

Mr. Jason MacLean
President, NSGEU
255 John Savage Avenue
Dartmouth, NS B3B 0J3

Dear Mr. MacLean:

Re: Social Workers – Child Protection

Thank you for your letter of May 9, 2017, to The Honourable Stephen McNeil regarding social workers who provide front line support to children and youth in the care of the Minister. As Deputy Minister of Community Services, the Premier has requested that I respond to you on his behalf.

The Department of Community Services (DCS) shares the commitment to ensuring that the social workers who provide front line support to children and youth in the care of the Minister have the appropriate tools and conditions within which to carry out their important duties.

The concerns and suggestions provided by you and your members have been reviewed by the Department. As has always been the case, the Department is open to meeting and discussing the impact of the important transformation work that is underway within DCS which is focused on ensuring that children and their families receive the best service possible. As the new *Children's and Family Services Act* (CFSA) and the associated changes in practice were rolled out across the province, the Department has been careful to provide feedback mechanisms and workload monitoring processes to ensure that any unintended impact to service is quickly identified.

To that end, I would like to specifically address the items contained in your letter.

Vacancies: The Department is aware of the challenge that having vacancies creates across all programs, and particularly in the Child Protection program. Vacancies occur for a multitude of reasons, including STI, unpaid leaves, staff requested assignments, and movement associated with the Expression of Interest (EOI) process. We consistently move quickly to address vacancies when the position is vacated and unencumbered. It is more challenging when a staff person is out because of STI as technically the position is not vacant. The Department remains committed to ensuring that standards are met, and that both caseload and workload is manageable.

A review of existing vacancies as of May 5, 2017, shows that on average, approximately 10% of Social Work positions are vacant across the province. For example, in the Central region there are 136 Social Workers. A review of vacancies in that region as of May 5, 2017, showed that a total of 14 positions (10.3%) were in active competition and being filled; a further 9 (6.6%) positions had incumbents off on Short Term Illness (STI), with 1 (.7%) position vacant due to a Workers Compensation situation. The same is true for the Western region where of the 88 Social Work positions, 6 (6.8%) were in active competition; 12 (2.2%) were vacant due to STI, and none vacant due to WCB.

We were unable to identify any office in the province which was only 50% staffed, and in fact, would appreciate knowing which specific office(s) this was describing. It is true that on any given day, an office that has a vacancy in competition may also experience staff on approved vacation, an earned day off, leave without pay, or have staff out of the office for training.

Managers are aware of the requirement to balance time off requests from staff with the need to meet operational requirements which, in the case of the CYFS program, means meeting caseload standards. Any Manager or Supervisor who identifies that caseload standards are not being met is required to report this immediately to the Director and Executive Director, and a plan to address same is put in place and carried out. I can confirm that at least two Managers in recent months have made such a report, and in both cases the Department took immediate action, including borrowing a vacant position from another program area and region to create an additional social work position in one of the cases.

Float, Intake and Screening Teams: Staff have forwarded these suggestions through their managers, and the Department is open to looking at the options. As we move forth with the next phase of Transformation of CYFS, a strong emphasis on the design and adjustment of the service delivery model, including how intake, screening and other activities are carried out is a priority. We are pleased that Social Workers and other staff are identifying creative, client centered solutions.

In preparation for further service delivery model work, we have been carrying out an initial inventory and current state analysis. This begins to get at the suggested workload analysis mentioned, although we recognize that a deeper and more comprehensive examination of workload and caseload is required. The Department leadership has committed publicly and frequently to this, and have ensured staff that, to the extent possible, they will be included in these discussions.

Occupational Health and Safety: The Department recognizes the importance of OHS training and education in supporting staff to stay safe in the workplace. A new DCS Occupational Health and Safety Management System document was developed and rolled out to all staff a few months ago. The document was prepared with support and guidance from the Public Service Commission's OHS team, reviewed by all DCS Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committees, and includes their input.

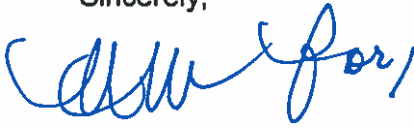
Over the next few months the new Director of Emergency Social Services and Safety for the Department will be working with the local OHS committees to establish and implement a workplace violence prevention plan for DCS. Recently the Department launched a working group to understand the risk of exposure to Fentanyl and to determine action required to ensure staff safety. Recommendations from the working group will be considered for implementation, which could include training, education and introduction of risk assessment tools.

Child Death Review: The department has made a number of recommended changes to policy resulting from the Nova Scotia Ombudsman's child death review in 2014 and continues to work with partners across jurisdictions to review and consider lessons learned from these jurisdictions who have had to deal with the tragedy of a child death. Our Department continues to work with local partners such as the Department of Health and Wellness and Justice, for example, in

creating information sharing agreements to allow a smoother sharing of relevant information while at the same time being cognizant of the child and family's right to privacy.

Throughout the CYFS Transformation process, the Department has made many efforts to communicate directly with Social Workers regarding the changes, and the impact on their daily work. We always welcome this type of feedback directly from staff, and through the NSGEU. Thank you for taking the time to make your members' concerns known to us, and we look forward to continuing to implement the solutions identified by staff as we continue with our transformation process.

Sincerely,



Lynn Hartwell
Deputy Minister

c Hon. Stephen McNeil (Ref # P-060917009)
Laura Lee Langley, PSC
Rollie King, PSC