

CUPE BC 2023 CONVENTION COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE REPORT

The CUPE BC Community Social Services (CSS) sector is a sector in crisis. Still reeling from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, CSS workers continue to face critical levels of stress, burnout, workload concerns, and other issues such as workplace violence and mental health challenges. Unprecedented recruitment and retention issues are not only hurting employers but are also impacting the mental and physical health of members, with devastating consequences.

The CSS Committee has been working hard to tackle these issues in creative ways. Committee members are dedicated to raising public awareness of these challenges and pushing for change. Recognizing the sector's strength in numbers, as well as the capacity for resiliency, compassion, and tenacity in its members, has fueled the Committee to continue addressing these critical issues.

Recruitment and Retention

CSS workers have toiled in the face of significant and worsening recruitment and retention issues in the sector. This is a longstanding problem, but employers and members alike agree that it has never been as severe as the current staffing crisis. Members report working significant overtime to address staffing shortages. Recruitment and retention in the CSS sector have been exacerbated by the pandemic, as staff contracting COVID-19 have been forced to take long-term medical leaves due to long COVID-19 and/or their own or a relative's immuno-compromised medical conditions, or because they are not vaccinated and so cannot work due to vaccine mandates. These challenges have increased burnout and vicarious trauma, prompting members to take much needed medical leaves.

Unprecedented Stress

As noted above, CSS employees are reporting overwhelming workloads leading to stress and burnout; on top of the exhaustion from workload, additional challenges are also mounting throughout the sector. Due to working with marginalized, vulnerable, and at-risk individuals, CSS workers can be faced with exposure to traumatic stories and the painful or fearful experiences of others. This is known as vicarious trauma, and it is being observed at unprecedented rates.

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Additionally, there are increasing rates of violence in the workplace. CSS workers are reporting more frequent, as well as more severe, episodes of violence on the job. These reports range from threats and other forms of verbal abuse or harassment to damage to personal property and physical and/or sexual assault. The CSS Committee has been working to raise awareness of this issue and has supported the development of a public campaign to highlight individual member stories. These stories are being shared as part of an online campaign during March Community Social Services Month. Sadly, CSS workers are also reporting increased addictions and mental health issues in their own lives, as they navigate these overwhelming and stressful situations on the job.

Training Needs

The CSS Committee has identified significant issues with training for staff in this sector, as there are significant accessibility issues when it comes to training in almost all classifications. Workers across many job classifications do not have access to ongoing training opportunities, and several themes are emerging:

- New workers may be thrown into a new position with very minimal training, only to become overwhelmed; frequently, these unsupported individuals leave the sector before these challenges are addressed.
- Often, longstanding workers are forced to provide support to new employees who have not received adequate training.
- In some cases, limited access to ongoing training leaves longer-standing workers feeling stagnant and unmotivated to progress in their field; in other cases, they feel unseen, unappreciated, and undervalued.
- Some specific classifications require program certification that very few individuals have access to, in terms of location of institutions, flexibility of learning opportunities, or number of program graduates; postings in these areas are left vacant for extended periods, causing additional strain and increased workloads for existing CSS workers.
- Across the province, there is disparity amongst diverse geographical regions when it comes to accessible training opportunities. In particular, workers in rural communities are facing multiple barriers, often experiencing little to no access to training opportunities.

The CSS Committee is calling for improved access to training for existing employees, across classifications and geographical regions, as well as increased awareness, flexibility, and accessibility of training for those interested in working in the CSS field.

Inappropriate Placements for Clients

Due to the critical recruitment and retention challenges noted above, there are shortages of appropriate placement opportunities for clients that meet their individual

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and diverse needs. Unfortunately, a new trend is emerging in which neurodivergent clients are being housed in spaces with unrestricted drug and alcohol use. This is leading to devastating consequences for persons served, as well as frustration and helplessness for CSS workers and the families of persons served. The CSS Committee recognizes that inappropriate client placements are unacceptable and calls for change in this area.

Community Social Services Month

March is recognized as Community Social Services month. One goal of the CSS committee was to promote a richer understanding of the sector and its employees, as well as to raise awareness of key issues. This had led to a virtual CUPE BC March Community Social Services Awareness Campaign. Campaign highlights are outlined in the article "[Community Social Services Awareness Month: Honouring our members' commitment](#)" on the CUPE BC website.

The Community Social Services Committee Workplan

The CSS Committee has developed a diverse workplan that reflects the many components of this complex and multifaceted sector. As noted in the resolutions below, key issues include CSS worker priorities as well as improved services for clients. This committee has also strived to promote awareness of CSS and its various classifications, priorities, and challenges, as well as appreciation of its workers. It is an ongoing priority of the Committee to develop connections among CSS workers across the province; new perspectives are valued, and an expansion of this Committee is welcomed.

The CSS Committee also continues to work towards promoting the health, safety, and dignity of those from vulnerable and marginalized communities. Considering the devastating consequences of the lack of safe and accessible housing in the province, the CSS Committee fully endorses the housing first initiative, which prescribes safe and permanent housing as the first priority for people experiencing homelessness.

Substance use is a critical issue in this province and affects individuals and their loved ones in all sectors. Substance use is a public health crisis, not a criminal justice issue. Given this, the CSS Committee also supports the ongoing evolution of the decriminalization of narcotics in BC, which will help reduce the barriers and stigma that prevent people from accessing lifesaving supports and services. Additionally, the Committee calls for increased treatment programs to address the ever-widening gap between detox and treatment programs. Too often, people struggling with addictions

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challenges enter detox programs only to find there are no available treatment programs. Consequently, they often relapse.

Committee members are dedicated to ongoing discussions on these matters so that attention does not shift away from these key issues. Recommendations to the executive board include:

- Pushing for continued support of the housing first model of housing
- Pushing for continued support of the decriminalization of personal possession of narcotics
- Continued advocacy with the provincial government to address the deepening recruitment and retention crisis in the Community Social Services Sector

Additionally, the CSS Committee offers support for other initiatives across CUPE BC; for example, this committee endorses the CUPE BC Childcare Campaign, and plans to liaise with the Skilled Trades and Persons with Disabilities Committees to support increased funding for people with disabilities to enter the trades. Also, the Committee intends to work with the K-12 Education sector and CUPE National Education to develop increased awareness of reporting near hits when experiencing violence in the workplace.

Recommended Resolutions in Order of Priority

As per the above workplan, the following are the CSS resolutions in order of priority:

- Social Services Education and Training
- Appropriate Supportive Housing and Program Placement
- The Gap Between Detox and Treatment Programs

Resources

CUPE BC

Community Social Services Awareness Month: Honouring our members' commitment.

https://www.cupe.bc.ca/2021/03/01/community_social_services_awareness_month_honouring_our_members_commitment/

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