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Guideline for Absence Management

This Guideline assists line managers to fulfil their responsibilities to identify and manage unsatisfactory absenteeism (for sick leave or carer’s leave, not absenteeism associated with leave without pay, workers’ compensation or health management cases).

Direct communication with individual employees about their responsibilities including absence is essential and can offer a positive approach towards establishing a culture that encourages attendance.

The following provides for the model process for managing unplanned absences. Where absenteeism is unsatisfactory the four step process (outlined below and with more detail in section 5) can be used to guide line managers to proactively identify, communicate and resolve individual attendance issues.

**Establish expectations**
Establish expectations with all employees regarding attendance at work and the requirement to report their absence. Employees should also be made aware that payment of sick leave is subject to the provision of appropriate paperwork, including leave forms and medical certificates (as required).

**Step 1 – Monitor attendance/absenteeism**
Manager regularly monitors attendance levels by reviewing attendance records/reports and ensure all leave is authorised. If an area of improvement is recognised, progress to Step 2.

**Engage in absence conversations with employees**
Informal absenteeism conversations should be initiated by the manager as soon as possible on the first day of return to work following an unplanned absence. The checklist can guide your conversation.

**Step 2 – Informal action**
Manager to meet with employee to discuss concerns about attendance, identify possible causes and clarify expectations.

**Keep in touch with employees**
A manager may contact an employee during a short-term absence. However, if the leave is long-term the manager should ensure regular contact with the employee and establish the form and frequency of the contact on an individual basis.

**Step 3 – Formal action**
Formal action is commenced to rectify attendance concerns (this should be undertaken in consultation with local HR) which could include the development of a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) to manage the unsatisfactory performance.

**Step 4 – Referral**
Where all attempts to resolve issues with absence have been exhausted, the matter needs to be progressed for more serious action to be taken. The matter should be referred to the local HR unit and the appropriate delegate for consideration of disciplinary action, or other process.
Introduction

An employee is entitled to access sick leave when they are unable to attend work due to illness or injury. Sick leave entitlements are outlined in the Department of Health HR Policy C64: Sick Leave.

An employee is also entitled to access their sick leave entitlements to take carer’s leave to care for members of their immediate family or household. Carer’s leave entitlements are outlined in the Department of Health HR Policy C9: Carer’s Leave.

When concerns arise regarding an employee’s rate or pattern or amount of unplanned absence, the management of such absenteeism needs to be conducted fairly, reasonably and in accordance with award, legislative and other policy provisions. This Guideline outlines the expectations managers should establish with all employees regarding attendance at work, and absence notification and recording requirements. The Guideline also outlines a four step process for managing unsatisfactory attendance.

Purpose

The purpose of this Guideline is to assist Queensland Health Line Managers to identify and manage attendance issues fairly and effectively, including taking appropriate action when there are attendance concerns at an individual level.

This Guideline is intended to support the Department of Health HR Policy G4: Absence Management, and is focused on the management of unsatisfactory absenteeism categorised as sick leave or carer’s leave, and not absenteeism associated with leave without pay, workers’ compensation or health management cases.

Audience

This Guideline is intended to guide and support the actions of Queensland Health line managers when managing unsatisfactory attendance, and is applicable to all employees of Queensland Health, including staff working in Hospital and Health Services and the Department of Health.
1. Responsibilities

1.1 Managers’ responsibilities

To manage sick leave in an effective manner, managers need to:

- be aware of the award and policy requirements relating to absence management and apply them fairly and transparently
- understand the majority of sick leave is genuine and needs to be dealt with empathetically
- understand that each employee’s circumstances should be managed on a case by case basis
- treat information provided by employees about their health on a confidential basis. Information shall only be provided to other persons who have a legitimate reason to know.
- use available information management systems to monitor and analyse sick leave data/reports
- identify options, strategies and support available to manage absences when they occur
- keep in touch with employees on unscheduled absences
- develop and facilitate return to work plans where appropriate
- recognise and act on underlying causes that may contribute to absences
- maintain open two-way communication with work teams, including regularly communicating that attendance matters and why.

1.2 Employee responsibilities

Employees need to understand:

- sick leave is a condition of employment that enables a permanent or temporary employee to recover from illness without loss of pay (with accrued sick leave); leave provisions are also insurance against future illness
- employees are responsible for attending work in accordance with their contracted working hours and fulfilling their contract of employment - if employees are fit for duty, they must come to work
- employees should be fit for duty before returning to work following sick leave absence
- employees are required to keep in touch with their Manager during periods of absence, if they are medically fit to do so
• payment of sick leave is subject to the provision of appropriate paperwork - i.e. leave forms and medical certificates. In situations of carer’s leave, in accordance with the HR Policy C9: Carer’s leave, an employee is to, if required; provide a medical certificate or statutory declaration to show that the immediate family/household member concerned is ill

• in cases where health and/or attendance becomes a concern, employees should discuss the situation with their manager at the earliest opportunity to seek a positive outcome

• personal commitments should be attended to during off duty hours, with other appropriate leave, or where available through the use of flexible working hours arrangements.

2. Establish attendance expectations

2.1 Establish an attendance culture

The creation of a culture where employees are engaged and committed to the organisation and its leadership has been shown to directly result in reduced absence. The impact managers have on employee attendance should not be underestimated. Management style, behaviour and allocation of responsibility have been shown to be clearly linked to absence rates. Cultural aspects of the organisation or work area also impact on employee expectations concerning attendance.

Managers should seek to establish a work environment that encourages attendance at work including:

• ensuring a safe and healthy workplace
• promoting healthy workers by supporting workplace health initiatives
• recognising and managing potential stress factors
• being approachable and considerate
• supporting the use of Queensland Health family friendly practices and flexible hours arrangements (where applicable)
• supporting the view that leave provisions are an employee’s insurance against future illness rather than an entitlement that must be used
• ensuring employees are aware of available support e.g. Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Managers should establish a standardised process for communicating and reporting unplanned absences and should communicate these expectations to existing and new team members (see section 3.1 for further detail). Direct communication with individual employees
about their individual absence records can also offer a positive approach towards establishing a culture that encourages attendance.

Managers should ensure induction for all new employees includes:

- expectations regarding attendance in general
- absence policies and procedures/business rules that apply to the employee
- how to report illness and injury related absences and what evidence the employee needs to provide
- other related policies and support services available.

Managers should consider whether absenteeism is a concern at a team or individual level, and whether it can be related in whole or part to organisational factors, such as difficult working conditions or the work group culture. If such issues are identified, managers should implement strategies to reduce organisational factors, in consultation with local human resources services (HR) and/or the available Manager Assist component of Queensland Health’s Employee Assistance Program.

3. Establish expectations for absence notification and recording

3.1 Standardise process for work teams to notify unplanned absences

Employees should be inducted in the absence procedure and notification system that applies to them – e.g. whether they are required to communicate unplanned absences directly to their line manager or manager’s delegate versus a rostering call centre.

Employees should also be instructed in notification expectations regarding the level of detail to be provided when notifying they are unfit to attend work or are requiring carer’s leave, including:

- the reason for the absence;
  - for carer’s leave: also provide the name of the person requiring care and their relationship to the employee;
- the anticipated length of absence;
- if any essential work priorities need to be attended to during their absence.

An absence notification process which stipulates direct communication with the line manager (or supervisor in charge for the impacted shift) is strongly recommended, as this allows the
manager/supervisor to discuss any critical tasks requiring delegation to other team members in the employee’s absence, as well as to discuss the likely length of absence for contingency planning purposes.

During an absence notification communication, the manager is also able to consider providing advice regarding requirements for a medical certificate, referral to the relevant OHS Unit if the injury/illness is work-related, and discussing available support services, such as the Employee Assistance Program, as required (refer to Appendix 1: Checklist for Absenteeism Conversations).

### 3.2 Record attendance and absence

All employee attendance should be monitored through some form of record (such as a timesheet) and should be authorised by the employee’s manager.

Employees should also be inducted in the absence recording requirements for their work team – e.g. Attendance Variation and Allowance Claims (AVACs) to be completed by the line manager for short-term absences, versus PARIS (Payroll and Rostering Intranet Site) leave forms to be completed by the employee on the first day of return to work following an unplanned absence (refer to Appendix 1: Checklist for Absenteeism Conversations).

Employees should also be made aware that payment of sick leave is subject to the provision of appropriate paperwork, including:

- leave forms;
- medical certificates, as required;
  - For carer’s leave: in accordance with the Department of Health HR Policy C9: Carer’s Leave, an employee is to, if required, provide a medical certificate or statutory declaration to show that the immediate family/household member concerned is ill.

By recording attendance and absence, absence rates can be measured to ascertain the type of absence, e.g. sickness, workers’ compensation or other absences, and also the duration of absence.

Attendance and absence data can then be analysed to assist in the targeting of strategies to promote attendance and/or address absence, including communication of sick leave performance at a team level, or direct communication with individual employees about their individual absence records.
4. Communicate with absent and returning employees

4.1 Keep in touch with absent employees

Managers must establish and maintain appropriate communication with employees while they are absent on unplanned leave, whether their individual attendance record is satisfactory or otherwise. This contact is to ensure adequate support is available for injured or ill employees, and/or to facilitate a return to work, as appropriate.

A manager may contact an employee -

- on short term absence:
  - if no contact has been made by the employee
  - to ascertain a return to work date, if not provided
  - to provide an update regarding workplace changes

- on long term leave due to illness/injury (over six weeks):
  - to ascertain preferred method of contact (e.g. phone, email, meeting at the workplace)
  - to maintain regular contact
  - to check on the employee’s wellbeing and discuss accessing the Employee Assistance Program, as appropriate
  - to discuss accessing QSuper entitlements if there is an illness/injury which could be long term, or where paid sick leave entitlements have been or are likely to be exhausted
  - to provide updates regarding workplace changes.

In both short and long term absences the form and frequency of the contact should be determined on an individual basis and made in a constructive and supportive manner, with the aim of seeking a timely return to work. Record of contact made is required to be maintained by the manager (i.e. file noted).

Maintaining communication with absent employees demonstrates care and concern for the employee’s welfare, and also acknowledges that their return to work will be planned for, and supported, as appropriate (refer to Appendix 1: Checklist for Absenteeism Conversations).

4.2 Engage in absenteeism conversations with employees

When an employee returns to work following any unplanned absence, it is the manager’s responsibility to ensure the employee is supported in their resumption of work, and that the...
appropriate leave documentation is provided by the employee, authorised and submitted for processing.

Informal absenteeism conversations should be initiated by the employee's manager as soon as possible on the first day of return to work following an unplanned absence. These conversations are intended to be informal and attendance-focused, by checking the wellness of the returned employee and letting them know that they were missed. Return to work conversations are also intended to support the employee's resumption of duties, including ascertaining whether workload support is initially required to assist the employee.

Absenteeism conversations can help identify short term absence problems at an early stage. They also provide managers with an opportunity to start a dialogue with employees about underlying issues which might be causing the absence, as well as to demonstrate that unjustified absences will not be tolerated.

Such conversations may also assist managers to identify where flexible work arrangements may need to be considered for employees, thereby avoiding attendance issues arising from non-work commitments through provision of a flexible work environment. Managers need good communication skills to encourage employees to discuss any problems they may have at an early stage so that employees can be given appropriate support or advice before matters escalate.

Absenteeism conversations can send a positive message that attendance does matter and staff welfare is a key concern (refer to Appendix 1: Checklist for Absenteeism conversations).

5. Four step process for managing unsatisfactory attendance

The following four step process can be used to guide line managers to proactively identify, communicate and resolve individual attendance issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1 – Monitor absenteeism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager regularly monitors attendance levels by reviewing attendance records/reports. If an area for improvement is identified, progress to Step 2.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concerns about attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2 – Informal action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager to meet with employee to discuss concerns about attendance, identify possible causes and clarify expectations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concerns about attendance

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The above four step process is outlined in further detail on the following pages of this Guideline.

5.1 Step 1: Monitor via observations in role as manager

Line managers have an important role to play in the management of absence, including monitoring and observing in their role as manager, in order to recognise potential problems. Some indicators to look out for include:

- manager detects an emerging attendance pattern occurring (see 5.1.2 for verification via reporting)
- manager encounters an ‘entitlement’ mindset in individual/s or team/s
- manager observes a decline in overall work performance
- manager becomes aware of potential triggers for absenteeism, such as:
  - organisational and/or leadership change
  - forced relocation or deployment
  - crises in an employee’s personal life
  - conflict arising between team members and/or supervisors
  - staff survey results indicate low job satisfaction or dissatisfaction with management.

Managers have the greatest opportunity to make a difference by positively addressing any workplace factors that can influence employee motivation to attend. Managers have
little direct influence over non-work related factors, however, can support employees by demonstrating care, concern, understanding and flexibility for individual circumstances, where possible.

5.1.2 Monitor via information management systems reporting

Accessing up to date records of individual and team attendance is critical to the monitoring and management of attendance. Managers can access attendance data for their team by contacting Corporate Enterprise Solutions, or running reports through the Decision Support System (DSS Panorama) or Workbrain.

The following reports are available through DSS and Workbrain to assist line managers to proactively monitor staff attendance and leave balances. (Further information on how to run these reports can be found in Appendix 2: Reports).

**DSS**
- Employee Details Report
- Leave Balance Report; and
- Leave and Overtime Report

**SAP Payroll and Rostering System**
- Daily Staffing Report
- Workbrain Roster Report

**Workbrain**
- Leave Takings Report
- Year at a Glance Report
- Employee Balance report

It is the responsibility of each manager to review employee attendance records to determine whether there is reasonable cause for concern. It is important for managers to carefully interpret the data before taking action as there may be multiple explanations for patterns of attendance.

5.1.3 Triggers for action

An expected attendance level of less than 10 sick leave days per year for full time employees (pro-rata for part time employees) is recommended. Leave can be mapped out over time and individual employee data analysed, to determine if trends/patterns or unsatisfactory absence rates are occurring.
The following examples outline circumstances which may provide grounds for reasonable concern:

- **an absence trend**: sick leave frequently taken on Fridays, Mondays or after Public Holidays or Accrued Days Off.
- **regular sick leave**: one or two day blocks of sick leave or carer’s leave taken in a pattern over time
- **frequent unsupported absences**: sick leave in excess of 10 days per annum without justification
- **recreation leave used in lieu of sick leave**: when an employee has used recreation leave in lieu of sick leave in excess of five days in a 12 month period
- **repeated failure to adequately notify an absence**: failure of an employee to contact their manager when they are sick or failure to provide a medical certificate when required
- **sick leave (unpaid)**: when an employee is accessing sick leave without salary due to exhausting paid leave entitlements.

### 5.2 Step 2: Informal action

#### 5.2.1 Discuss and file note conversations with employee

The focus of this step is identifying why absenteeism at the individual level is occurring and how it can be improved informally with the employee.

If attendance concerns have been identified, the manager should arrange an informal meeting with the employee to:

- inform the employee of the concerns about their attendance
- describe the reasons for the concerns, including expected attendance standards and current attendance by employee
- provide copies of attendance records or patterns of absences
- allow the employee to respond to the concerns and ask any clarifying questions
- establish whether there is anything the manager needs to be aware of that may be contributing to the employee’s absences
- advise the employee their attendance will continue to be monitored for two months and attendance does not meet acceptable levels, it may result in the matter being progressed for further action.

During this meeting employees may raise issues that may be contributing to their ability to attend work. Managers should be sensitive to personal issues which may be
impacting upon an employee’s attendance, as well as their right to privacy and confidentiality in relation to any specific health issues which may be disclosed.

Managers should make a file note of what was discussed at the meeting and any actions that were agreed upon. A file note template can be found on the QHEPS managers toolbox here.

5.3 Step 3: Formal action

5.3.1 Consultation with HR for support and advice

The focus of this step is on providing a formal, structured approach to managing unsatisfactory attendance. It is appropriate to commence formal action when employees continue to have unsatisfactory attendance levels following informal actions (steps 1 to 2).

It is recommended that managers consult their local HR unit prior to commencing formal action. Following consultation with HR, managers should arrange a formal meeting with the employee to discuss the concerns about their attendance and advise them a performance improvement plan may be implemented, which will aim to assist them to improve the employee’s attendance to a satisfactory level.

An employee should be provided with:

- sufficient information about the purpose of the meeting
- at least 48 hours’ notice of the meeting
- an opportunity to bring a support person if they wish to.

5.3.2 Development of Performance Improvement Plan

A Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) - hereafter referred to as a PIP - should be developed in accordance with the Department of Health HR Policy G11: Performance Improvement.

If a manager has concerns about poor or under performance of an employee, following a period of performance monitoring, they may refer the process to an authorised delegate to consider commencing a performance improvement process.

The delegate is as listed in the relevant Department of Health Human Resource (HR) Delegations Manual, or Hospital and Health Service Human Resource (HR) Delegations Manual, as amended from time to time.

Managers may wish to draft a PIP prior to the meeting as a starting point for discussion; however, the final PIP should be jointly developed between the manager and employee.

At a minimum, the PIP should state:

- the duration of the PIP, including start and end dates
- the attendance issues being addressed
• expected outcomes (these should be specific and measurable)
• the parties responsible for undertaking required actions
• frequency of review meetings and the final review date.

Managers should make a file note of what was discussed at the meeting and any actions that were agreed upon.

Following the meeting, the manager should finalise the PIP and provide a copy to the employee. The PIP should be signed by both parties to demonstrate their agreement and avoid any dispute as to the actions and expectations required. If an employee refuses to sign the PIP, it is still to be implemented and the manager is to note the employee’s reasons for refusal to sign the PIP.

At the outset, employees must be advised that failure to meet the requirements and expectations of the PIP may result in disciplinary action which can include penalties up to and including dismissal.

Once a PIP is implemented, the manager is to advise their local HR unit for reporting purposes.

5.3.3 Review meetings

Managers are responsible for scheduling review meetings with the employee (the frequency of these meetings will be determined on a case by case basis, but are generally undertaken at least fortnightly).

The purpose of review meetings is to provide the manager and employee an opportunity to discuss progress on agreed outcomes, any issues that have arisen affecting agreed actions, and any additional support that may be required.

Each review meeting is to be documented and records kept of the nature of the discussion, any supporting evidence relied upon during the meeting and any actions agreed upon. It is recommended the file notes are signed by the manager and the employee to demonstrate it is an accurate representation of the meeting.

5.3.4 Final review meetings

Prior to the final review meeting, the manager should consult with their local HR unit regarding whether the attendance objectives have been achieved by the employee. Your local HR unit will be able to review the documentation available in relation to the PIP and provide advice on what further action is required. As a guide:

• if the employee has met the requirements of the PIP, the manager should revert to normal monitoring practices (as per step 1), however it should be made clear that the levels of attendance demonstrated during the PIP are expected to be maintained. The employee should be notified of this PIP outcome in writing.
• if the employee has not met the requirements of the PIP, options include:
The delegate may consider extending the PIP for a further specified period (up to 3 months).

The matter may be referred to the appropriate delegate for commencement of disciplinary action (i.e. progress to step 4).

To identify the appropriate delegate, please review the relevant Department of Health Human Resource (HR) Delegations Manual, or Hospital and Health Service Human Resource (HR) Delegations Manual.

The manager and employee are to meet on the agreed PIP final review date to discuss the outcome of the PIP. This meeting is to be file noted and a report on the outcome of the PIP is to be prepared. The manager is to clearly communicate to the employee which aspects of the PIP have and have not been met and the reasons why (supported by evidence).

Following the meeting, the manager is to provide the employee with a letter formalising the PIP outcome and further actions to occur, based on the outcome achieved by the employee.

If the employee has not met the requirements of the PIP and it has been determined the PIP will not be extended for a further timeframe, the manager should progress to step 4.

5.4 Step 4: Referral to HR/Delegate (for possible disciplinary action)

5.4.1 Refer to HR/Delegate

This step is implemented when all attempts to resolve the issue at the local level have been exhausted.

Once steps 1 to 3 are completed and the employee’s level of attendance continues to be unsatisfactory, the matter is referred to the authorised delegate for appropriate action, which may include the commencement of a disciplinary process (or another process). The appropriate action to take will depend on the circumstances of the case.

Advice from HR will be dependent on the individual circumstances of the case and available documentary evidence, and could include –

- extending the timeframe on the current PIP
- commencing a fresh PIP with altered goals and timeframes
- disciplinary action to commence (refer to the Department of Health HR Policy E10: Discipline for further information).

Further information about this step can be obtained from your local HR unit.

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6. References

6.1 References and acknowledgements


- Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service: Redesigning from the Inside Out Project: Leave Standardisation Project; 2012.


6.2 Suggested further reading and resources

7. Appendices

**Appendix 1:** Checklist for absenteeism conversations

**Appendix 2:** DSS absence reports for line managers

- DSS HR Managers Guides (HR/Payroll data)
- Running reports for leave balances (individual and team)
- Running reports for leave taken (leave and overtime report)
- Workbrain absence reports for line managers
- Leave Takings report (individual and team)
- Year at a Glance report (individual and team)
Appendix 1: Checklist for Absenteeism Conversations

A guide for line managers to engage in a discussion with employees during initial absence notification and on resumption of work following an unplanned absence.

Employee: ___________________________ Date of conversation: _______________________

Date/s and Type of Absence: _________________________________________________________

Conducted by: ______________________________________________________________________

Medical Certificate: (received/sighted for sick leave over 3 days) YES / NO

---

Initial absence notification by employee
Contact made by telephone

Check the employee is aware:

☐ Payment of sick leave is subject to the provision of appropriate paperwork – i.e. leave forms and medical certificates
☐ Employees are required to keep in touch with their manager during periods of absence
☐ Sick leave is a condition of employment that enables an employee to recover from illness without loss of pay; leave provisions are also insurance against future illness
☐ Employees are responsible for attending work in accordance with their contracted working hours and fulfilling their contract of employment – if employees are fit for duty they must come to work
☐ Personal commitments should be attended to during off duty hours, with other appropriate leave, or where available through the use of flexible working arrangements

Confirm:

☐ Are there any meetings, tasks or activities that will need to be rescheduled / reassigned?
☐ The illness/injury is not work related – if work-related, then an incident report is required; also a WorkCover medical certificate is required if a claim is being lodged by the employee
☐ The type of absence and likely length of the absence _____________________________
☐ The agreed form and frequency of contact during this absence period: _______________

On employee’s return to work

☐ Welcome the employee back to work, and check they are recovered
☐ Check if there is anything you can do, as their manager, to assist their resumption of work?
  - E.g. are there any short term adjustments in duties/shifts/hours required?
  - E.g. is there any initial requirement for support if the employee’s workload has been unattended during their absence (e.g. workload support from colleagues)?
  - E.g. is there a requirement for a hand-over from other team members (e.g. if the employee’s workload was reassigned to other team members during their absence)?
☐ Update the employee on any developments in the work area during the period of absence

Confirm:

☐ Ensure appropriate leave documentation is provided by the employee, authorised and submitted for processing
☐ * Where short term absence problems have been identified – Consider commencing a dialogue with the employee about underlying issues which might be causing the absence. E.g. How are your other priorities, outside of work, impacting on your ability to attend?

* Only required if an employee has an unsatisfactory attendance record
DSS Panorama offers a range of reports in the HR Module which can assist managers to monitor attendance. The following links provide information on how to run these reports:

- Employee Details Report:  
- Leave Balance Report:  
- Leave and Overtime Report:  

Instructions on how to set default HR Managers Reports can be found at:  

Further information on how to gain access to DSS, helpful hints and other reports available in the HR Module is located at:  

**SAP Payroll and Rostering Systems Reports**

Information about the reports available through the SAP Payroll and Rostering System can be found at:  

- Daily Staffing Report – displays all employees that are rostered for a shift and their corresponding shift details.
- Workbrain Roster Report – displays all employees rostered to work and the shifts they are working during the roster period.
- Employee Data Report – references rostering details of current employees.

**Workbrain Reports**

The following leave reports are available in WorkBrain:

- Leave Takings Report - displays all approved leave for an individual employee or a team, with options for leave types and date ranges able to be selected.
- Year at a Glance Report - displays details of absence amounts and types for given individuals or organisational units over a specified year.
- Employee Balance Report - outlines individual leave balance values for an employee as at a specified past, current, or future date.
Information on how to run and interpret these reports is located at:

Additional information on the Leave Takings Report can be found at:

Additional information on the Year at a Glance Report can be found at: