

Executive Summary

For some time, Ontario social service workers have been reporting workload increases coupled with high rates of stress and deteriorating health and safety conditions. A survey completed over the summer of 1999 confirms that social service workers are overloaded and under fire.

Approximately 9,000 Ontario CUPE members work in three social services groups. This sector includes Developmental Services, Workers' Compensation and Children's Aid Societies.

The report of workload increases are alarming – eighty-seven per cent (87%) said their workload had increased in the past year. Unpaid work is the equivalent of 630 positions for CUPE members in the social service sector.

The effects of the workload increase are staggering. Ninety-four per cent (94%) reported feeling run down, while eighty-seven per cent (87%) reported feeling exhaustion. A total of eighty-nine per cent (89%) reported having headaches.

Amazingly, one-half (50%) of respondents reported their physician suggested their symptoms were caused by work.

Almost three quarters of those surveyed (71%) reported that they were subjected to a combination of physical assaults, verbal abuse or threats at work.

Finding the balance between work and family life is also proving to be difficult. Forty per cent (40%) of respondents had

children in some childcare arrangement and nineteen per cent (19%) reported responsibilities for adult dependant care.

A high percentage of respondents reported tension balancing home and family life. On a scale from 1 to 10, over fifty per cent (50%) said they assessed their tension at seven and above and seventeen per cent (17%) reported tension levels at nine or ten.

The survey's findings point to the following recommendations aimed at improving social service workplaces:

- Ensure that joint health and safety committees recognize, document and report the hazards and health threats created by workload.
- Demand that employers and supervisors are held accountable for their obligations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act.
- Introduce legislative amendments to the Occupational Health and Safety Act to recognize stress and workload as occupational health and safety hazards.
- Improved workloads obtained through a process approved by and including CUPE members in the sector.
- Introduce amendments to the Employment Standards Act to help workers balance work and family life.
- Improve wages and working conditions especially in the developmental services sector.

Introduction

CUPE members are facing ongoing attacks on their health, safety and well being as governments move ahead to implement corporate models of downsizing and restructuring under the guise of delivering more efficient public services.

In almost all cases, the consequences of re-organization, restructuring, downsizing and contracting out are increasing workloads and a corresponding rise in injuries and stress. In fact, employers are so concerned about stress-related workers compensation claims, that they are consistently lobbying governments across Canada to exclude occupational stress from being compensated.

Increasing workloads basically means to many duties and responsibilities with too few hours in the day to complete them. It also means too few workers to do the work that was once done by a greater number of workers.

Overwork has great consequences for workers, their families and society at large. Stress and its psychological and physical effects on workers are consequences most of us are aware of. Others include the effect on the quality of life.

Overwork does not just mean longer hours. Employers today are intent on making CUPE members work harder and faster. They are changing and intensifying the way we do our work. Their goal is to be able to have us do more work with fewer workers. In the end it all amounts to the same thing – our bodies and our dignity just can't take it.

Survey Background

In 1993 CUPE Social Service members were surveyed on the violence occurring in their workplaces. The results portrayed the grim reality of a social worker inside social services; a staggering 65% were subjected to some form of violence through aggressive acts. The conditions creating the violence included staff shortages, growing intensity of cases, and a disregard for health and safety in the workplace.

Nothing was ever done to correct these working conditions. In fact working conditions have only worsened. Violence is not the only threat to workplace health and safety for social service workers. Further cuts to services, staff and clients, coupled with the changes created through restructuring have produced a system where workers are overloaded and under fire.

CUPE members knew their workplaces were deteriorating and called for a survey of their work environment to help them tell the story of how changes in their workplace were affecting them.

Focus groups were held in June 1999 to obtain the qualitative information, the stories of the everyday experience at the workplace. Volunteer CUPE members also stepped forward to help in the distribution of the nine-page survey on work environment, which comprised 35 questions covering workplace conditions, symptoms experienced health and safety, job satisfaction, major stressors and possible solutions.¹

¹ To obtain copies of the CUPE Work Environment questionnaire or additional information, contact Margot Young or Anthony Pizzino at CUPE National, 21 Florence Street, Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0W6

■ Who Was Surveyed

Approximately 9,000 CUPE members work in three social services groups were surveyed:

- Developmental Services, ACL (4,000 members)
- Workers' Compensation, WSIB (3,000 members)
- Children's Aid Societies, CAS (2,000 members)

■ Developmental Services

"I am really worried about Making Services Work for People (MSWP) and what this means for services in the future".

"I have to work overtime and other part-time jobs to make enough money to pay my bills".

Developmental services involves working with children and adults with developmental disabilities. Often they also have physical disabilities. CUPE members provide residential and vocational supports and services so clients can live their lives more fully. Many workers are required to do shift work in the services' residences. If no one shows up for the next shift, workers must stay until they are relieved, which can sometimes mean a worker staying on the job for twenty-four hours when replacements aren't found. A typical wage in this area is less than fifteen (\$15) dollars per hour.

Restructuring has been a protracted process for front-line developmental services workers and the final picture of what their future working conditions will look like is far from being told. Workers fear worsening of services, privatization, and deteriorating working conditions.

■ Workers' Compensation

“Reorganization changes have taken a definite toll – I feel drained all the time, mostly at the end of the day. ...the changes are so rapid that we are not keeping up with training needed to do the job – I feel rushed most of the time.”

The CUPE members surveyed are claims adjudicators who manage disability claims for injured workers. They are required to be in constant communication with injured workers, employers, agencies, and advocates. Much of their work requires using computers for long periods of time.

Workers compensation services have been restructured following massive changes to the legislation. Recently, workers found out that there will be a further restructuring of the service delivery model under the legislation. Uncertainty through restructuring will exacerbate workplace stress.

■ Child Welfare

“Over the last four or five years in child welfare, things are in a constant state of change – new legislation, changes in job expectations, new paperwork formats, increased reliance on computer technology, staff shortages, lack of resources for referring clients, changes in client procedures, significant delays in matters moving through court process, reduced availability of at-school programs for children with special needs – the list is endless”.

Child welfare workers are responsible for the protection of children and apprehension of children at risk. These CUPE members work with the children and their families under very stressful circumstances providing child abuse and neglect programmes as well as out-of-home care for children.

Child welfare has been under a microscope over the past few years resulting from Coroners' inquests into child deaths. It is well acknowledged that the child welfare system, which has been in crisis with spiralling workloads, will grow as the new legislation and procedures create more cases. The intensity of the work is greater because the children in care have complex behavioural and emotional problems.

Respondent Characteristics

The survey was not scientifically random in distribution. CUPE members were charged with handing out surveys to about 10% of the membership within their local in the early summer of 1999. Seven hundred fourteen questionnaires were returned to the National Office.

Social services is a female dominated sector. The results of the survey bore this out – almost eighty-two per cent (82%) of the respondents were female. The predominant age of the group (41%) was between thirty-one and forty years of age. The next largest groups (30%) were between ages forty-one and fifty.

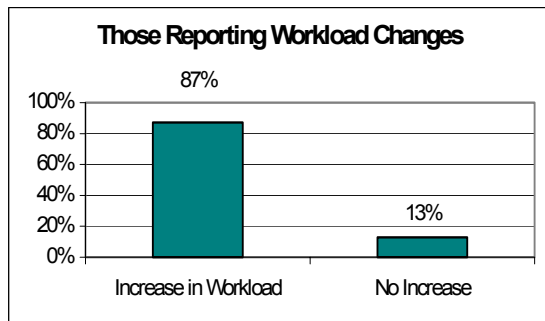
The respondents had long service in their jobs – almost seventy-two per cent (72%) had been with their employers for over five years. Of those surveyed, eighty-nine per cent (89%) were full-time employees.

Survey Results

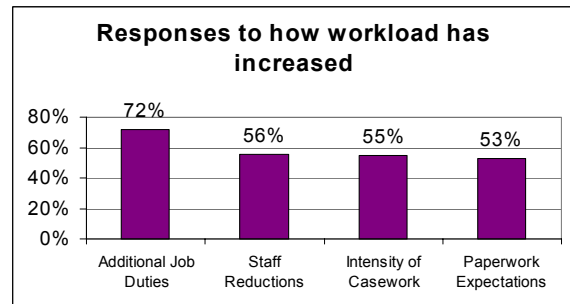
■ Workload Issues

“This job is very emotionally draining and it is almost impossible to stay ahead of the number of demands. Ultimately I feel tired and even with a break on weekends and vacation I do not become completely relaxed.”

Workload is a major emerging issue for many Canadian workers. According to one study, fifty-two percent (52%) of workers experience stress from the degree of their job demands.² Fifty-seven per cent (57%) of the social services respondents reported that workload was a major stressor at work. The report of workload increases is alarming – eighty-seven per cent (87%) said their workload had increased in the past year.



It is no wonder that members are reporting high rates of workload stress. Workload had increased as a result of additional job duties, staff reductions, intensity of casework and paperwork expectations.



■ Paperwork

“The number of cases has increased as well as the amount of paper work, yet there has been no accommodations or provisions for this to lessen the responsibility to the worker. It is humanly impossible to keep up with the growing demands of my job.”

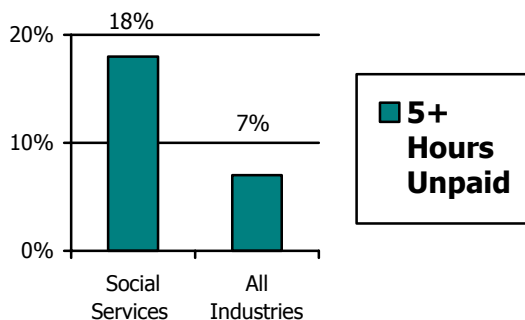
Paperwork demands have created a major source of stress in social service workplaces and it is increasing – Fifty-three per cent (53%) said that paper work was responsible for increase in their workload. Restructuring and the transition to new technology seem to have resulted in the work being more oriented to record keeping while the importance of client contact has been diminished. Over seventy-three per cent (73%) of the respondents said they did not have enough time to complete their paperwork. Fifty-four per cent (54%) listed paperwork as a major source of job stress.

² Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (1996). How Canadians spend their time. Progress in prevention, Bulletin No. 6.

■ Unpaid Overtime

“It is very difficult to take vacations or be absent as the workload is incredible.”

CUPE members in the social service sector seem to have difficulty leaving work. In fact, sixty-six per cent (66%) of the respondents do not have any paid overtime, compared to only ten per cent (10%) reported in a recent Statistics Canada publication.³ The CUPE respondents were 1½ times more likely to work five or more hours of overtime a week compared to the rest of the Canadian workers.⁴



Source: 1999 Labour Force Survey

Most respondents said they worked thirty (30) minutes a day without pay. With 9,000 CUPE members in social services unpaid work amounts to 1,170,000 hours annually. Unpaid work is the equivalent of 630 positions for CUPE members in this sector.

³ Hours Polarization at the end of the 1990s Perspectives Summer 1999 Statistics Canada pp28-37.

⁴ Ibid.

■ Major Stressors at Work

“There is a great deal of pressure and stress associated with paperwork demands, audits etc. Time off cannot be taken unless the paper work is up to date. The latter is hard to achieve while the caseload increases. It becomes harder to catch up.”

Survey respondents identified a wide range of sources of stress in their work.

- **Staff Shortages** were identified by 60% of respondents as one major stressor at work.
- **Workload** was reported as a stressor by 57% of respondents.
- **Time Pressures** accounted for stress in 56%.
- **Management Practices** were cited by 55%.
- **Additional Duties** were a source of stress for 55%.
- **Paperwork** was reported by 54%.
- **Broad Job Descriptions** were reported by 41% as a stressor.

In Britain, employers are being made to pay for the effects of stressful work. Britain's largest union UNISON has secured a court award of £ 67,491 for a former housing worker who had to retire at 41 on ill-health grounds, after suffering panic attacks and bouts of clinical depression. A job move in 1993 led to increased workload for Beverley Lancaster, who was employed as a Birmingham City Council housing officer. For almost a year she did the work of two while the council failed to fill a vacancy. In a legal first, the council admitted liability for the stress caused to Mrs. Lancaster, who was awarded the compensation for pain, suffering and future loss of earnings.

In 1996 UNISON also succeeded in securing a £174,000 court payment to ex-social worker John Walker. Mr. Walker suffered a nervous breakdown in November 1986. He returned in March 1987. His employer, the Northumberland County Council did nothing to reduce his workload, or ease the stress. He subsequently suffered a second nervous breakdown and retired on medical grounds in May 1988. UNISON solicitors effectively argued that his nervous breakdown was caused by his employer's negligence and that he had been exposed to unreasonable stress, which could have been avoided. The judge was convinced that among the causes of the "psychiatric damage to a normally robust personality" were "the sheer volume of work", "the character of the work, regardless of the volume" and an inability "to control the volume of work or gain from senior management increased resources or guidance on priorities."

In June 1996, UNISON went ahead and won another substantial settlement for Janet Ballantyne who was awarded £66,000 for the ill-health she said was caused by a bullying manager. She had been forced to give up her work because of her stress-related health problems.

Currently, UNISON says that it is investigating up to 7,000 other complaints of stress. The Trade Union Council (TUC) estimates that more than 460 union-backed stress cases are currently before Britain's courts.

■ Symptoms

"People in our agency are not coping well. Sick leaves and health problems appear to be on the rise."

"This job is very emotionally demanding and I often am overtired and over-stimulated. I wake up at night worrying about work. I find the pace very difficult sometimes. It is also very stressful to keep job and home life separate."

"As the job duties continue to expand, without any reduction in caseload size, stress levels are elevated to unhealthy levels. When it is brought up to managers' attention I am told to help myself and work regular overtime to get the work caught up. Doing this on a regular basis is also unhealthy. I am usually exhausted from a regular day's work."

The survey results reflect the adverse effects of workload. Most respondents reported experiencing between six and seven symptoms that have an impact on their health.

When respondents were asked about symptoms they sometimes or often experienced,

- 94% reported feeling **run down**
- 89% reported having **headaches**
- 87% reported feeling **exhaustion**
- 86% reported experiencing **muscle or joint pain**
- 84% reported having **sleeping difficulties**
- 80% reported feeling **anxiety**
- 65% reported changes in **appetite**
- 60% reported **indigestion**

In many cases, linking workplace conditions and adverse health effects is difficult. The results of the survey indicate that symptoms reported by social service workers are validated by their physicians as having an occupational origin.

- 50% of respondents reported their physician suggested their **symptoms were caused by work.**

■ Sick Day Pressures

“The major issue is caseload coverage for vacation and sick leave. There is non whatsoever. So even if you are not feeling well you are under a lot of pressure to go to work because there is so much to do, daily. Vacation coverage is nothing more than a band-aid solution. Without improvements stress will continue and accelerate.”

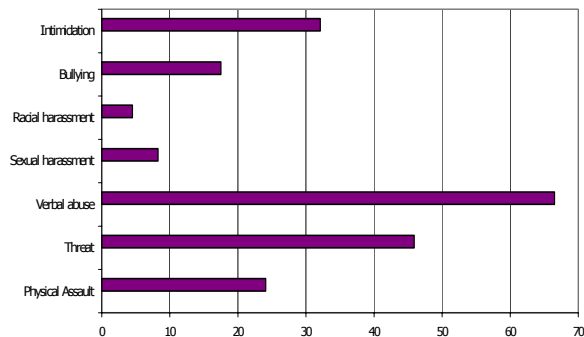
Given the large number of symptoms reported by respondents, one would expect that sick day use would also be high. When asked about their sick day use, the majority of respondents reported using between 1 and 7 sick days per year. The average for the social services sector is 6.7 days annually.

One possible explanation for this may be the pressures on workers not to use their sick days.

- Even when sick, a total of 70% reported that they **felt pressured not to use their sick days** so that they could keep up with their work.

■ Health and Safety Effects

“Our caseloads are extremely high. As front line staff, we are the ones who receive all the verbal abuse from our clients. Management tells us to do one claim at a time, but we are not allowed to use our caseload size as an excuse for the outside public as to why we have not yet resolved their issues!”



The adverse effects of workload and stress on social service workers' health and safety are key issues identified by respondents.

- 67% reported being subjected to **verbal abuse**
- 46% were **threatened**
- 32% experienced **intimidation**
- 24% were physically **assaulted**
- 18% were **bullied**

■ Violence at Work

Almost three quarters of those surveyed (71%) reported that they were subjected to a combination of physical assaults, verbal abuse or threats at work.

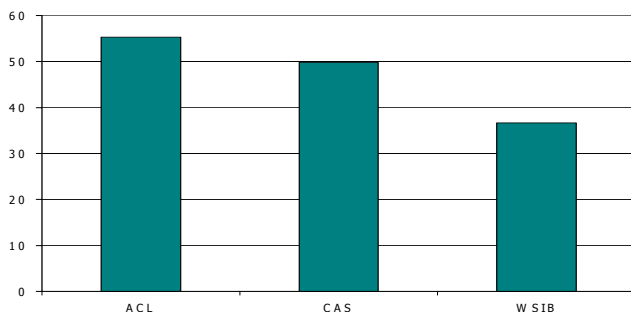
By contrast, a 1993 CUPE study of violence in Ontario social services found that 65% of respondents has been subjected to an aggressive act in the past two years. The current survey results validate what social service workers have been reporting to CUPE – the number of incidents of violence are on the rise.

■ Physical Assaults

As a group within the social services sector, ACL (developmental services) workers reported the highest number of physical assaults at the hands of clients.

- 55% of ACL workers reported being assaulted.

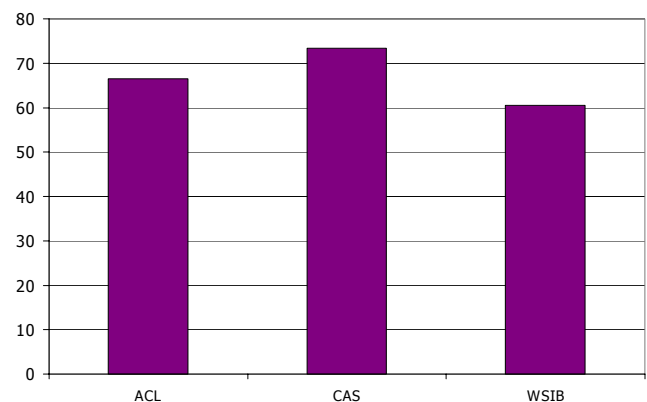
■ Threat of Assaults



- 55% of ACL workers and 50% of CAS workers reported being threatened with assault by a client.
- 37% of WSIB (Workplace Safety and Insurance Board) workers were threatened with assault.

■ Verbal Abuse

The three groups surveyed (ACL, CAS and WSIB) reported being subjected to high levels of verbal abuse at work.



■ Joint Health and Safety Committees

Active joint health and safety committees were reported in eighty-three per cent (83%) of social service workplaces. A total of twelve per cent (12%) did not know if they had joint health and safety committees.

■ Work and Family Responsibilities

“Taking vacation for my child’s medical appointment doesn’t make me feel supported as a working parent.”

“The stress I bring from the workplace makes my personal life difficult.”

“This is not the type of job you can punch out at 4 p.m. and not think about it again until your next shift. Therefore, your unfinished work is always with you and when you finish up some more is always there. That you can count on for sure.”

According to a recent publication of the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute⁵, the following demographic groups are more likely to have more difficulties juggling work and family responsibilities:

- 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.

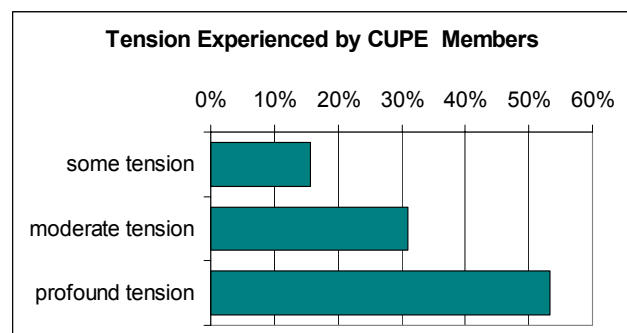
The characteristics of the CUPE social service worker respondents match every demographic group that is likely to experience difficulty balancing home and

⁵ Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (1996). How Canadians spend their time. Progress in Prevention, Bulletin No. 6.

work. Forty per cent (40%) of respondents had children in some childcare arrangement and nineteen per cent (19%) reported responsibilities for adult dependant care. Seven per cent (7%) reported that they had children in some childcare arrangement (ages 12 and under) as well as adult dependent care responsibilities. These are immense family responsibilities in addition to a very demanding workday. To compound the problems, there does not seem to be a clean break for CUPE members – fifty-eight per cent (58%) reported being called at home about work.

Seventy-five per cent (75%) of those with children in some childcare arrangement reported missing at least one day of work for childcare. Forty-nine per cent (49%) said they had to miss three or more days or work for childcare.

A very high percentage of respondents reported tension balancing work with home and family life. On a scale from 1 to 10 over fifty per cent (50 %) said they assessed their tension at seven and above and seventeen per cent (17%) reported tension levels at nine or ten.



It is crucial for employers and government funders to review working conditions to create family-friendly policies.

Workplace Solutions

“Many staff need part time work to support their families.”

“Staff morale would go up if decent wages and benefit plans were available.”

“Decision-making is top down, not bottom-up as it should be where it directly affects workers day-to-day in their work place.”

“High staff turnover leads to increased staff stress working with inexperienced people.”

The list is long of how to improve Ontario social service workplaces. The provincial government has a large role to play in finding solutions together with the agencies and unions. More staff was viewed as the best remedy to workplace problems with sixty-seven per cent (67%) of respondents favouring this solution. This requires an infusion of funding to the agencies.

The next highest response fifty seven percent (57%) was the coverage for vacation and sick leave was needed so that people could return to work and not face staggering work demands. Reducing red tape, improved work policies, training and improved management/staff relations were all listed as solutions by over forty-five per cent (45%) of the respondents. These are solutions that we feel the employers and government can start to work on together with CUPE.

Recommendations

The survey results point to some concrete steps that can be taken by the government to immediately improve working conditions:

1

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

The survey results provide a clear indication that active joint health and safety committees are in place in eighty-three per cent (83%) of social service workplaces. Ontario joint health and safety committees have the power to identify situations that may be a source of danger or hazard to workers.

Committees can also make recommendations to the employer and workers for the improvement of the health and safety workers.⁶

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.

2

Demand that employers and supervisors are held accountable for their obligations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

⁶ Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act (R.S.O. 1990, c.O.1). Section 9(18).

Ontario's occupational health and safety legislation places a legal obligation on employers and supervisors to ensure the health and safety of workers. Employers are obligated to appoint competent persons as supervisors. Supervisors have a legal duty to take all precautions reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of workers. In addition, they must advise workers of the existence of any potential or actual danger to their health or safety.⁷

3

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 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 legislative contains a general duty clause that requires employers to provide a safe and healthy workplace for workers. However, the legislative does not address

⁷ Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act (R.S.O. 1990, c.O.1). Section 25(2)(c).27(2).

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 be pushed 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;
- 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.

4

Improved workloads obtained through a process approved by and including CUPE members in the sector.

The Coroner of Ontario has stated that workload standards in child welfare should be developed in consultation with CUPE members⁸. This recommendation has yet to be acted upon by the provincial government. Workloads are of equal concern to child welfare, workers' compensation, and developmental services employees. Workloads must be revised before we lost too many

⁸ Recommendation #7 from the verdict of the Coroner's jury into the death of Shanay Johnson, issued May 9th 1997.

dedicated workers who leave because they cannot tolerate the excessive workloads and the impact they have on their lives and on the lives of those seeking services and support.

5

Introduce amendments to the Employment Standards Act to help workers balance work and family life.

The Ontario Conservative Party blueprint has outlined amendments that would allow for unpaid job-protected time for up to 10 days for family crisis. This is clearly inadequate. Employees need paid time off for family responsibilities. Amendments should also be broadened to cover all family responsibilities, instead of narrowly confining leave to crisis situations only.

6

Improve wages and working conditions especially in the developmental services sector.

Wages for comparable work in the institutional sector of developmental services are much higher. With the move to de-institutionalization, the people to whom CUPE members provide support and services are the same. The Provincial government should provide adequate funding for wages to rise to about \$20.00 per hour for residential counsellors with proportional adjustments made for the other classifications to maintain internal equity. In addition, a province-wide pension and benefit plan should be introduced.