

**Community Divisional Council  
Violence in the workplace**

Speaking notes for Smokey Thomas

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news conference

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Greetings, and thank you for coming.

I'm Smokey Thomas. With me today are Deb Gordon, chair of the Community Services Divisional Council, from Sarnia, and Terri Aversa, one of our union's health and safety officers, at OPSEU head office.

I'm going to speak to you about an issue that is of serious concern to almost all workers. It's of particular impact for workers who work in community settings.

This is about violence in the workplace. It concerns all workers. Today we are

considering its impact on people who provide social and community services.

Next door, OPSEU is holding a seminar on violence in the workplace. This is for workers in what we call our community services division.

This division includes 11,500 members who work in developmental services, children's aid societies, child and family services, child care, community agencies, corrections, and child treatment centres.

These members work in settings such as: day treatment programs, group homes, youth custody settings, early years centres and child care centres, women's shelters, client's homes, supervised access centres, community outreach programs, and schools, and more.

Workers in this sector are vulnerable to workplace hazards including physical and verbal abuse. They feel that they are not adequately protected under current law.

Threats and violence are traditionally, and wrongly, considered 'part of the job' in these workplaces. They are told 'You signed up for this – deal with it.'

OPSEU has identified this as a major issue, and our union has been actively looking for creative solutions.

First, we polled our membership in these workplaces. What we found was shocking.

In our survey, we found that violence in these work settings is epidemic.

- Almost half of our community division members have personally been a victim of violence at work over the past year.
- Of these, more than 90 per cent have been threatened, and almost three-quarters have been subjected to physical attacks.
- Almost half of our members have witnessed a violent act against a co-worker over the past year.

93 per cent of members have experienced violence from clients, 29 per cent from co-workers and 25 per cent from a supervisor.

Why is this happening?

- According to most workers, issues like understaffing, government underfunding and heavy workloads have an underlying effect on this trend to increased workplace violence, bullying and harassment.

It's also when you work:

- 55 per cent of overnight staff and 51 per cent of rotational shift workers experienced violence as compared to 33 per cent of workers who work the day shift.

We wanted to see what this meant in terms of the real work experiences of our members.

So we held workshops in the regions across Ontario and listened to members about their first-hand experiences with violence.

What we heard was the very harsh reality of working in these settings. I know it shocks me, and I've seen every form of workplace violence as a Registered Practical Nurse.

The reality is that workers in these sectors never know if they are going to be protected from threats and violence at work.

Some are not even safe when they go home, or when they are out in the community.

If this is about worker safety, it's also, equally, about quality of care.

If Ontario can't protect its own workers, it can't protect the people the workers care for.

Last week, our members met with senior advisors in the Ministry of Labour to divulge our findings and ask for the necessary changes.

Today, in London, is the last of the regional workshops.

Deb Gordon will elaborate on the work of this division, the workshops, and the challenges workers face. And then, Terri Aversa will give an overview of the legislative changes we are looking for.

We also have with us today numerous workers from the region who can testify to their own experiences and why they need a better law to protect them as workers, to ensure they get

home safely after a shift, and to ensure they can adequately protect people in their care.

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(introduce Deb Gordon....)