

OPSEU BUSINESS PRACTICE REVIEW OF
ONTARIO DISABILITY SUPPORT
PROGRAM OFFICES

JULY 18, 2000

BACKGROUND:

In the spring of 2000, the Ministry of Community and Social Services(MCSSS), advised OPSEU that it would be undertaking the ODSP Business Process Review. This review was to take place prior to the implementation of the new Service Delivery Model.

The purpose of the Ministry's review was to identify what was working well within the program and what was problematic. Part of the Ministry's review was to facilitate Focus Group discussions across the ODSP program. The Ministry sent out Senior Policy Analysts to one office from each Regions. In addition, the Ministry sent out surveys to ODSP Staff asking for feedback and also invited the MERC Sub-Committee on ODSP to participate in the Focus Group process, this occurred on June 9, 2000.

Since the implementation of the ODSP staffing model in June, 1999, OPSEU has identified numerous issues in terms of how the program was seriously under resourced and the need to fully review and evaluate the current model. OPSEU has also highlighted the fact that this program is a growth program with an estimated 3% increase in recipients per year. The Ministry disputes this however, to date they have failed to provide any statistics to substantiate their position.

In addition, the Ministry introduced a new benefit for recipients called Mandatory and Special Necessities. This benefit was previously administered by the Municipalities and covers medical travel and transportation costs, diabetic supplies and surgical supplies and dressings. This new recipient benefit has resulted in serious workload implications for ODSP staff especially Client Services Representatives(CSR's) and Income Support Specialists(ISS). There is also an expectation and standard that this benefit will be processed and paid to the client within two business days, adding further pressures to ODSP staff.

As well, the Ministry has set unrealistic targets for the Consolidation Verification Process(CVP). The current target for CVP is 6 outcomes per week per Income Support Specialist(ISS). This places great demand and stress upon ISS's. We have asked the Ministry to explain how and why it arrived at 6 outcomes per week and we have asked the Ministry to review these unfair expectations, unfortunately to date the target of 6 remains.

In an effort to ensure that ODSP Income Support issues are properly identified and addressed, OPSEU decided to undertake it's own review by surveying their members across the Ministry. This survey (Appendix A) consists of 17 questions. The survey was completed between June 1 and 30/00.

Twenty-nine Local Offices participated in the survey representing all Regional Offices. The following is a list of those offices who completed the survey.

Hamilton Newmarket ThunderBay
Barrie St. Catherines Ottawa
Hawkesbury Waterloo Stratford
St. Thomas Kenora Kingston
Sault Ste. Marie Orillia Sarnia
Cambridge South Porcupine Brace Bridge
Toronto(Wilson) Owen Sound London
Toronto(Birchmont) Sudbury Belleville
Mississauga Peterborough(5231) Port Hope Unit(5232)
Burlington Whitby

SURVEY RESULTS:

The first 2 questions dealt with the number of clients and staff allocated to each office. The number of clients ranged from large offices providing services to approximately 16,000 clients to smaller offices providing service to approximately 1,600 clients.

Staffing numbers appear to be inconsistent, for instance 2 offices with the approximate same number of clients vary greatly in staffing numbers. One office with 1,600 clients has 4 ISS's, 4 CSR's and 2 ISC's, the second office with approximately the same number of clients has 3 ISS's, 3 CSR's, 2 ISC's and 2 vacancies.

If the Regional Offices try to cash manage constraints by not filling vacancies it will have detrimental impacts on our members. Under resourcing leads to greater stress and job dissatisfaction. It is imperative that the employer post and fill vacancies just as soon as possible in an effort to minimize these types of impacts.

Question # 3 - Do you currently have staffing vacancies, if yes how many.

Twenty two offices or 68.9% of those surveyed reported that they have either temporary or permanent vacancies. Six offices representing 20.6% report that they have permanent vacancies. One office left this question unanswered, however 3 offices or 10.3% of those surveyed reported that they have never been at full complement since the program began.

By not filling vacancies the Ministry is placing undue stress on those employees who are working chronically short staffed. The volume and workload of the ODSP program is significant and the Regional Offices that are not filling staff vacancies are jeopardising the health and safety of their employees.

Question # 4 - Do you have unclassified staff working in your office?
If yes how many.

Eighteen offices or 62% of those surveyed report that they have unclassified staff working in a variety of positions within their offices. Ten offices or 34.4% report that they do not have unclassified staff and one office did not answer this question.

The use of unclassified in short term vacancies and backfilled positions is a widely used practice within the Ministry however, it would appear that the Ministry has vacancies that they are either not posting or failing to post in a reasonable time period. It is difficult for staff who come to work each day and realize that they will be looking at increased workloads and pressures as a result of the employer dragging it's heels in posting and filling vacancies.

At our Divisional Meeting in May OPSEU members reported that the clearance, posting and filling of vacancies can take several months to complete. We suspect that this gives regions some breathing space in terms of constraint issues, but unfortunately the ODSF staff must directly bear the brunt of decisions such as this. The work can't possibly be done in the time frames and standards that are outlined and clients become very vocal and dissatisfied with the service that they are receiving. It becomes a vicious cycle for staff who are trying to do a good job but can't do to the sheer volume and backlog of work facing them.

Question # 5 - Do you have temporary agency staff working in your office? If yes how many.

Sixteen offices or 55% of offices surveyed report that there are temporary agency staff working within their offices. Thirteen offices or 44.8% of offices report that they do not use temporary agency staff. There are currently 36.5 agency staff reported to be working in the 16 offices who identified that agency staff are used within their offices.

This creates problems in terms of continuity and consistency. In those offices there are issues of the need for continual staff training and orientation. In addition temporary agency staff are utilized for longer term fill ins. What happens here is that you have staff working side by side making different amounts of money but expected to do the same work. The over use of temporary agency staff is also another way for the employer to save money but once again those savings are at the cost of employee health and safety. It is OPSEU's position that the employer ought to be using unclassified staff in place of temporary agency staff.

Question # 6 -What works well in your office?

The following are comments of what appears to be working well in offices

surveyed. It should be noted that 7 offices or 24% of those offices surveyed reported that nothing was working well in their perspective offices.

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Comments about what is working well:

- our office has recently acquired 2 new vehicles, having reliable transportation to travel to satellite offices will be useful especially in the winter months
- specialized units Pending, CVP, MSN
- internal review process
- CSR's identifying contentious issues to ISS by printing off the narrative and giving it to the ISS
- ISS can more easily book time off without impacting on caseload management
- calls get responded to quicker and clients can see someone immediately
- caseloads for facility and shelter clients
- applications and self referrals - standards are being met
- Local management is flexible in adjusting CVP targets
- when staff can have input into the process then things go smoothly, however staff are not allowed this opportunity very often
- the people work well but the system stinks
- caseloads with ISS's & CSR's attached to them
- a float ISS who covers intake, does some complicated reviews etc. and fills in for CVP
- more staff using narratives
- the ISS's and CSR's work together well and help each other
- having telephone calls going directly to CSR (indicated by 2 offices)
- mail sorted by alpha (indicated by 5 offices)
- ISS not responsible for booking appointments or interview rooms

- ISS has more time to deal with complex issues and reviews instead of mundane clerical duties

- Compressed Work Week

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What works well comments continued:

- people try and make the unworkable work

- all ISS's pitching in helping, covering and training

- the fact that we have a small office and therefore only have a few workers dealing with clients

- having 1 CSR assigned to MSN

Question #7 - What doesn't work well in your office.

- no direction or support by management (indicated by 7 offices)

- too many people involved in the same case (indicated by 5 offices)

- team approach does not work (indicated by 5 offices)

- CSR at reception is expected to answer the phone, do mail and earnings etc.

- always working short staffed (indicated by 3 offices)

- MSN workload (indicated by 3 offices)

- inadequate staffing (indicated by 7 offices)

- more in-depth or lack of training (indicated by 6 offices)

- we need the opportunity to self manage

- need time away from phones to complete other duties (indicated by 2 offices)

- not a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities and delegated authority (indicated by 2)

- intake process - ISS cannot always accept forms from OW due to lack of information or changes in client circumstances (indicated by 4offices)

- cleaning up someone else's errors

- clients don't like dealing with a number of people to have their issues addressed (indicated by 2)

- Who does what needs to be better clarified

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What doesn't work well in your office - continued

- poor technology to support this program

- no accountability without caseloads (indicated by 5 offices)

- DAU process still is not working

- NORA - assigns new grants to be reviewed, in some cases the grants are less than 6 months old

- NCBS - frequent errors regarding the tapes

- MTO - no training to read the print outs

- ERO data base is a mess

- clients shop for different opinions and answers (indicated by 3 offices)

- no time to complete tasks

- no ownership, loss of pride in job performance (indicated by 2 offices)

- poor staff morale

- no flexibility

- no Parental Support Workers

- CPO/ERO, dual position is a conflict

- rules and policies keep changing (indicated by 2 offices)

- no longer have familiarity with clients (indicated by 2 offices)

- emotionally and mentally fragile clients do not deal well and cannot communicate effectively if they must retell their story every time they call in

- too many workers touching the file to complete a transaction

- you could have everyone in the office working on the same file at any given time

- caseloads were more beneficial for client service delivery

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What doesn't work well in your office - continued-

- larger area to cover, clients must travel significant distances for service. CVP's are not being done
- not enough ministry vehicles for the travel that we are expected to do
- no service to clients in areas where satellite offices closed (indicated by 3)
- CVP targets are unachievable and are not being met (indicated by 3)
- physical structure of the office does not support team work or optimal communication
- ODSP reg and directives are not updated on CWT (indicated by 2)
- workload implications when involved on committees
- rotation of duties and functions
- not knowing the client's actual disability, impacts on our ability to properly accommodate

Question # 8 - Does your office have designated units?

Sixteen offices or 55% of those offices surveyed indicated that they have designated work units, 13 offices or 44.8% do not have any form of work units.

The following are examples of the designated units identified;

- CVP, Pending, ERO, MSN - on a rotational basis
- CVP unit
- Pending, CVP, Intake
- Pending
- CVP& Pending Unit
- CVP Intake
- Eligibility and Case management
- Applications, CVP, MSN, Case management, SBT

Question # 9 - Does your office have any form of caseloads?

Thirteen offices or 44.8% of those offices surveyed indicated that they have some form of caseload while 16 offices or 55% state they do not have any caseloads.

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Caseloads where indicated by;

- Area
- Alpha Split
- Facilities

- By County
- First Nations
- CVP, MSN, Nursing Homes & Chronic Care

Question # 10 - Does the team concept work?

Twenty - five offices or 86% of all offices surveyed indicated that the team concept does not work, 4 offices or 13.7% felt that the team concept did work. The following are comments that offices shared on the team concept.

- not enough staff, we are not machines
- utter chaos, no tracking, clients and agencies hate it, duplication of reporting
- the team concept is just that, a concept
- no leadership from the ISM (indicated by 4)
- no clear responsibility for tasks (indicated by 4)
- it could work in a different structure i.e. 1- ISS to 1 - CSR, this no caseload no matter what is difficult to manage
- no accountability and confusing to clients
- deteriorating since the collapse of caseloads
- there is too much duplication
- does not work as well as it could
- only because the remaining members of the team do more than their share and put more effort into the team to make up for the inadequacies of the structure
- no one knows what the other is doing
- tried it but too many mistakes were occurring
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Does the team concept work well within your office - continued

- not good service delivery to clients. Too many staff handling the same case.
- everyone is performing specialized functions and therefore loses sight of the bigger picture, rotations are too long i.e. 6 - 8 months and requires retraining on other duties not performed during this period

Question # 11 - Which statement reflects your office?

- mostly urban - 6 offices
- mostly rural - 3 offices
- urban & rural mix - 15 offices
- northern urban - 0 offices
- northern rural - 0 offices
- northern urban & rural mix 6 offices
- northern remote 3 offices

Please note that 2 offices felt that they were both northern urban & rural as well as remote.

Fifteen offices or 51.7 % of those surveyed cover both urban and rural areas. Consequently the closure of satellite and sub-offices has a dramatic impact on how we deliver services in those areas. In the North this becomes more of an issue due to the vast distances that staff must cover and clients must travel for service. This relates directly to the next question and the comments as they relate to office closures.

Question # 12 - Have you witnessed office closures within your region. If yes what are the impacts.

Nineteen or 65.5% of those surveyed indicated that they had office closures within their regions.

The impacts are clearly demonstrated by the following comments;

- clients are complaining regularly to the MPP's office
- clients can only access service in their community by appointment. ISS's must travel extensively to provide the services.
- lack of services, staff must commute further to work and travel long distances
- only one bus daily for clients to access service now that office has closed and relocated
- staff are discouraged from doing home visits, which makes it very difficult for clients in terms of transportation
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- relocation for some staff, further distances to commute
- clients must rely on family and friends to transport them as home visits are discouraged
- poor service for clients, more travelling for staff and poor staff morale (indicated x 2)
- lack of public transportation
- limited equipment in satellite offices i.e. no computer

- hoteling in other agencies limits clients ability to access service
- due to office closures there are increased activities around phone calls and mail. Mail is not actioned in a timely manner due to volume which results in more phone calls, overpayments and confusion and frustration by clients

Question # 13 - What are the top workload pressures within your office?

In analysing the comments and responses to this question there are definitely some reoccurring themes and concerns expressed. In addition, some of the concerns mirror comments made earlier in section of the survey questioning what's not working well within your office.

- lack of leadership and support from management (indicated by 5)
 - lack of technology for example computers and adequate phone system (indicated by 2)
 - MSN volume and turnaround (indicated by 12)
 - CVP targets (indicated by 12)
 - ERO issues (indicated by 2)
 - volume of work (indicated by 11)
 - poor training, unclear processes (indicated by 3)
 - not enough staff (indicated by 8)
 - no job satisfaction and no ownership
 - constant monitoring but not necessarily the quality of work
 - internal review causes animosity between ISS's
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What are the top workload pressures within your office - continued

- time lines for grants are impacted as files are coming late from OW (indicated by 6)
- lack of trained staff (indicated by 2)
- meeting artificial and unrealistic deadlines (indicated by 6)
- pressures to have good stats instead of quality customer service
- lack of corporate direction i.e. date of grant, how many changes on this policy
- SBT's (indicated by 3)

- not knowing who does what
- customer service demands i.e. phones and response time (indicated by 6)
- DAU/ OW communications
- dependent adult tracking i.e. earnings, assets, performance agreements, changes etc.
- Earnings (indicated by 2)

Question # 14 - Do you currently have staff on sick leave due to stress? If yes how many and what are their classifications?

Twenty-two or 75.8% of those surveyed indicated that they did not have anyone currently off of work due to stress leave, however, 7 offices or 24% reported that they had a number of staff of various classifications who are currently off on sick leave due to stress.

Question # 15 - Have you noticed an increase in sick leave in your office since the ODSP staffing model was introduced?

Nineteen or 65.5% of those surveyed have noticed a definite increase in sick leave within their offices. Five or 17% notice that sick leave has somewhat increased while 4 or 13.7 % have not noticed any increase in sick leave.

We believe that the increase in sick time and stress leave as reported in questions 14 and 15 is symptomatic of a high stress, fast paced and very demanding job and work environment, that is seriously under staffed. As supported by the results of this survey and issues identified as workload issues, the conclusions are rather obvious.

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ODSP offices are severely under staffed and in some cases it appears that staff are forced to take sick leave in order to cope. There is also a reoccurring theme of hopelessness and helplessness that the Ministry has a responsibility in addressing.

Accommodation of staff needs must happen prior to someone being forced to use sick leave due to the stress they are under. Employee Assistance Programs are good but often the intervention and assistance happens only after the staff member is on sick leave.

A good manager should be able to identify and react to the stressors that their staff are experiencing, instead this survey indicates that there is little direction or support from front line managers. This must change!

Question # 16 - Does your office have a process for dealing with support

issues?

Eleven or 37.9% of those surveyed indicated that they had some process in place from bringing forward (bf) issues for six months to sending the file to OW for actioning. It was also noted that in at least 5 offices, support issues are referred to the ISM. This is a major concern as this was formerly bargaining unit work that was performed by PSW's that is now being assigned in some offices to the ISM. In addition, some offices report referring cases for issuing arrears on past entitlement to the OW Support Arrangement Unit.

Seventeen or 58.6% had no process for dealing with support with the exception of bringing the issue forward for review in 6 months time. Some offices reported that they have been bring forward issues for over a year with absolutely no actioning taking place.

There certainly appears to be a lot of support arrears that are sitting in limbo as the Ministry does not have a mechanism for collection beyond assignments.

Question # 17- Have staff in your office received adequate training in order to do their jobs?

Two offices or 6% of those surveyed indicated that they have received adequate training. Eight offices or 27% indicated that they have not received adequate training while the majority of offices 19 or 65.9% indicate that they are still in the process of receiving training.

Some offices indicate their displeasure with the fact that this program has been running for two years yet they are just in the process of receiving formalized training. Other offices report that due to the turn over of staff and the number of unclassified staff that there will be an ongoing need for training for quite some time.

In addition one office reports the reliance on the trainer to explain directives and processes as the ISM has never had the training. This is unacceptable.

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CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS:

In reviewing the survey results there were numerous reoccurring themes. Workload and under resourcing appear to be two of the most prevalent issues that come up time and time again in the survey. Other issues identified are;

the volume and turnaround time for processing Mandatory and Special Necessities

CVP targets

lack of support and leadership from management

time lines for grants are impacted as files are coming late and not complete from OW

meeting artificial and unrealistic deadlines

customer service demands i.e phones and response times

volume of work

the team concept does not work

sick leave has increased and sick leave due to stress is very evident

a review of the PSW function is warranted

the closure of satellite offices has had impacts on clients attempting to get the service that they require and staff trying to deliver the service that is needed

When this program was implemented there was no way of evaluating the adequacy of the staffing model. Since then the Ministry has undertaken a review of the ODSP program we are confident that the results of its survey and review will support the findings of the OPSEU survey.

OPSEU has pushed from the onset of the ODSP program, that the staffing was woefully inadequate and after listening to our members concerns at our Divisional Meeting in May and reviewing these survey results, it further reinforces that our members cannot continue to work under such poor working conditions.

We urge the Ministry to address these important issues and commence an action plan to ensure that there is appropriate levels of staff to deal with the volume of work that ODSP staff face.

As an employer the Ministry must provide for the health and safety of its employees, OPSEU is prepared to do whatever it can to ensure that this happens.