

# **Working Harder: Working Sicker**

A Report for OPSEU members  
in the Developmental Services Sector

March 2000



## Introduction

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union represents approximately 5,610 members in the developmental services sector. Our members provide services to developmentally disabled adults and children in 49 communities in Ontario.

OPSEU members in this sector work for Associations for Community Living (ACLs) and other related agencies. Our members work with clients who are physically and developmentally disabled, generally in a group home setting.

The workforce is overwhelmingly female and the majority work part-time. Eighty per cent of our members in the developmental services sector are female. An estimated 42 per cent of our members are full-time employees and 58 per cent are part-time.

OPSEU members in this sector face many challenges. They work in an environment of funding cutbacks, restructuring and the threat of privatization. They work with often hard to serve clients whose welfare the government has little concern for.

The OPSEU executive in the developmental services sector felt it was important to find out more about the pressures our members face in the workplace. This survey was intended as a snapshot of our members' working conditions and their concerns.

## Who Was Surveyed

Surveys were sent out to all 5,610 OPSEU members who work in developmental services in the summer of 1999. Only 149 surveys were returned to OPSEU. This is a lower response rate than we would have liked. As a result, the statistics contain a margin of error that is greater than one would get in most standard surveys. However, the results provide the union's developmental services executive with a more detailed picture of how health and safety concerns and other issues are affecting members at the local level.

As mentioned above, 43 per cent of our members in this sector are full-time employees and 58 per cent are part-time. However, 75 per cent of our respondents to the survey work full-time and only 25 per cent work part-time. (Despite the fact that exposure to workplaces problems in no doubt related to work time, the frequency of occurrence is still reported to be significantly high among part-time respondents. Thus, the full-time/part-time distinction does not seem to affect the results of the survey.)

OPSEU's developmental services membership is known as Sector 2 in the union's Broader Public Services (BPS) Division. Sector 2 is broken down into three smaller groupings: ACLs, ACL related and Schedule 2 agencies.

The following is a percentage breakdown of OPSEU members according to these smaller groupings, in terms of the sector membership as a whole, and the sample of respondents for this survey.

	<u>Developmental Services Sector</u>	<u>Survey Respondents</u>
<u>Subsector</u>	<u>Per cent</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
2A ACLs	61	75
2B ACL Related	25	14
2C Schedule 2	<u>14</u>	<u>11</u>
Total	100	100

## Our Members Speak

Many of the members who responded to the survey wrote comments next to their answers. Here's a sample of what they wrote:

### On Clients with Higher Needs:

- *Are they getting the quality of care/life they need given budgeting restraints?*
- *More high need clients – no more staff.*
- *Staff working alone at risk with some of them.*

### On Health and Safety:

- *[Health and safety issues] at present are swept under the carpet – no preventative/proactive measures.*
- *We are often in a situation where the people we support exhibit physical and verbal aggression.*
- *We do not have access to info about the people we support and whether they have HIV, Hepatitis B.*
- *[I have] no benefits, or paid sick time – work sick often*
- *No sick time for part-time employees – the majority are part-time.*
- *I am dismayed that the [health and safety] issues I have indicated here are denied by my employer.*
- *[Sick time] appears to have increased. People talk about “mental health” days, which technically we don't have.*

### On Employer Support for Staff Working with Aggressive/Difficult Clients:

- *Harrasment rather than support.*
- *Staff are expect to resume working immediately following incidents or any first aid required. Only in rare circumstances is the staff permitted to move to another group even if another group is available within the work area.*

### On Training:

- *... We are dealing with more dual-diagnosed and long-term institutionalized persons who are “thrown” into the community. We are given no direction or methods of approach.*
- *[Employers offer the training] but not the time taken to do it. All courses scheduled for off hours, no pay, no lieu time.*
- *[Training is] greatly reduced due to budget cuts.*
- *Few staff ever get to go and not to the ones they are interested in.*
- *No training offered since approximately 1996 besides First Aid/CPR.*

#### On Privatization:

- *The lack of regulations governing the private sector is placing vulnerable clients at risk.*

#### On Restructuring:

- *Block scheduling has burned staff out.*
- *Losing our union member that works directly in our house and replacing their duties with an individual outside our actual house (management position).*

#### On Workload:

- *I have protested that my workload is too heavy and made my case for and asked for extra staffing at every opportunity. My requests are always denied because of 1) budget and 2) inefficient use of time. My unapologetic stance about workload and inadequate staffing have resulted in a written warning and actions on the part of my manager threatening demotion or worse.*
- *Both the volume and complexity of the work has escalated sharply mainly due to government and agency job cuts and increased paper accountability.*

#### On Collective Bargaining:

- *[We have had] no raise except pay equity since 1991.*
- *We have been without a contract for 18 months.*

#### On Other Issues:

- *Agency now hiring P.S.W. grads to do D.S.W. jobs. Not adequately trained and no experiencing working with developmentally challenged individuals or have pharmacology training.*
- *Executive Director has no front-line experience.*
- *Extremely poor morale. Several of us have been looking for employment elsewhere (most of us have 5 to 10 years of service). It is unfortunate we are treated so poorly as employees.*
- *I am a residential counsellor with 23 years experience...I am one of the fortunate ones. At least I have 40 regularly scheduled hours per week. I have seen peers have to uproot their families to chase pensions or jobs, and of those who chose to remain, for many the future is not bright. Some work multiple jobs as call-back or relief staff. Their hours are uncertain and dependent on the good will of managers or other residential staff.*

# Summary of Survey Results

## Top Concerns

Increases in workload were cited by 76 per cent of respondents as one of the top five issues they would like addressed. The complete list of issues is below. The percentages reflect the frequency each issue was mentioned by respondents.

Workload	76%
Health and Safety	61%
Higher need clients	58%
Restructuring	58%
Bargaining	50%
Funding Decreases	44%

## Health and Safety

**Working Alone:** When asked how often they work alone, 71 per cent of the respondents replied “always” or “often”.

**Working With Aggressive Clients:** When asked if they work with clients who may become aggressive, 78 per cent of the respondents replied “always” or “often”. This could be particularly problematic for workers who are working alone. Of those respondents who always or often work alone, 79 per cent always or often work with clients who may become aggressive.

**Injury and Illness:** 22 per cent report having lost time at work due to a work related injury in the past year.

For those who reported an increase in their use of sick time, work stress was reported as the most common reason for this increased use (69 per cent of those reporting an increase or 24 per cent of the sample).

50 per cent of the respondents reported an increased use of sick time in their work place while only 14 per cent stated that the use of sick time had not increased. The remaining 36 per cent did not know whether sick time had increased or not.

94 per cent believe that the current climate of layoffs, agency restructuring, mergers and bargaining has contributed to increased stress levels at work.

## Developmental Services Survey Results (149 responses)

### 1) Please identify the top five issues you would like to have addressed:

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
<u>Responses</u>	84	58
	36	25
	41	28
	84	58
Health & Safety Issues	88	61
Privatization	44	30
Bargaining	73	50
Grievances	38	26
Work Load	Increase 110	76
	Decrease 2	1
Discrimination	24	17
Funding	Increase 18	12
	Decrease 64	44

### 2) How frequently have you been at risk due to exposure/contact to the following in the last year? Please enter number of times.

High Frequency – hourly, regularly, 100%, always, daily, constantly, all the time, 50 times or more

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
Needle pricks	12	8	2	1
Uncleanliness	88	59	60	40
Poor air quality	70	47	44	30
Handling of drugs	65	44	55	37
Body fluids	110	74	79	53
Chemicals	46	31	38	26
HIV	14	9	2 *	1
Other (please indicate)	47	32	(31 cited Hepatitis B/C; 11 cited violence)	

\* most reporting exposure don't know the frequency of exposure.

**3) How often do you work alone?**

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
Always	45	31
Often	60	41
Rarely	26	18
Never	16	11
<hr/>		
Total	147	100

**4a) Do you work with clients who may become aggressive?**

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
Always	48	32
Often	67	45
Rarely	26	18
Never	7	5
<hr/>		
Total	148	100

**4b) How frequently have you experienced or been exposed to the following in the last year? Please enter the number of times.**

	<u>At Least Once</u>		<u>High Frequency (5 or more times)</u>	
	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
Kicked	74	50	31	21
Pinched	68	46	47	32
Hair pull	41	28	19	13
Punched	70	47	35	23
Abusive language	107	72	80	54
False Allegations	49	33	20	13
A threatening statement	79	53	50	34

**5) Which of the following support does your employer offer to staff who have experienced aggressive-difficult issues?**

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
EAP (Employee Assistance program)	23	15
Peer counselling	19	13
Additional training	74	50
Accommodating transfers	50	34
Policies in place to support staff	51	34
Paid time off to recover	38	26
Psychological counselling	15	10
Other	15	10

**6) Have you lost time at work due to a work related injury in the past year?**

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
Yes	33	22
No	114	78
<hr/>		
Total	147	100

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
Hit	4	3
Punch	4	3
Bite	1	1
Spit	2	1
Weapon	1	1
Kick	2	1
Strain	17	12
Back	18	12
Push/Pull	9	6

**If yes, how many days?** Average = 21.1 days (range from 1 to 120)

**7) Has your use of sick time increased in the last year?**

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	48	35
No	91	65
<hr/>		
Total	139	100

**If yes, by how much?** Impossible to accurately analyze.

**What was the cause?**

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>	
Disease	10	7	(Note: the responses are for the 48 respondents reporting an increase, but the percentages are for the sample as a whole)
Disability	9	6	
Work Stress	33	24	
Home stress	11	8	
Mental Illness	6	4	
Work Load	15	11	

**8) Has sick time use increased in your work place?**

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
Yes	73	50
No	20	14
Don't know	53	36
<hr/>		
Total	146	100

**9) Do you believe the current climate (such as lay offs, agency restructuring, mergers, current bargaining) has contributed to increased stress levels at work?**

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>	
	Yes	137	94
	No	9	6
	<hr/>		
	Total	146	100
Layoffs	28	19	(Note: the responses are for the 137 respondents reporting an increase, but the percentages are for the sample as a whole.)
Mergers	22	15	
Agency Restructuring	86	59	
Current Bargaining Status	61	42	
Incompetent Management	92	63	
Uncertain Future/Unknown	94	64	

**10) Does your employer require mandatory training, and do they cover the cost?**

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>	
	Yes	144	97
	No	5	3
	<hr/>		
	Total	149	100
Fire safety	55	37	(Note: the responses are for the 144 respondents reporting 'Yes', but the percentages are for the sample as a whole)
Back care	45	30	
Food handling	15	10	
CPR	126	85	
Nutrition	17	11	
First aid	131	88	
Non-violent crisis intervention	104	70	
Infectious disease control	22	15	
Pharmacology	41	28	
Other	24	16	

**11) Does your employer make field related training/education/in-services available to the staff?**

	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Per cent</u>
Yes	109	80
No	28	20
<hr/>		
Total	137	100



Authorized for distribution:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Leah Casselman".

Leah Casselman, President

Ontario Public Service Employees Union  
100 Lesmill Road, Toronto, Ontario  
M3B 3P8  
[www.opseu.org](http://www.opseu.org)   [opseu@opseu.org](mailto:opseu@opseu.org)

March 2000