



## AA Insurance

# EMERGING DIVERSITY & INCLUSION AWARD HIGHLY COMMENDED

### THE STORY

Wanting to foster a workplace where all staff feel safe and included, AA Insurance launched an internal Support Network to help those experiencing domestic violence, which is among the country's most serious social issues.

One of New Zealand's leading insurance companies, AA Insurance (AAI) has a diverse workforce of 760 people.

Under a company-wide Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, it is committed to providing those staff with a safe and supportive environment where everyone's voice matters, opportunities are equal and people can be a true version of themselves.

As part of that, it created its Support Network specifically to help those suffering from domestic violence or mental health issues.



“The impacts of domestic violence can affect both the individual's personal life and professional life,” says AAI's Corporate Social Responsibility Manager Ainslie Malcolm. “We wanted to ensure the workplace could be a sanctuary away from abuse through the environment we created; one that is non-judgmental, where our people felt safe to speak-up and receive the support and help they deserve.”

Launched in November 2019, the Support Network gives confidential support to individuals, whether that be a shoulder to lean on in challenging times, assisting with workplace adjustments, or directing people to professional help.

AAI had previously established a Domestic Violence-Free Policy, and received accreditation from Shine, a national domestic-abuse charity.

As part of that accreditation, most of its leaders were trained to support staff facing domestic violence or abuse. But the company wanted to do more. It recognised some staff might not

feel comfortable approaching their leader, and saw the creation of a Support Network of volunteers from among the staff themselves as an obvious answer.

Encouragingly, six per cent of staff offered to volunteer, and an initial team of 15 was quickly expanded to 20.

“The passion of those interviewed was obvious, most with personal experiences that drove a desire to help others avoid situations they were once in,” says Ainslie. “Our volunteers are representative of the diversity of our workforce, to provide comfort to staff from someone ‘like’ them. They represent each AAI site geographically, hold varying roles, are of different genders, sexual orientation and ethnicity.”

The volunteers have been given an intensive two and a half days of training with Shine and have undertaken the St John’s Mental Health First Aid course, equipping them with skills to recognise mental distress and the confidence to provide initial help and guidance. They can be contacted by their peers to listen, provide various kinds of guidance, support requests for leave or security provision, or put people in touch with professionals for additional support.

The volunteers, who are enabled to step out from their day-to-day roles as required to support colleagues, have been championed by AAI’s executive management team. Progress on the initiative has been shared throughout the company, with a launch video played in team meetings to raise awareness, and a dedicated page maintained on the AAI intranet.

Since going live, the Support Network has already helped four per cent of AAI’s staff, over a period that included the extra stress of Christmas and the Covid-19 lockdown. Support for staff seeking help has included flexible working arrangements and provision of domestic leave.

Absenteeism is down, and resounding support for the company’s focus on wellbeing was evident in its 2020 staff-engagement survey. The latter was anecdotally attributed to the Support Network initiative.

AAI Safety & Wellbeing Business Partner Erin Brearley, who has been closely involved with the initiative, says the company wanted to create an environment where talking about domestic violence was ‘okay’ and, when people were ready to get help, there was a clear path for them to ensure they were kept safe. “Being able to support staff who have the courage to speak out has been amazing,” she says. “I am so proud of the work the Support Network is doing in this area assisting their colleagues.”

CEO Chris Curtin says, “AA Insurance is not just a workplace, it is a family. I’m so proud of what we are doing to support our people in need.”

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## THE CHALLENGE

Aware of the prevalence of domestic violence in New Zealand, AAI wanted to ensure the workplace could be a sanctuary for any of its staff who might be affected.

## STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- A Diversity and Inclusion Strategy commits the company to providing its people with a safe and supportive environment.
- Implementation of a Domestic Violence-Free Policy across the company.
- Training of leaders to support staff experiencing domestic violence or abuse.
- Recruitment and training of a Support Network of volunteers.
- Company-wide promotion and support of the initiative.



## RESULTS AND BENEFITS

- Since going live, the Support Network has already helped four per cent of AAI staff.
- The company's 2020 staff-engagement survey found resounding support for its focus on wellbeing. This is anecdotally attributed to the Support Network initiative, which dominated AAI's wellbeing activity for 2019-2020.
- Staff who have reached out to the network have been supported in a variety of ways, including being provided with flexible working arrangements and supported to take domestic violence leave.
- Support Network volunteers have had the opportunity to develop support and leadership skills.

## KEY LEARNING

People want to support their colleagues. When the need for a peer-to-peer support network was recognised, a strong representation of volunteers stepped up to be trained in providing support to colleagues experiencing domestic violence or abuse.

**DO WORKPLACE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION WELL AND DO WELL BECAUSE OF IT.**

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