

OVERLOADED AND UNDER FIRE MUNICIPAL SOCIAL SERVICE WORKERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Municipal Social Service Workers in Ontario have reported increases in workload and correspondingly high rates of stress and deteriorating working conditions. A survey completed by 480 CUPE members working in the Ontario Works Program confirms that increased workload is a major issue for municipal social service workers¹.

The survey, completed over the summer of 2000, revealed that increases in workload have created serious health and safety issues and workers are experiencing major stress in their efforts to balance the competing demands of work and family. Many of these workers are putting in large amounts of unpaid overtime to meet the increased demands.

There are approximately 5,000 Ontario CUPE members working in Municipal Social Services. Eighty seven per cent (87%) of the 480 workers who participated in this survey reported that their workload had increased in the past year.

The study found that there is incredible pressure to accommodate the increased workload by working overtime and skipping lunches and breaks. Sixty three per cent of the survey's respondents reported that they go to work early or stay late outside of normal working hours as a way of keeping up with workload. Municipal social service workers are overloaded and under fire.

The hours of work contributed by CUPE members is staggering. Fifty three per cent (53%) work over 150 minutes of unpaid overtime per week and seventy three per cent (73%) receive work related phone calls At home outside of regular working hours.

The efforts to balance work and family life are proving to be very challenging for many. On a scale from 1 to 10, almost half (49%) assessed their tension in balancing work, family and childcare responsibilities at seven and above. Sixteen per cent also have responsibilities for adult dependent care.

The survey indicates that Ontario Municipal Social Service workers operate in an extremely unhealthy atmosphere. Many of the respondents reported feeling intimidated, overworked and abused. Ninety per cent (90%) said that they had experienced verbal abuse at work and fifty three per cent (53%) have been threatened with assault. Forty per cent (40%) have been intimidated by their supervisors and nineteen per cent (19%) reported being bullied by supervisors.

The delivery of the Ontario Works Program is creating enormous pressure for CUPE members. The implementation of a program that reduces peoples' choices and replaces personal contact with technology has been very stressful for workers who want to expand choices for individuals and families and improve the living conditions for people on social assistance.

¹ We would like to acknowledge the work of processing and analyzing data done by Gabe Loulie.

Participants in the study identified the pressures associated with administering a deeply flawed program. CUPE has consistently criticized the changes the Ontario Government has imposed on the welfare system. Despite major opposition from unions and social justice groups the Ontario Government has blithely proceeded with a welfare program that removes human dignity for social assistance recipients, manipulates and distorts the caring relationship that should exist between welfare workers and clients, and panders to inaccurate and destructive images of people in poverty. CUPE has proposed changes that ensure eligibility for all persons, restore levels of assistance, institute voluntary education and training programs, and guarantee due process.

The survey's findings point to the following recommendations aimed at improving the excessive overwork pressures for these workers:

1. Improve workloads through a process approved by and including CUPE members in the sector:
 - Ensure sufficient staffing levels at all times to ensure that service can be maintained and that no worker carries an excessive workload;
 - Replace workers on vacation or any other leave;
 - Stop attrition _ fill jobs when people retire or quit;
 - Reduce the work week and the number of hours required before overtime pay is allotted;
 - More rest periods; more vacation;
 - No extra duties without the union's consent;
 - Compensation for overwork and related problems;
 - Pay for all overtime hours worked;
 - Time-off in compensation for overtime;
 - Reasonable work schedules that deal with the problem of long, exhausting and potentially dangerous work shifts;
 - Effective procedures to address workload complaints including the right to grieve workload, to make health and safety complaints about overwork, and to refuse excessive overwork;
 - Workplace committees with authority to investigate workload problems and fix them.
2. Support campaigns to encourage workers to take their breaks and refuse voluntary overtime work.
3. Develop policies to ensure protection from personal harassment and bullying.

4. Create joint technological change committees to determine the impact of proposed changes and ensure that workers are not adversely affected.
 - Effective workplace training programs to help workers meet changing job requirements;
 - Ensure full coverage while on training;
 - No new technologies to speed up work demands;
 - No implementation of new programs without training.

5. Ensure that joint health and safety committees recognize, document and report the hazards and health threats created by workload.

According to the survey there are active joint health and safety committees in ninety one per cent (91%) of these workplaces. Ontario joint health and safety committees have the power to identify situations that may be a source of danger of hazard to workers. Committees can also make recommendations to the employer and workers for the improvement of the health and safety workers.² CUPE'S Health and Safety Branch will be developing materials to assist with reporting situations of overwork and workload. They will be an integral part of an overall plan to document and correlate increases in sick leave and injuries to workload.

6. Introduce legislative amendments to the Occupational Health and Safety Act to recognize stress and workload as occupational health and safety hazards.

Currently, the government does not deal directly with the issue of stress and workload as a health and safety issue. They do not order direct corrective measures, as they should. In some cases they justify the failure to act in the obvious health and safety interests of their workers by claiming that there is no legislative basis upon which to act. CUPE and the labour movement must squarely address the inability or unwillingness of the government to address emerging issues such as stress and workload.

The occupational health and safety legislation contains a general duty clause that requires employers to provide a safe and health workplace for workers. However, the legislation does not address hazards posed by stress or overwork/workload. In addition, no effort is made by employers to deal with the consequences of overwork/workload.

CUPE will push for legislative changes including:

- Prohibitions on overwork;
- Overwork/workload to be dealt with as a health and safety issue;
- The right for joint occupational health and safety committees to investigate and resolve workload/overwork related health and safety complaints;

² Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act (R.S.O. 1990, c.0.1). Section 9(18).

- The right to refuse to work in situations where overwork/workload compromises a workers' health and safety or the health and safety of another person;
 - Introduce amendments to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act to allow for stress-related claims that are not necessarily caused by trauma.
7. Introduce amendments to the Employment Standards Act to help workers balance work and family life:
- Better provisions to allow workers to balance the increased demands of work and family;
 - Provide paid leave for family responsibilities.
8. Reverse changes to the Employment Standards Act that allow for a 60 hour work week
9. Implement changes to the Ontario Works Program so that it becomes a helping service
- Stop workfare;
 - End punitive and demeaning mandatory drug testing plans;
 - End assembly line welfare model of call centers.

INTRODUCTION

Increased workloads and shifting responsibilities account for a major source of stress among Ontario's municipal social service workers. In a survey of members CUPE has found that these workers are experiencing high levels of frustration created by excessive workloads and limited opportunities for improvements in their working conditions. Respondents to CUPE's survey reported increased paperwork, accelerated service expectations, larger and more complicated caseloads, complex and inflexible bureaucracy, pressure to perform more duties within shorter time frames, unrealistic targets, additional responsibility, and demands for increased accountability. The pressures of work have intensified dramatically and large numbers of workers report excessive stress leading to recurring health problems.

SURVEY BACKGROUND

CUPE members in municipal social services have been concerned about the changes in their workplace and the effects on service to clients, public accountability and the dramatic increases in workload. Throughout Ontario CUPE members have reported worsening working conditions and serious damage to health and safety. Workers in Ontario's municipal social services are overloaded and under fire.

Municipal social service workers called for a survey of their work environment to determine the extent of the problems and to help formulate suggestions to address them. Changes caused by restructuring and major cuts to services, staff and clients have created a dangerously overloaded workforce with limited resources to alleviate stressful workplace conditions.

A deteriorating work environment and the pace of change include chronic staff shortages, growing complexity and intensity of cases, and concerns about unsafe and unhealthy workplaces. CUPE members want to tell their story and suggest changes to improve their working conditions and the service to clients.

A survey was conducted in the summer of 2000 among Ontario municipal service workers to document the actual details of overwork, determine some of the causes, and solicit suggestions to improve workplace conditions. Volunteer CUPE members circulated a nine-page survey on work environment through CUPE locals. The survey included 35 questions focusing on workplace conditions, symptoms experienced, health and safety issues, job satisfaction, balancing family and work, major stressors, and possible solutions.

WHO WAS SURVEYED

Approximately 5,000 Ontario CUPE members work in Municipal Welfare. The survey was completed by 480 of these workers, all of whom work in the Ontario Works Program.

“Working in a government program you are accountable to everyone, clients, politicians, managers, the taxpayer. We have had so many changes in this program and too many cooks giving direction. Why can't someone just listen to us.”

“On any given work day I may deal with 20-30 clients. I am expected to have the basic understanding and knowledge of the following areas to assist my clients and assess my clients:

bank statements, mortgages, stocks, bonds, term deposits, rental income, small business income, Revenue Canada deductions, child and spousal support issues, employment insurance, workers' safety insurance board, compensation for victims of crime, child welfare issues, drug and alcohol abuse issues, physical and mental disability issues, landlord and tenant issues, client-employer issues, fraud issues, personal counseling, employment related issues, food banks, emergency shelters, homes for abused women, health clinics, employment agencies immigration, children's aid, resumes, native issues, etc. And while I'm doing this I am expected to keep abreast of all changes to the Ontario Works legislation, keep up to date on all new and ever changing computer programs, ever changing employer expectations and Mr. Mike Harris' ever changing rules."

In a climate of constant and unpredictable change these workers are responsible for delivering a complicated social assistance program for Ontario Works participants. They are required to display sound judgment and discretion with efficiency and effectiveness. The expectations are enormous and often impossible.

RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

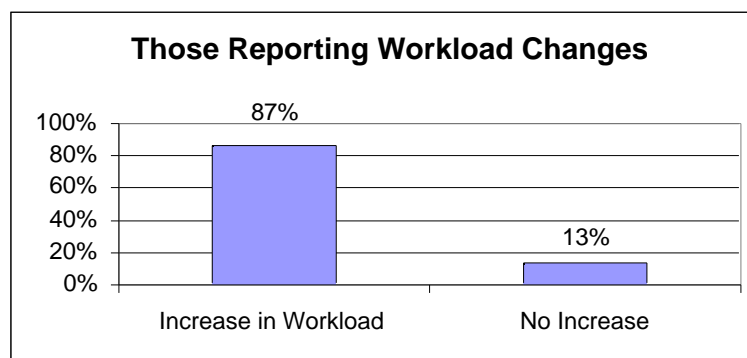
This survey is not scientifically random. It aims to give a snapshot of the everyday experiences of workers operating within the Ontario Works Program and identify the stressors, symptoms and solutions resulting from excessive workloads and limited support.

This is a workforce that is predominantly female and so the majority of respondents were female. Women accounted for eighty eight per cent (88%) of the respondents. Most were long service employees and seventy seven (77%) had been in their jobs for over five years. Ninety five percent (95%) were full time employees and the largest age group represented was between 31 and 40.

WORKLOAD ISSUES

“My workload has increased significantly. Management continuously puts more quotas for SAW’s to meet. Management also continuously changes procedures to follow when service planning with clients. Add to that policy changes (often) and increases in caseloads without increasing the amount of time spent with clients in order to follow through. Also, lack of consistency and support by management.”

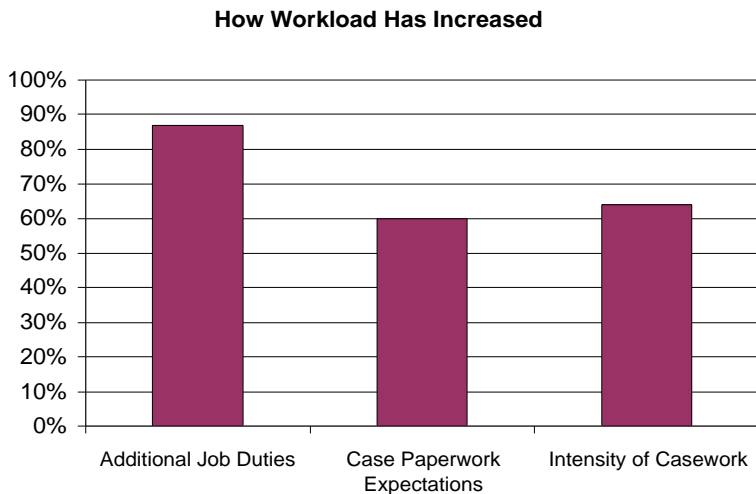
Increases in workload were reported by eighty seven per cent (87%) of the respondents primarily in the areas of additional job duties, case paperwork expectations and the intensity of casework. Comments revealed a high level of frustration with the constant increases in workload and the varying expectations with little acknowledgement of the degree of commitment and effort being made.



“I have in the past been in positions where the workloads were equal to two positions, ie. Doing my desk as well as covering a supervisor’s, and this work was difficult, tiresome and went virtually unappreciated and unnoticed.”

“We have been asked to do additional job duties and one feels as if one is doing more and more for the corporation but not getting anything back, no thanks, no encouragement, no moral support.”

Additional job duties were reported by eighty seven per cent (87%); with sixty four per cent (64%) attributing workload increase to intensity of casework and sixty per cent (60%) cited case paperwork expectations. Staff reductions were another major source of workload increases according to fifty seven per cent (57%) of survey participants. Expectations and criticism seem to be increasing while corresponding increases in support and encouragement are few and far between.



UNPAID OVERTIME

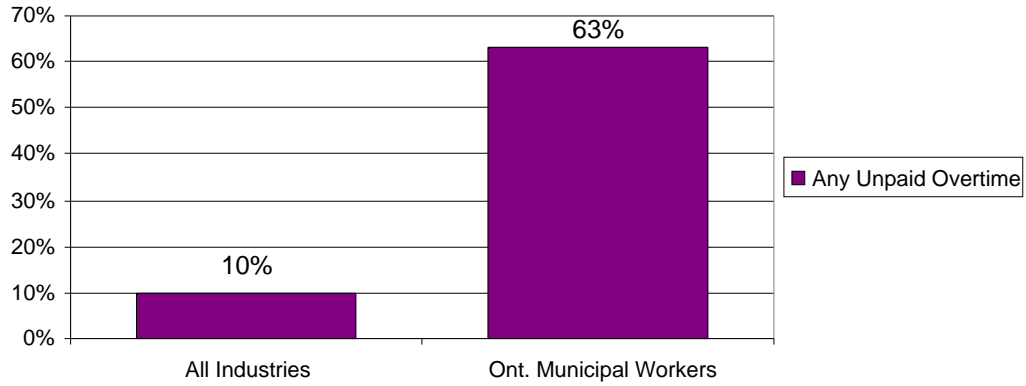
“Then there are the “extra” assignments which are no problem, except there is no time to do them! Staff generally feels intimidated and then will do extra work on lunches and before and after office hours.”

Many respondents mentioned the pressure to work overtime and skip lunches and breaks. For forty four per cent (44%) there is no paid overtime. There is not enough time in the regular workday for workers to complete the work they have in front of them. Sixty five (65%) reported that there is not enough time at work to complete the necessary paperwork and documentation. Working early or staying late outside of regular or normal working hours was common for sixty three per cent (63%) as a way of keeping up with workload.

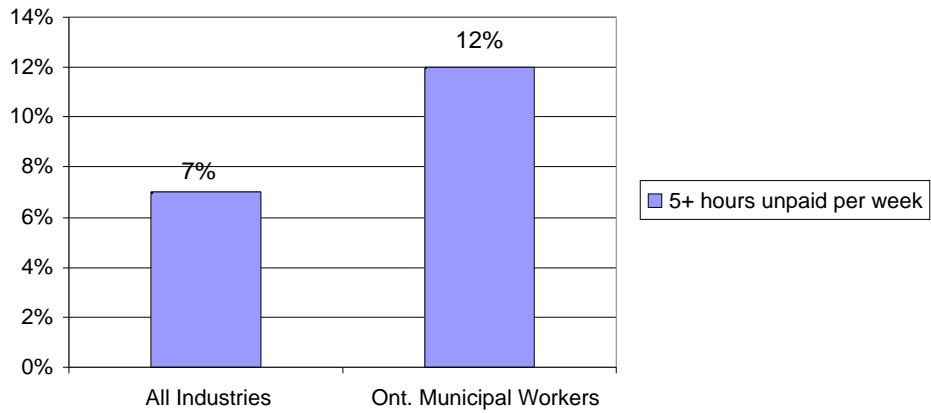
CUPE members contribute large amounts of unpaid work to municipal social services. Certainly, the workers in this study felt that unpaid overtime was a major consequence of workload increases.

Fifty three per cent (53%) are working over 150 minutes (2.5 hours) of unpaid overtime per week and seventy three per cent (73%) receive work related phone calls at home outside of regular working hours.

Typical Any Unpaid Overtime



Unpaid Overtime



TECHNOLOGY

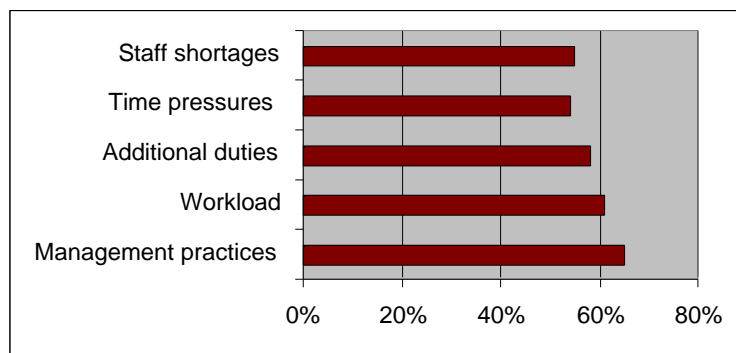
“Technology has made this job impossible to do as it causes more work than is possible in a 40 hr work week. It is never complete no matter how hard one works at it...one feels they never do a good job and that one is constantly under the magnifying glass. On days off one just keeps thinking of work and all the unfinished tasks.”

Technological change has had a major impact on workers. Computer use on the job has been steadily increasing.³ However, there is often a gap between the amount of computer use required in the workplace and the amount of computer literacy and training. Workers who are expected to constantly increase their technological use experience significant levels of frustration. However, technological changes that are organized, planned and implemented to integrate well into workplaces create fewer negative effects.⁴

MAJOR STRESSORS AT WORK

“I feel that it is “survival of the fittest” in my workplace. Management continues to tear the workplace down to the bone. I believe that they are just waiting for people to drop like flies and then they won’t have to lay anyone else off! Caseloads will continue to increase and the quality of work will suffer. Workers just do what they can to get through the day.”

Workers identified several areas of stress. Management practices, including arbitrariness, lack of respect, changing directions, lack of communication and feedback, pressure to reach quotas and unrealistic targets contribute to a high level of stress on the job. Sixty five per cent (65%) of respondents said that management practices were a major source of stress. Workload was identified by sixty one per cent (61%). Time pressures and deadlines (54%) and staff shortages (55%) were other important contributors to stress in the workplace.



³ Computers in the workplace. Perspectives on Labour and Income. Summer 1997. Statistics Canada. Pp. 29-36.

⁴ Ibid.

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

“I took 10 sick days last year (9 were to look after my kids and 1 was for me). I feel guilty taking sick time for me when I use so much time off for sick kids.”

“More sick days should be allowed. The young staff with young children use most of the sick days for their children and then are forced to come to work sick. Mental health days should be made available which may reduce incidents of stress leave and other related leaves from work.”

“There is a need for family leave to be used both for dependents and parents as many of us are not only single parents, but are taking on more responsibilities with our aging parents.”

The pressures of balancing home and work are particularly acute for Ontario’s municipal social service workers. These workers may have particular trouble juggling the often competing demands of each due to their demographic profile. Research indicates⁵ that these workers are the most likely to experience some difficulty:

- Women are almost twice as likely as men to experience difficulty (17% versus 10%).
- Employees between 30 and 49 years old are the most likely to have difficulty balancing home and work. This age span represents a time in life when people are typically establishing a career and having a family.
- Difficulty balancing home and work demands increases with education.

This is precisely a description of some of the major characteristics of the survey respondents. Most workers with children had some sort of formal childcare arrangements other than their spouse (84%). Missing work due to childcare responsibilities is not uncommon for workers with responsibilities for children. Ninety two per cent (92%) report that they have missed at least one day of work due to childcare responsibilities and fifty seven per cent (57%) report missing three or more days. Responsibilities for adult dependent care are also part of the reality for sixteen per cent (16%) of these workers. This included personal care and household assistance for elderly relatives or relatives with disabilities.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

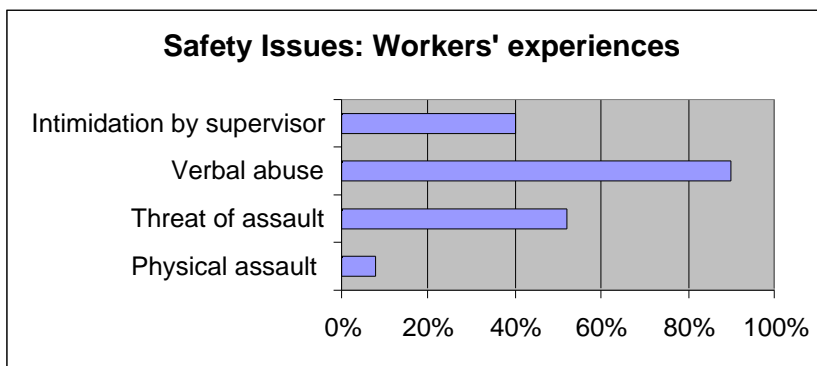
“There is also a lot of pressure to come into work when you are ill because you feel there is no one else to do your work when you are off and you feel a certain responsibility to your clients, pressure from management to be accountable for sick days, and feel guilty over calling in sick when you are sick!”

“I suffer from migraines. When I call in sick due to a migraine, I know my anxiety level increases as a result of missing work and knowing I won’t have coverage and will come back to too many voice-mail messages and days worth of work. As a result of this anxiety, my migraines get even worse. There are no formal or informal plans/actions/coverage for when a worker is ill.”

⁵ Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (1998). Juggling home and work. Health Canada, Bulletin No. 2.

Health problems created by overwork, combined with the inability to take sick time because there is no coverage, create a vicious cycle. Eighty five per cent (85%) of respondents indicated that there is no additional coverage available when work is missed. For fifty six per cent (56%) the work remains there to be picked up upon return to work and for thirty nine per cent (39%) the work is picked up by a co-worker in addition to their own job creating even more work for their colleagues. Although seventy one per cent (71%) had used less than 8 sick days in the past year there is pressure for workers to come in to work when sick. Seventy two per cent (72%) experience pressure to work even when they are ill. Ninety one per cent (91%) of the workers reported having headaches and migraines in the last year. Ninety four per cent (94%) felt run down, with seventy eight per cent (78%) experiencing sleep difficulties and eighty five per cent (85%) suffering from exhaustion. Eleven per cent (11%) of workers had been treated for stomach ulcers.

Comments related to personal treatment were peppered throughout the responses and indicate a workplace that suffers from a lack of respect and validation. Workers who feel valued and recognized are not likely to feel intimidated, overworked, and abused. Ninety per cent (90%) of workers have experienced verbal abuse at work and fifty three per cent (53%) were threatened with assault. Intimidation by supervisors was reported by forty per cent (40%) and bullying by supervisors by nineteen per cent (19%).



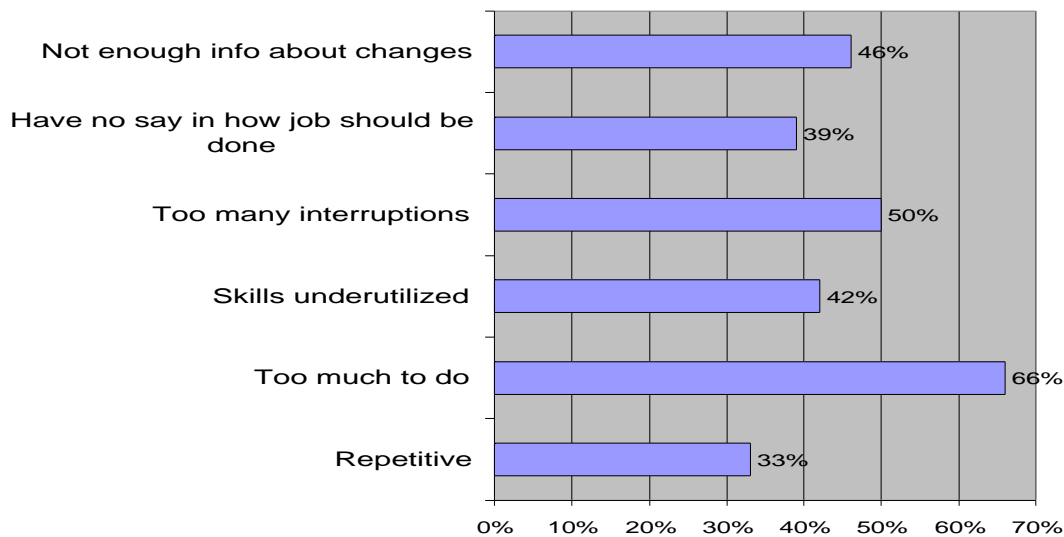
JOB SATISFACTION

“The stress I’m experiencing is more to do with legislative changes re: Ontario Works, ie. lifelong bans if convicted of fraud, 22% cut to social assistance, inadequate housing, unreal expectations, invasion of privacy. Although I’m a caseworker I feel more and more like a police officer or guard. That’s not the job I want to be doing.”

“I get no satisfaction from this job. I went into this field to help people and all I do now is try to meet deadlines and can’t even identify my clients because I have no personal contact with them due to the changes. How can I be an “employment counselor” and be “income maintenance” too? I am tired of being told by our Director that he understands and can empathize with our dilemmas as caseworkers with the dramatic changes over the past 3 years. He does not understand.”

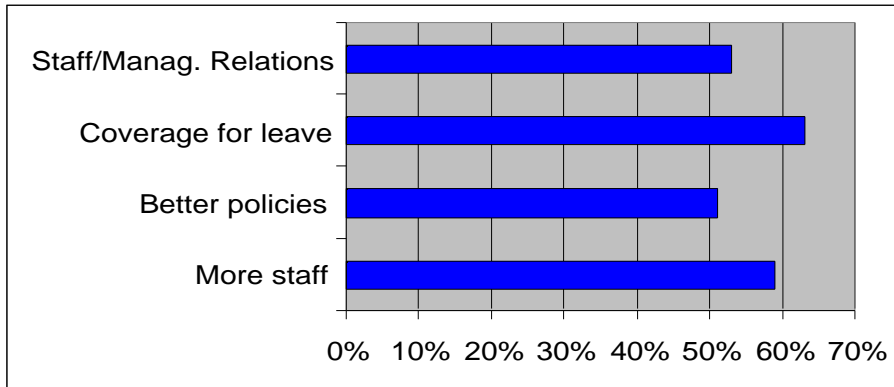
“The work environment could not be worse in terms of morale. The workload is ridiculous and they are laying off staff.”

Many respondents mentioned low morale and feelings of frustration. There were several comments about the underlying commitment to people that led many to seek employment in social services. The desire to work with people and to be helpful are key factors. However, the constancy of change, the lack of control, the level of workload, the inflexibility of systems and the levels of disrespect lead many to conclude that their jobs are deeply unsatisfying. The overwork created by massive changes to the system and staff shortages are cited by sixty six per cent (66%) of respondents. Another forty six per cent (46%) complain that the lack of information about changes contributes to job dissatisfaction. Determining priorities is a major aspect of this type of work and thirty nine per cent (39%) of workers reported frustration with having no say in how the job was to be done.



SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

The best people to make suggestions about how to improve the situation are the very ones who feel unheard. The workers who responded to this survey were very anxious to express their feelings about the extent of overwork they are experiencing, the impact this is having on them and ways that the workplace could be changed to address this. A major suggestion dealt with the need for more staff and the need for coverage when workers are away for any reason. Sixty three per cent (63%) suggested that there should be coverage for vacations and for sick leave time. Fifty nine per cent (59%) thought that there should be more staff and fifty three per cent (53%) feel that better relations between staff and management would improve the workplace. Work organizations and policies should be improved according to fifty one per cent (51%).



RECOMMENDATIONS

CUPE has made several recommendations for change in the workplace that could lessen the workload and stress levels of workers. There are several ways that the government and employers could concretely improve the working conditions for workers in municipal social services:

1. Improve workloads through a process approved by and including CUPE members in the sector:

- Ensure sufficient staffing levels at all times to ensure that service can be maintained and that no worker carries an excessive workload;
- Replace workers on vacation or any other leave;
- Stop attrition _ fill jobs when people retire or quit;
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6. Introduce legislative amendments to the Occupational Health and Safety Act to recognize stress and workload as occupational health and safety hazards.

Currently, the government does not deal directly with the issue of stress and workload as a health and safety issue. They do not order direct corrective measures, as they should. In some cases they justify the failure to act in the obvious health and safety interests of their workers by claiming that there is no legislative basis upon which to act. CUPE and the labour movement must squarely address the inability or unwillingness of the government to address emerging issues such as stress and workload.

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