

Forgotten on the Frontline

– *Sub-Sectors Report* –



SSWCC
Social Service Workers
Coordinating Committee

CUPE  **SCFP**
Ontario

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Message from Carrie Lynn Poole-Cotnam, CUPE Ontario Social Services Chair

Social service workers have gone through some of the most difficult times of their careers in the past two-years. It is critical that workers' stories are told that their voices are heard loud and clear by decision makers. This is especially true when we are faced with important decisions, like the upcoming provincial election. The sector is facing challenges it has not seen before.

The pandemic has amplified the issues that have long impacted social services, including recruitment and retention, redeployments, an influx of service users, and more. All of this is taking place without commitments from municipalities and the provincial government that will stabilize and enhance the supports and services provided by workers in the sector.

CUPE Ontario social service members have been a critical component of the pandemic response. In many cases our members were the only support community members could access to stabilize their lives. The first-hand stories from workers in this report reveal what CUPE members are feeling and dealing with daily. In many ways, this has a corresponding consequence for service users. For example, in developmental services, when there are missing workers or workloads are too high, it means that those people being supported are going without what they need. This situation is unsustainable and undesirable.

Whatever the outcome of the upcoming election, workers need a commitment from government for robust support. Our social service members have something important to contribute to the challenges we face.

Background: Impact and Overview of Engagement Sessions

In the winter of 2021/22, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Social Service Workers Coordinating Committee (SSWCC) conducted member engagement sessions titled “Forgotten on the Frontline” in the following sectors:

- Child care
- Children’s Aid Societies
- Community agencies
- Developmental services
- Municipal social services

All of these helping professions are critical to Ontario communities. The CUPE SSWCC represents more than 35,000 members across the province in municipal social services, developmental services, child care, child protection, and community agencies. During the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, CUPE SSWCC members have often been the only supports for the provinces most marginalized people. Without these workers doing what they do, the impact of the pandemic could have been much worse, particularly for those from equity seeking communities. During a time when we are faced with ultimate decisions about leadership – a provincial election – it is important to focus on how best our communities will be served.

Forgotten on the Frontline is a revealing examination of what these workers have been through. These largely non-profit community and government delivered services are known to be under-resourced stressful jobs, particularly now during the pandemic. The purpose of the engagement sessions is to help inform the future work of the committee and key demands as we approach the provincial election.

The theme of the sessions, *Forgotten on the Frontline*, is a feeling shared by many workers who feel ignored, betrayed, and disappointed by the inaction of decision makers during the pandemic. While being heralded as heroes, frontline workers continue to face serious obstacles to fair treatment, good jobs, and decent wages. The engagement sessions provided members with an opportunity to connect, find common ground, and collaborate, with the support of the social services sector team and the committee.

This report amplifies the voices of both workers and the people they support, which often go unheard.

Overview of Findings

Workers on the frontline are having a very difficult time. A confluence of factors has brought workers to this level of frustration, which is led by the impact of the pandemic. These workplace issues go beyond just the pandemic and reflect years of neglect, patchwork policy, and funding regarding the sector.

Our members have told us that:

- Job satisfaction is low.
- Stress is high and workers' health is suffering as a result.
- There is chronic understaffing.
- People who rely on social services are not getting the level of services they need.
- There are systemic issues that need to be remedied.
- There are lingering health and safety concerns due to the pandemic and everyday nature of our members' work.

Workers are feeling exhausted and despondent after working on the frontline the last two years. This period has been marked by more uncertainty and danger — both in terms of the future of services and support along with a general concern about employers' responses to keeping members safe at work. These feelings are amplified as everyday there is a scramble for appropriate staffing and compensation levels, that have not kept pace with the broader economy and service need. Throughout our engagement sessions, we heard repeatedly that workers feel disrespected on multiple levels and simply "forgotten".

A key component of members feeling undervalued is the compensation restraint legislation in Bill 124. This law has kept compensation artificially low and targets social services specifically with the inclusion of the \$1 million threshold of government funding to qualify for the legislation's scope. It remains difficult to see how workers will recover economically and emotionally from measures like this.

Sub Sector Survey Results

Child Care

The child care sector is experiencing a period of national attention. The federal bilateral child care agreement is in effect in every jurisdiction except Ontario. This landmark deal has unlocked a massive \$27 billion investment in the sector, and gives workers and parents alike, hope for the future. The pandemic has also highlighted the critical work that CUPE members do – there is no functioning economy without sufficient child care in place.

Workers are aware of their value and that this new deal will, in some way, recognize it. CUPE members need this deal in place so that resources are finally available to fund an effective workplace strategy, including a \$25 wage floor, which does not rely on patchwork grants and top-ups. It should also not go unstated that the Conservative government did not extend the pandemic wage premium to child care workers, while still opening up child care for essential workers. Our members deserved both the additional support and respect that came with it, as recognition of the challenges facing the sector in a human resources context.

The survey and engagement session we conducted with our members revealed the following key findings:

- Job satisfaction is low.
- Workers are feeling stress about their work, particularly in the last two years.
- Members are not feeling supported by government.



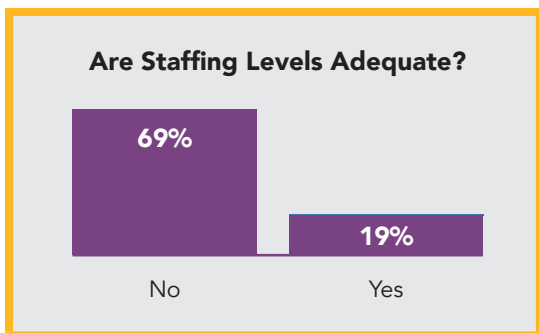
It is not a surprise that workers are feeling this way. One of the features of the new federal bilateral agreement is a workforce strategy. The aim of the strategy is to remedy some of the systemic challenges the sector faces, like low wages and not enough staffing. It is well documented that there are not enough qualified staff coming into the field to meet demand. Anecdotally, we have heard of workers

leaving the profession for jobs in other sectors, such as retail, as wages are competitive to that sector without all the stresses associated with early learning and child care.

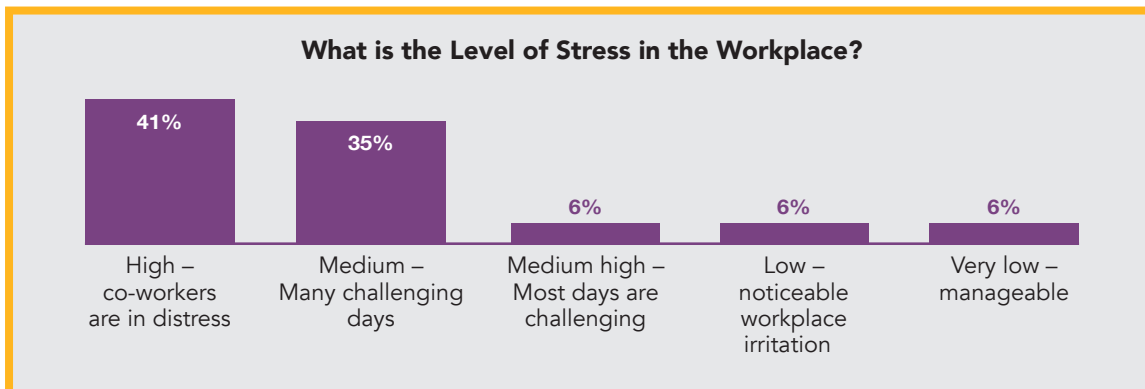
One member testified that child care was hard prior to the pandemic, now the challenges have been amplified, and chief amongst them are a lack of staffing. She further reported that she and her colleagues are “drained” after every day. This is on top of other job-related pressures such as increased paperwork. This worker articulated that there is a lot of pressure, and you really must love what you do to continue in the profession. Judging by the staffing crunch and these other factors, love is not enough.

Professional development has also been identified as a problem – half of our members surveyed identified this. We hear from our members that generally there is not enough opportunities available for additional training and education. This is in addition to what another member stated, indicating that early childhood educators do not even have enough time to think about pedagogy. A member from Peterborough noted, even when there is the possibility of taking on additional professional development, worker coverage for those that are off learning is a problem. This is another point which supports the worker shortage in the sector.

We also asked our members about stress in the workplace and its consequences.



A staggering 82% of members surveyed experienced medium to high stress daily.



This is an unsustainable situation. Even when the federal bilateral agreement is finally in place, decision makers will need to act with haste to implement the plan. This is another sector where workers are struggling, with members suffering from sleep loss, panic attacks, and general irritability. These workplace issues are solvable.

Our surveyed members reported generally that there is a recruitment and retention problem. **Licensed child care is already a fragmented underfunded system.** This is not a debate, and

moreover, provinces like Quebec, have shown there are systemic fixes to improve the daily worker experience. The knock-on impacts of implementing the federal bilateral deal are also well-known and include increased revenue for government, improved working conditions, a better experience for children, and affordability to parents. This election the child care sector needs firm commitments for positive change. This is achievable with the federal dollars on offer and existing provincial commitments.

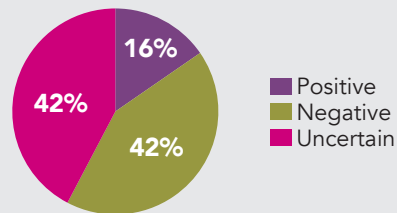


Children's Aid Societies

Child protective services, often referred to as Children's Aid Societies, was regularly the only social service response to some through the pandemic. While other sectors were forced to go into crisis management during the pandemic response, child welfare agencies leveraged their statutory duty for a social services response for many families when no other help was available. Like other sectors in the social service field, child welfare is facing slow moving reforms, recruitment and retention issues, and a general lack of resources. Overall, what we learned from our members is that they are being worked into exhaustion, forcing some out of the profession or field entirely.

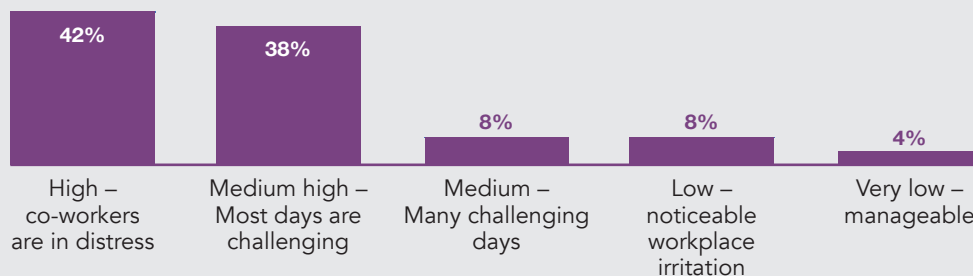
It is worth noting at the outset that **only 16% of child protection workers polled responded they have positive job satisfaction.** While the pandemic and the extra strains it has put on this work is certainly noteworthy, our members inform us that workplace stresses have been going on for some time.

What is Your Current Job Satisfaction?




Workers in Children's Aid Societies have expressed that there is an experience gap developing in the sector as more senior workers switch agencies or move on to other employment. This is mainly due to high stress levels. Given compensation in this sector is higher than other sectors in the field, child protection workers retention issues cannot be fixed simply with enhanced compensation. Notwithstanding, it would not hurt – this is another sector where Bill 124 implications were very much felt by workers. Given the intensity of the work in this sector, some workers have viewed Bill 124 as a mark of disrespect aimed at them.

What is the Level of Stress in th Workplace?




An unfortunate 88% of those surveyed noted they are facing many challenging days at work, with almost half of those respondents detailing they are in outright daily distress. Workers elaborated on the consequences of this workplace stress. 27% of respondents detailed that they are experiencing sleep loss; 27% noted increased irritability; 15% of said that panic attacks were a consequence; and 8% noted weight loss or gain.

Child protection workers also see and experience the systemic lack of investment in the social services sector – much like municipal social service workers do. CUPE members in child welfare are responsible for making appropriate active referrals to other services in the community. These services include mental health supports, housing, substance use supports and more. These referrals are managed and tracked by caseworkers in the community so there is a continuum of care. Our members stated they are often just trying to fill service gaps in the community. One worker noted that there is an utter lack of housing options for people; moreover, clients are still faced with hard survival decisions, like paying for food or housing. This situation was identified as particularly acute for youth.



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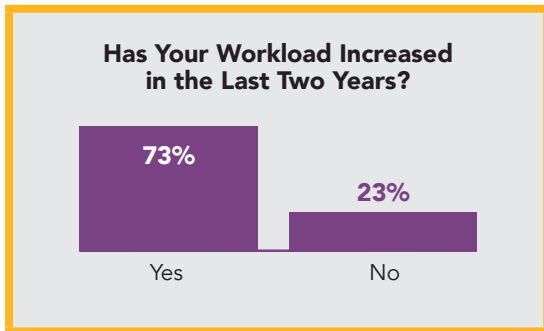


Another challenge that was explicitly noted is workload. A large majority of those surveyed – 73% – identified that their workloads have increased throughout the pandemic. Given the stressors that communities are under, this is hardly a surprise. The problem also goes beyond a simple number of how many cases is acceptable for one worker to carry. A member from Windsor explained that caseload experience and complexity is not considered. For example, a worker could have a family on their roster that has complex continuing needs, or comorbidities. These cases take more time and care, and it is not an option for any of our members to simply ignore the needs of families.

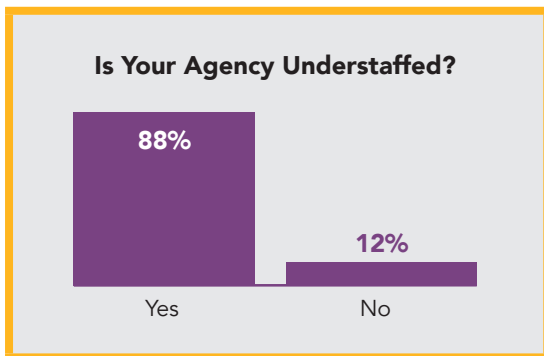


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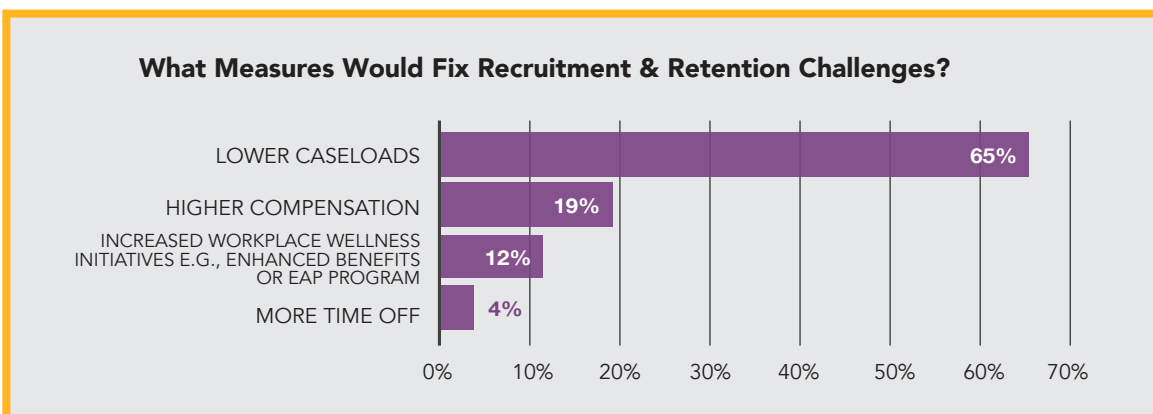


One of the reasons for increasing workplace stress and workload could also be chronic understaffing in the service. There has been a constant review of child welfare services in the province going back decades and CUPE has always been consistent that staffing is a key matter. **Only 12% of members that were polled identified that they had appropriate staffing levels.**



The problems in this sector are not intractable. We asked members what it would take to remedy the recruitment and retention problems in the sector. Extrapolating from the data, the solutions presented by members would also likely ease the levels of frustration and stress in the field as well. While compensation and enhanced wellness initiatives were noteworthy in the responses, 65% of respondents identified that lower caseloads and a recognition of case complexity is the fix. Increasing staffing to lower caseloads is a necessary requirement for the reforms to be successful.

Few people want to or can do, the work that child protection workers do. It is emotionally taxing, multifaceted work, where many of our members must cope with irregular hours and the threat of violence looming. Like members across the helping professions, we owe them a duty to be in a safe, secure workplace where they have agency and certainty over their working lives. We also had reports of workers openly crying in the workforce: this is not a situation that can continue.



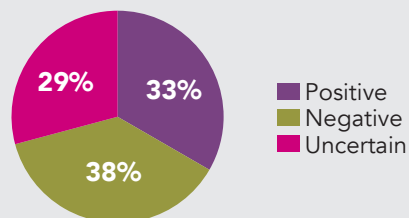
Community Agencies

CUPE members in this sector work in a variety of settings and services which are most often highly geographically oriented. These services could be related to housing, mental health, homelessness, newcomer services, violence against women services, corrections/justice, or seniors. There are also multi-service agencies, which combine some or all those services. These agencies serve a single community or urban area, or even a particular neighbourhood in a city. Community agency workers are often the lowest compensated and most insecure CUPE members in the wider social services sector. While there are similarities with this group and others, a lack of consistent funding and programming are a hallmark of this sector.

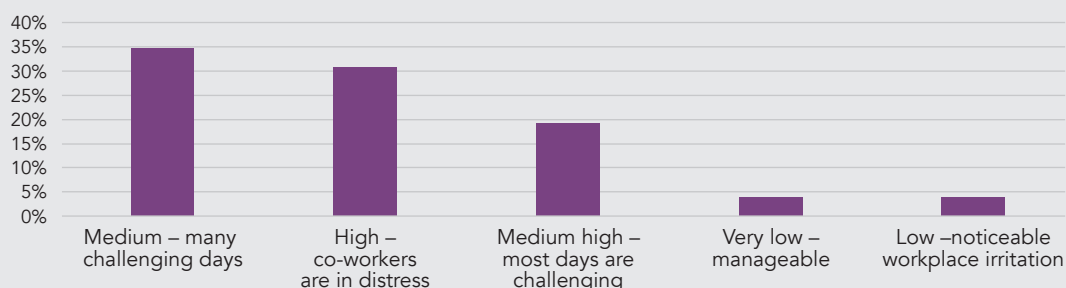
Like in other sectors, we canvassed our members on their current job satisfaction – only 33% of respondents replied that they had a positive view of their working lives. In one sense for this sector, the pandemic was a missed opportunity when it comes to funding. There have been billions of dollars dedicated to COVID-19 recovery, and not enough dollars have been committed to the sector. For those that have, funding has been very time limited. The wage enhancement and future withdrawal of that enhancement for shelter workers was noted by our Toronto members. Like other sectors, members are fearful that recruitment and retention issues will remain a key problem.

This is a sector where there is generally great difficulty in the workplace due to threats of violence, insecure jobs, and historic low pay. We measured what current stress levels are in the workplace with the added pressures of working through a pandemic. Only 8% of workers responded that stress levels are low or very low and almost a third replied that co-workers are in distress daily.

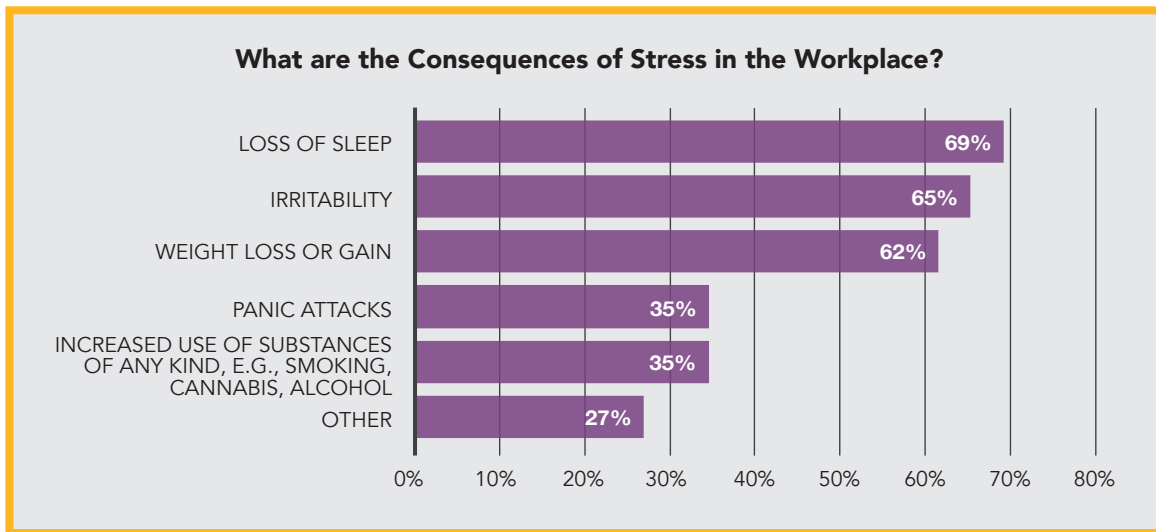
What is Your Current Job Satisfaction?



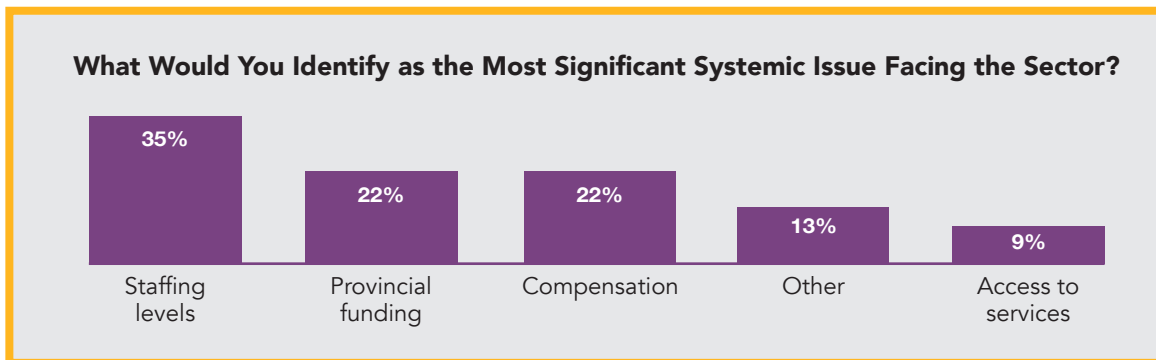
What is the Level of Stress in the Workplace?



This daily grind when coupled with years of contract jobs and funding crunches takes a significant toll. Stress and health indicators like irritability, substance use, and sleep or weight variation, are all key indicators that are both preventable and could lead to chronic illnesses. Workers in this sector are feeling the strain from all these maladies.



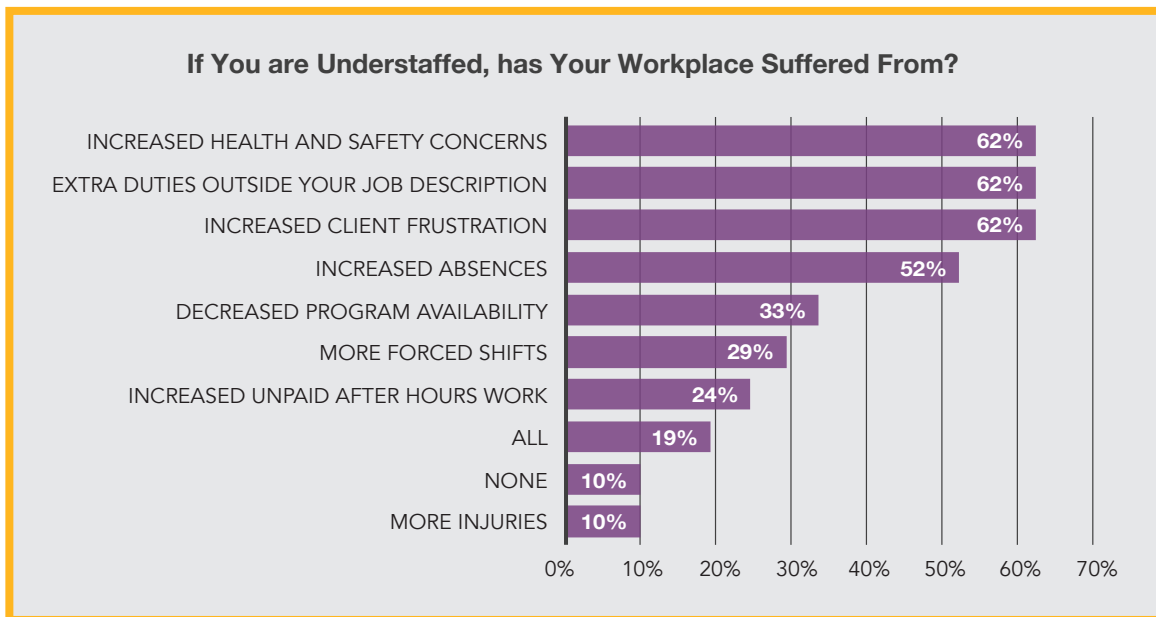
There are similarities between this sector and others in the social services field. We also asked our members specifically what the biggest issues are facing the sector and has noted, there are no surprises.



Leading the way is staffing levels. These mostly non-profit agencies operate on resources that are very often in the form of grants, which are highly inconsistent and typically focus on short-term projects. This could be more lucrative and concrete sources of revenue like through the government, or through other funding agencies such as private foundations or the United Way. While many of these funding streams allow for staffing costs, they

are also tied to project funding. A worker might expect to only be guaranteed a job at a particular agency for a few years – it is not a field in which you can build a career with a single employer, complete with benefits and a pension.

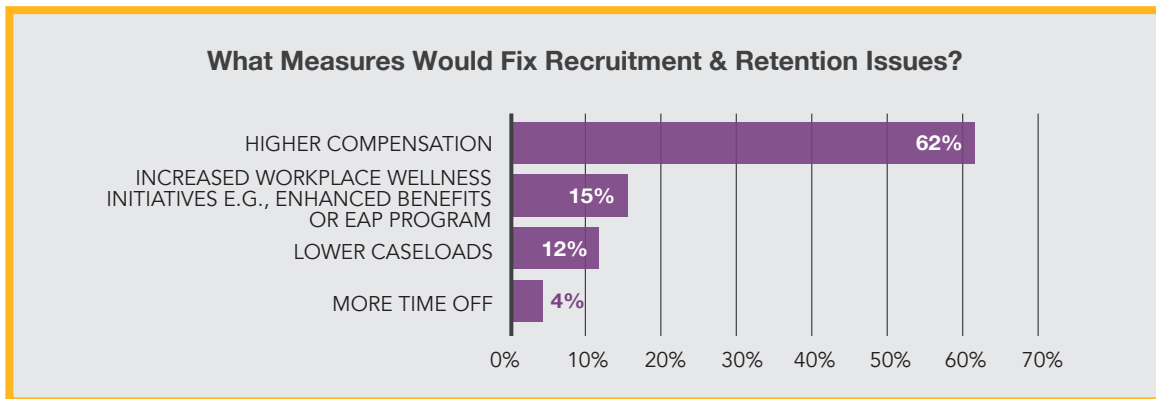
A worker might expect to only be guaranteed a job at a particular agency for a few years – it is not a field in which you can build a career with a single employer, complete with benefits and a pension.



Understaffing comes with its own set of consequences. While members identified a litany of issues stemming from understaffing, leading the way are three problems all with 62% of respondents; they are:

- Increased client frustration.
- Additional duties other than your actual job.
- Increased health and safety concerns.

Another high-ranking item is absenteeism, something that is not conducive to a continuum of care for clients and is a tremendous pressure for employers to deal with. Our members are under extraordinary pressure in their daily working lives. There is urgent reform and sustainable funding required to remedy this situation.



Finally, it cannot go unstated that the governments compensation restraint legislation Bill 124 has upset this group of workers and stopped them from making modest and fair gains for the services they provide. A strong majority of members polled – 62% – identified that higher compensation is something that will make them feel valued and respected. Bill 124 places a very low threshold of \$1 million of funding from government sources on agencies to qualify for the Bills provisions. **In a time of precipitously high costs of living, this legislation puts members that stitch together communities behind and is causing real hardship.**

Developmental Services

Developmental service workers and the individuals they support are often overlooked in the funding and policy decisions of government. The last two working years for these members have been intensely difficult and this was a job that was already fraught with a number of workforce challenges – compensation, violence, and irregular hours to name several. Our members have also been hit with necessary restrictions that have not impacted other sectors during the pandemic. **The situation in the developmental workforce is an urgent one.**

96% reported their workplaces are understaffed.

In the myriad of issues facing the workforce, understaffing is paramount. Staffing equals services, and this is a particularly important concept given the intimate support work our members provide to adults with developmental disabilities. Of those members surveyed, 96% reported their workplaces are understaffed. This is an even more acute problem during the pandemic given the extra demands put on workers. This has been essentially acknowledged given

the province's position to subsidize wages through the pandemic. Of our surveyed members, 64% reported that the following impacts have been felt in the workplace due to understaffing:

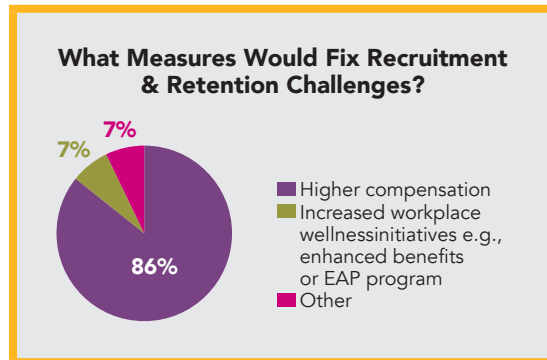
- Increased health and safety concerns.
- More unpaid after work hours.
- Increased injuries.
- Absences from work.
- Forced shifts.
- Performing additional duties outside workers' job descriptions.
- Decreased programming.
- Increased frustration from supported individuals.

Like most workforces, understaffing is a complex issue, but many of the challenges in the developmental services sector can be distilled down to basic recruitment and retention issues. Workers are concerned about some fundamental issues:

- Hours of work.
- Compensation.
- Lack of trust with employers.

"We are forgotten. We are not appreciated, valued, or recognized."

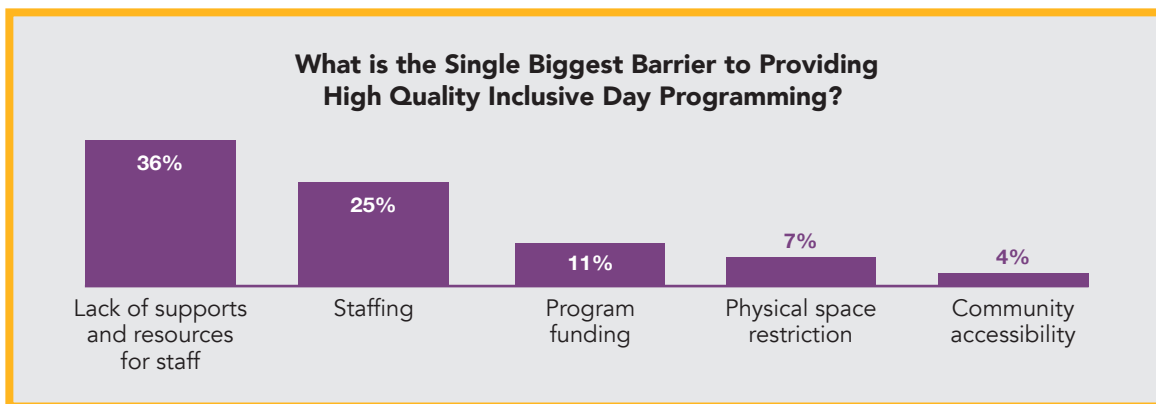
One member from Ottawa describes the problem: “We are forgotten. We are not appreciated, valued, or recognized.” Emergency orders stipulated a single employer for part-time workers, who often take on multiple jobs at multiple agencies as there are generally few full-time work opportunities in the sector. Members felt like employers took liberties with workers. Hours of work were manipulated, and people were thrown into uncertainty about their working lives despite their seniority. There is also a distrust of government management of programming and finances. The province has dragged its heels on making the pandemic wage enhancement permanent and Bill 124 has set workers back significantly; the compensation restriction also makes it difficult to bring new workers into the field.



Our members have spoken clearly – compensation is the number one obstacle to fixing the understaffing problem. Moreover, low staff morale, staffing, recruitment, and retention has an impact on care; a majority of members polled identify that supported individuals receive inferior care because of these circumstances.



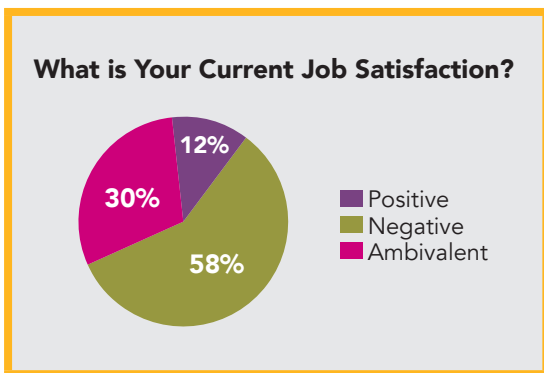
The final matter that needs to be identified in the sector is day programming. This crucial component of developmental services has either been inconsistent or outright cancelled during the pandemic. Only 36% of survey respondents identified that their agencies day program would re-start following pandemic opening up. This is particularly true for Community Living agencies. Day programs provide an outlet for supported individuals and respite for their families. When Community Living Guelph Wellington unilaterally decided to shutter their day programs, the agency experienced a backlash from families and had to rescind the decision, at least for now. There are other jurisdictions which continue to campaign for day programming to remain. Some of the problems in the sector overall are present in the day programming debate.



While these problems seem difficult, the solutions are relatively simple. This is a sector which requires enhanced investment. It is a rare occasion when simply providing additional money to a sector can unlock solutions, however, this is one of those. To stop workers from walking out the door to other jobs, sometimes following or even during a shift, they need to be paid better across the board of job classifications and province wide. Our members have also clearly identified that increased staffing and compensation will lead to better outcomes for supported individuals.

Municipal Social Services

CUPE members work in the delivery of municipal social services, Ontario Works (OW). These highly skilled workers determine eligibility for income support and engage in case management practices with recipients. The Conservative government has embarked on a large system transformation, which will have implications for years to come. The reforms which have been ongoing for more than a year and will fundamentally alter both service delivery and the recipient experience. Workers are highly concerned.



More than half of the workers have a negative view of their work. In our engagement with workers, this can be directly correlated with the continuing roll out of new reforms.

The reforms are in three key areas:

- A change from determining eligibility to intensive case management, dubbed “life stabilization”.
- Increased automation with a new model that accepts more risk in granting money to recipients.

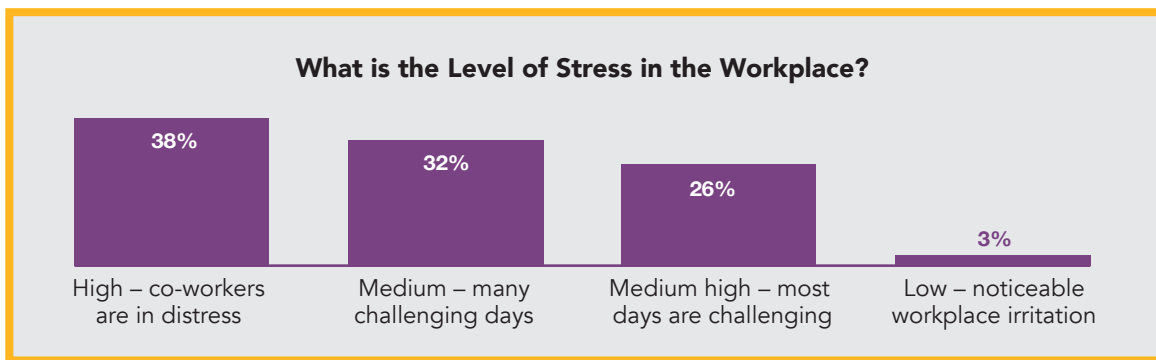
- A change in employment services – OW workers will not deliver these services in certain jurisdictions any more.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM MEMBERS IN SPECIFIC REGIONS

- **From Hamilton:** members reported that the reforms have caused them to have to spend more time on administration tasks because of the newly implemented systems, which includes increased complaints from recipients regarding applications. This is in part because there is a reported increase in wait times and having to redo applications because of new automatic payments to recipients. There are also reports of the pandemic making work more difficult due to a lack of interpersonal communications. It is extenuating circumstances like this that are not being considered in the reforms. Overall workers reported that the new changes are not positive. Stress levels are high, largely due to caseworkers feeling uncertain and fearful about what their jobs may look like with the life stabilization component.
- **From Peterborough:** overall it was reported that the new programs are not working well. There has been additional difficulty due to an application surge due to the end of federal pandemic benefits. Workers are being pulled from regular duties to process applications because of workload challenges. Currently, it was reported that workers are not able to meet the four-day turnaround requirement for grants. This has had the impact of not allowing workers to perform life stabilization activities due to workload.

- **From Brantford:** it was articulated that workers are “maxed out and stressed”. In this jurisdiction as well, items are not being processed and there are problems with regular grants to recipients.

Change management is a difficult process, and it is expected there will always be tense times as workers, recipients, and management alike adjust to new processes. Members were very clear though, that they feel set up for failure and the new programs are destabilizing a sound foundation.



Only 3% of workers surveyed identified they are not experiencing stress in the workplace, and more than a third note that co-workers are in outright distress. Workplaces that are experiencing this level of protracted reform are very challenging places to work. The stressors that members are experiencing can have very detrimental impacts that are known to contribute to long-term chronic illnesses. An astounding 91% of members reported loss of sleep of workplace issues, and other high-ranking items was irritability (88% of respondents), and weight loss or gain (74% of respondents).

More than a third note that co-workers are in outright distress.

Confounding all these issues is that members do not believe the reforms are effective and that management or the province is an honest broker when it comes to implementation. For example, two thirds of survey respondents reported that the new recipient central intake model has not been working in the last 6 months. This matches up with data we analysed in the previous 6-month period as well. Basically, workers are reporting that a supporting column of the reforms has been unworkable for a year.



An astounding 91% of members reported loss of sleep due to workplace issues.

There is distrust and a lack of understanding amongst members as well. Almost half, 47%, of those polled reported that they do not understand the provinces recovery and renewal vision and how reforms will accomplish that vision. Moreover, 59% responded that they do not believe that ongoing reforms will benefit recipients. Finally, 65% of members do not believe that management is committed to communicating openly and honestly about system transformation. For this to be successful there needs to be a confidence amongst the workforce and the system is not there.

Background: Impact and Overview of Engagement Sessions

Elections are time to chart a path forward. This report has clearly illustrated a snapshot of where workers are at and the state of services they provide. Social services in Ontario are not just a necessary set of services that meet critical community demands. The sector is also an important part of the economic make-up of the province. The 58,000 agencies and not-for-profits in Ontario employ more than a million workers and has a \$50 billion provincial economic impact generating 2.6% of the provinces GDP.¹ This sector and its components, leverage the helping professions in every community to be part of a rebuilding solution that is unique from any other sector of our society.

The social services sector has been an indisputable support against some of the worst outcomes the pandemic could have delivered.

One of those aspects will be where to invest. The social services sector has been an indisputable support against some of the worst outcomes the pandemic could have delivered. Without these services present in our communities, the consequences of the pandemic could have been more tragic. Like in health care, when many were sequestered at home, our members in social services continued to do frontline work, including stitching together supports for people in dire need of assistance. Social service interventions have saved countless lives during the pandemic, including adults with developmental disabilities who were isolated from their families for more than a year, those experiencing mental health and addictions crises, those experiencing food insecurity, and children whose families were unable to provide the care they need. These curative examples only begin to scratch the surface of the profound impacts that social service workers have in supporting communities across the province.

The following items are presented by sub-sector, including child care, municipal social services and income support, developmental services, child welfare, and community agencies.

CHILD CARE

- Ensure the federation wide bilateral child care agreement is signed and include up to \$10-a-day child care, a workforce strategy, and curtailment of the expansion of for-profit care.
- Execute the agreement and subsequent plan to expand non-profit and public care.
- Raise the working standards for the sector, including compensation, through a permanent wage enhancement, decent work standards, and a renewed commitment to staff recruitment and retention.

CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETIES

- Work with employers to implement universal workload standards.
- Invest more dollars into the sector for items such as mental health supports, particularly following dangerous or involved cases and, funding for anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism training and/or programs.

COMMUNITY AGENCIES

- Commit to a housing plan that will see a spectrum of rent geared to income housing (RGI) with new builds or conversions occurring in year one of governing.
- Work to bring more sustainable and predictable funding to the sector.

DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES

- Make the 'pandemic premium' of \$3-per-hour permanent and ensure that the premium is applied universally to all workers in the sector.
- Develop a staff recruitment and retention strategy that includes education incentives through partnership with post-secondary institutions and access to decent work with full-time employment opportunities.
- Recognize the spectrum of services for persons living with developmental disabilities, and what family and caregiver supports are necessary.

MUNICIPAL SOCIAL SERVICES AND INCOME SUPPORT

- Stop the privatization of employment services oversight and delivery.
- Raise the rates of social assistance on an annual basis to reflect changes to the costs-of-living.
- Continue working with key stakeholders in the sector on program reform co-design.

CUPE members look forward to engaging with the new government on these important matters.

