers." Let's get away from that.

Let's say let's look at Kate, let's look at Nicole. Let's look at Jackie. Let's have these conversations as people and get to know each other. And just trying to present those trainings and workshops to open those conversations up for organizations so they're not just sitting down listening like a classroom to say, "Okay, two plus two is four. Got it." And that's all I can do. No, you want to have those conversations to be like, "Well, why?" And let's have a dialogue about it. So providing those tools to organizations so they can continue to do that work as a team.

Then we're just there in the background to continue to guide them, do check-ins. We do monthly check-ins with all of our members to make sure to say, "Okay, what was great this week? What were your weaknesses? What are you still struggling with and how can we continue to help you?" They go through that first year with us. They have those trainings, they have that assessment, they have the plan, and then hopefully if they still need us, come back the next year, continue to do more trainings because it's not a one and done situation. It's a process.

Kate Baumann:

I can imagine, yes.

Jackie Davis:

You have to keep working on it. Then we also offer to guide them to get the Mental Health America Bell Seal of Workplace Wellness, which MHC is a platinum level recipient of that, which is the highest level that you can get. Unfortunately, people that have tried to do that, only one in four organizations have met that criteria for that certification. Interesting. So where the MHC Collaborative comes in, we help those organizations get those tools, get those processes in place, get to that level so that they can earn that certification, not just to have that nice gold star to put on your website, but to actually show your staff and walk the talk and be like, "You know what? We put the work in, we've earned this, we did this together." It kind of feels like that aha moment, and just kind to check yourself and make sure that you are meeting that bar that you're setting for your organization.

Kate Baumann:

That's great. That's a really good approach. One thing I want to circle back on, we've talked a little bit on just the organization at the management level. Nicole, you talked about the individual employees and the people is sometimes you think, hey, we're going to do new programs and new trainings. And sometimes as an employee, people aren't thrilled about it, but we'd love to get what of this people's approach? I think this is so unique and it's different than some of the other trainings we may need to do within a workplace.

So Nicole, we'd love to just hear first what were employees' opinions about starting a program like this? And then what are you seeing now that you've really been able to take a year into the program?

Nicole Batista:

Yeah. One thing in my experience coming into an organization and building a new program is the importance of including employees and making it a collaborative because it's not successful if it's viewed

as my program. This is Nicole's wellness program. It's successful when it's viewed as our program. And so one thing that I really appreciated about the assessment process was the opportunity for those one-on-one conversations with employees because that brought them in so early on to hear their perspectives.

We really focused on making sure that employees' voices who were heard were diverse, not just in gender or race or ethnicity, but also in how long have they been at the organization, what departments are they in, who are their managers, so that there was a really broad view across the organization of what different employees were experiencing. I think employees really appreciated being included in that way so that when we did come back and announce our partnership with Mental Health Connecticut company-wide, it felt like they had a part in building this.

I think that's a really big, big piece to consider early on to get that buy-in and get that participation. As talking about the benefit employees are having from the manager Mental Health First Aid training, we are very intentional about communicating this as a priority for us because we want employees to know that companies put resources towards things they value. We're putting resources in terms of it is a seven to eight hour training, and I was trained to become an instructor for it. We communicate specifically to employees for them to know, "We want you to know that we're investing in these things. We're training your managers in this way so that you can feel comfortable whenever this conversation might have to happen."

There's a lot that has to happen before an employee feels comfortable disclosing if they are struggling. The hope and the long-term outcome that I hope employees are going to understand is we've done a lot of foundational work so that if you are going through this, it's de-stigmatized, there's an environment that's ready to hear you out and there's an environment that's ready to support you. We've seen that. I think from the manager level too, again, they are employees too, and sometimes we forget that.

Kate Baumann:

That's an excellent point.

Nicole Batista:

We forget that managers are individual employees too. I think they have felt a little bit of relief after this training because it is kind of scary sometimes. There is this thought of, "What if I have the conversation wrong? What am I required to say? What are the employment laws around this topic?" I think they've felt a bit of relief to know, one, your HR team is here to support you in this way, but two, here's a toolbox and a framework that you can use. It's only been the first year, so there'll be a lot of long-term benefits we hope to see, but those are the early ones that we're talking about as a team.

Kate Baumann:

Okay, great. Thank you for sharing those. Jackie, from your perspective, what have you seen on the employee level with some of the other companies you've worked with?

Jackie Davis:

A lot of great success stories very similar to FCP Euro. I'm so proud of you guys. I'm proud of all of our members that are going through this process. Everyone's at a different stage where they are at. I think as to Nicole's point of having those one-on-one conversations, bringing people into it, getting that buy-in early on really did make that initial impact right up front where staff and employees saw that investment from their organization, from their leadership team right up front. It wasn't just another training, it wasn't just another little initiative where you get a little sticker at the end of the day.

It really is an investment where they are being seen and heard in a new way. I think that has created such a value for the employees that we've been working with. That's one of the best things about it. I always like to say there's no about us without us. It's not my saying someone else did it. I don't know where it came from, but it is such a great philosophy that really should continue to be ingrained because if you're going to talk about something, you're going to talk about changing an environment, you need to involve all those people in that environment.

Kate Baumann:

That is really good. There's no about us without us. Oh, I like that. Okay. I'm going to steal that too. Fantastic. Jackie, where for companies who may be looking to start or looking to build on a strong foundation they have, where do you recommend them? What's that next best step or that first step in some cases?

Jackie Davis:

Individuals that are ready to make that first step or just have some questions and want to know what direction they can go in, please come to our website, contact me directly. You can go to collab@mhconn.org to email me. You can go to our website at mhconn.org/education. You'll go directly to where the collaborative information is. There are materials on there that give you the overview of what the program looks like, what the prices are, and everything is open to have discussions. If possibly you're just looking for, "Well, let's just do one training and see how it goes. Let's just have one conversation and see how that goes," I'm always happy to talk to people and customize things.

Again, we meet people where they are. I can't just say "This one, thing's going to work for you," because it won't. So yeah, I'm always happy to have those conversations with individuals. I really love meeting people and seeing what they're up to because it is a collaborative for a reason. It's not just that one-on-one with an organization. I get to take the best practices and the findings from one organization and share it with someone else to say, "Oh, you know what worked really great for them." What new program this group has done, I can say, "Oh, at FCP Euro, their wellness coordinator is doing the Mental Health First Aid trainings herself."

How awesome is that to be able to have that resource in-house as opposed to having an external trainer that you're going to see once and that's it? You can go back to Nicole and say, "Hey, remember back in that training, can we talk about that again?" That is such an asset. I'm able to share that story with our other clients to say, "You really should have an internal trainer because it's had such a strong impact," and we can have those stories to share and feed off of each other, which is the beauty of this program.

Kate Baumann:

Fantastic. Can you share what your website is one more time?

Jackie Davis:

It's www.mhconn.org.

Kate Baumann:

Fantastic. Nicole, do you mind sharing where people can learn more about FCP Euro and also too, if they may be looking for a job too?

Nicole Batista:

Absolutely. Our website is fcpeuro.com. If you're interested in learning a little bit more about our organization, there's an about page on there that has our history that I talked a little bit about in the beginning, but we also have a careers fcpeuro.com page as well where we will post our openings. We also have our LinkedIn page, which is FCP Euro on LinkedIn, where we are posting about a lot of the work that I've spoken about here, a lot of pictures from employee engagement events that we do, as well as our brand new distribution center in Mesa, Arizona that just opened up this month.

Kate Baumann:

Oh, congratulations.

Nicole Batista:

A lot of fun stuff. You can learn about what we're doing as an organization in all different areas.

Kate Baumann:

That's great. Well, thank you so much. We're going to have to get you back in now another six months or so to get the updates and everything. You too, Jackie. We really appreciate the conversation today and appreciate really what each of you're doing, again, for the people and for each of us as individuals. Thank you guys so much for being here today.

Jackie Davis:

Yes, thank you.

Kate Baumann:

Of course.

Nicole Batista:

Thank you for having us.

Kate Baumann:

Of course. No, thank you guys and thanks for coming in. I appreciate it. I love friends. Thank you all for listening today. For all the details about today's show, you can visit metrohartford.com. We would love to, as always, give a big thank you to our partner, Oak Hill. And again, thanks to you for listening. I'm Kate Baumann. Go out and make today a good day here in Connecticut.