

# LEADERSHIP IN DEI



**Integrating diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) into benefits plans is becoming an imperative for employers to attract and retain talent. Marie-Chantal Côté, Sun Life's senior vice-president of group benefits, shares how the company is taking an inclusive lens to its group benefits offerings.**



*Why did Sun Life put an early focus on DEI in group benefits?*

Over the last few years, our clients were telling us that they'd started embedding DEI into their workplace practices and wanted to know how to make their benefits more inclusive. So last year, we partnered with Ipsos on first-of-its-kind research exploring what diverse employee groups want from their benefits plans. We heard loud and clear that applying an inclusive lens is important—and that employers and providers have work to do to meet the needs of diverse Canadians. A majority of respondents across diverse groups said their benefits were an important factor in retention.

*How has Sun Life incorporated DEI into its group benefits offerings?*

In 2019, we introduced a gender affirmation product that supplements provincial or territorial coverage. Our goal is to help people who are transitioning embody their authentic selves. Last year, we enhanced our family-building coverage for fertility treatments, adoption or surrogacy arrangements to better support all employees wishing to start a family. Solutions like these can have a profound impact on people's lives.

These journeys are often complex and require holistic support. While transition surgeries and fertility treatments are physical changes, Canadians going

through these experiences often need mental-health support along the way. That's why we have various mental-health offerings available to them.

*What is Sun Life working on now in the DEI space?*

We're working to improve access to traditional Indigenous healing practices. To do this, we're working with health leaders from Indigenous communities to ensure we're providing access to culturally appropriate care in a respectful way.

We're also very focused on women's health. Women face a gender health gap due to stigma around their health issues; there's also a lack of representation in medical research and clinical trials—and overall, women's health is underfunded. The health gap includes not only reproductive health but other major areas like cardiovascular and mental health, as well.

We're focusing on raising awareness and providing guidance on benefits solutions, many of which are already available in group plans. We also want to create supports that fill in the current care gaps, especially when it comes to life stages that are rarely talked about, such as menopause.

*Why is there a need to focus on menopause in the workplace?*

Most women will have to deal with menopause—and it affects many at

their career peaks. There are more than 30 symptoms associated with the transition, ranging from hot flashes to lesser-known, debilitating symptoms like fatigue, depression and memory issues. We've seen research that estimates up to 10 per cent of women have symptoms so incapacitating they leave their jobs. Despite this, it's rarely talked about and many women are left feeling alone. Because we need a better understanding of what women go through, we're partnering with the Menopause Foundation of Canada to raise awareness.

There are things employers can do right now to support women. These include checking their paramedical coverage to ensure they're providing support for menopause-related physical health issues; reviewing their mental-health coverage amounts; making sure their plans cover hormone replacement therapy, incontinence supplies and pharmacogenetics; and adding a personal spending account for wellness expenses. By communicating what's available and enhancing group benefits where possible, employers can ensure women feel supported and valued in the workplace.

