

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

Workplace Survey Summary



In November 2016, BCGEU's Component 6 and Component 12 executives and Research and Interactive Services department conducted an extensive survey of members who work in the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation (MSDSI).

Using the guidance and input of component and local executive members who work in income and disability assistance, this survey was designed to gather information on workloads, worker classification and experience, health and safety, staffing conditions (including recruitment and retention), and overall workplace conditions and job satisfaction. In addition to collecting important quantitative data, the questionnaire was used to assemble detailed written

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accounts on the impact of specific issues, practices and programs, including recent service delivery reform in the ministry and access-related challenges for clients.

This survey drew a very strong level of participation from workers, with a response rate of roughly one-third of sampled workers. The component 6 and 12 executives have carefully reviewed these findings, and in response, the union and its elected leadership are continuing to pressure government to make changes that address the issues and concerns raised by workers.

The following is a brief overview of the issues identified in the survey, including some of the key findings.

This questionnaire was implemented as a follow-up to a previous survey initiative conducted by the BCGEU in spring 2014. The 2014 survey was part of a larger research project on child, youth and

family services throughout the province at that time. However, in the area of income and disability assistance, it also uncovered specific information from workers related to the sweeping service delivery changes in MSDSI that, newly-implemented in 2014, had radically altered the workplace experiences of members as well as their ability to provide services to clients and communities.

The current survey findings show, unfortunately, signs of further deterioration in day-to-day workplace conditions. The central challenges identified in BCGEU's 2014 questionnaire remain central today: Integrated Case Management system (ICM), service backlogs and daily workload, burnout and stress, negative morale, and increasing hostility from frustrated clients.

Overall, nearly half of the participants from Component 6 disagreed—either “somewhat” or “strongly” —with the statement “my day-to-day workload is manageable.” In their additional comments, they described a work model that is unfeasible, plagued with constant backlogs, and addressed by management only through daily goals and targets that are rarely achievable and deeply demoralizing for workers. Many respondents portrayed income assistance work in MSDSI as “operating in constant state of semi-crisis,” and as a “system [that is] setup to fail.”

In order to expand on what was learned about this system in 2014, the BCGEU asked several additional questions concerning MSDSI's new and highly centralized provincial queue system, and the ministry's increased reliance on phone and online resources (rather than direct in-person service). When asked whether clients are generally able to navigate these new resources, again, nearly half of respondents disagreed, citing a range of significant access-related concerns. These concerns include: a high percentage of clients with multiple barriers that make using these resources impossible, a phone and online platform that is highly confusing even for

able users, and prohibitively long wait times on the ministry's phone line.

Members draw a clear link between the persistent service challenges faced by clients and their own day-to-day experiences as workers. Regarding MSDSI's 1-866 toll-free information line in particular, several hundred written comments explained the deep personal and professional impacts of dealing with clients that are angry and highly frustrated due to wait times and inadequate service. Responses throughout the survey outlined the regular experience among workers in local offices who struggle to manage frustrated and sometimes hostile clients who show up after a troubled experience on the phone. In addition to an increase in incorrect and conflicting information—as well as duplication of work—members in local offices report that the current approach to service delivery has resulted in a higher frequency and intensity of critical incidents.

As a result, health and safety is becoming a more urgent area of concern among workers in the ministry. To illustrate, over 300 participants provided written accounts of the safety issues they regularly confront in the workplace, with a majority citing increased confrontation with violent and volatile clients, as well as being frequently subjected to threats and verbal abuse. Many participants who work in remote call centre locations also noted the mental and emotional impacts of being regularly exposed to such abuse over the phone. Other feedback pointed to the extensive ergonomic concerns (e.g. excessive mouse clicks) and also visual strain related to long hours spent working with ICM.

The resulting impacts for staffing, unfilled vacancies, and, ultimately, workloads, have been described by participants as increasingly serious and nearly half of respondents reported having to take leave in the previous two years for stress and health related reasons. Many instances (though not all) were attributed to stress, burnout and anxiety (with both physical and psychological symptoms), ailments due to ICM-related impacts (repetitive motion, eye strain, headaches, etc.), and an incidence of existing health

conditions aggravated by unmanageable workplace stress. These comments and responses offer important context for government records which show MSDSI now experiences the highest rate of Short Term Illness and Injury Plan (STIIP) usage among workers in the public service.

Respondents from both components each ranked “workload” as the number-one workplace issue according to the perceived impact on day-to-day work conditions and job duties. Again, a combined 50 per cent of participants from within Component 6 disagreed that their work unit is adequately staffed and resourced, and just over 70 per cent also disagreed that they are generally satisfied with the level of pay and benefits they receive—nearly 50 per cent of whom disagreed “strongly.”

Overall, the findings and implications of this new survey are far-reaching and deeply concerning. Participation and engagement in the exercise was high and respondents shared a degree of detail that clearly indicates exasperation and deep dissatisfaction—particularly among those in Component 6. To briefly summarize, the main issues and experiences include:

- Persistent and unmanageable workloads;
- Deep frustration with negotiated levels of compensation;
- High levels of reported health and stress leave, and instances of job-related burnout;
- Struggles over sick leave and STIIP procedures;
- Deep retention challenges and high turnover;
- Widespread technical issues related to the ICM;
- Poorly maintained and inadequately equipped offices and physical work locations;
- Serious access challenges for clients rooted in the virtual service model and provincial queue system;
- Backfill and coverage challenges, and problems with vacation scheduling;
- Significant concerns over leadership and management practices, including accountability, transparency and trust;
- Confusion and administrative silos;

- Growing sense of alienation as work becomes de-personalized, fragmented, and removed from local context(s); and
- Concerning impacts for clients and communities.

The results of the survey describe a work model shift that has abandoned the social, client-centric foundation of income assistance, moving instead toward a highly centralized administrative model buried in process. As a result, workers feel disconnected from clients, each other, and their work generally. They rarely feel in control of the work they are expected to perform and experience not only deep personal pressure as a result of the service impacts for clients, but also guilt and shame in some cases.

BCGEU members at MSDSI have clearly stated (again) that working conditions at the ministry are unacceptable and in urgent need of change. The union, including its staff and elected leadership, will be working closely with outside organizations to raise the profile of these issues and experiences—both for workers and clients—and will continue to bring direct pressure to government to dramatically change the way it does business in this ministry.

