

Labour Management Committee

Final Recommendations

This Labour Management Committee was formed in 2019 to liaise and develop recommendations to address the working conditions identified in the grievance that was filed by the NSGEU on behalf of child protection Social Workers in 2018. Four Provincial Labour Management Committees were formed and comprised of NSGEU Labour Representatives, Child Protection Social Workers, Supervisors and Management Representatives from the Department of Community Services, and HR Business Partners from the Public Service Commission. These committees identified the specific needs in various program areas and considered the unique and differing needs of the varying regions of this province. The following outlines the main areas of concern and subsequent recommendations.

1. PTSD – Presumptive Benefits

Recommendation:

The four Provincial Labour Management Committees comprised of Labour representatives of Social Workers from the NSGEU and Management Representatives from the Department of Community Services, request that: The Deputy Minister support and advocate to expand the definition of “front-line or emergency-response worker” in the provisions respecting presumptive benefits for workers diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder in the Workers’ Compensation Act, Nova Scotia to include all social workers employed in direct child welfare services.

2. WORKLOAD

Recommendations:

- a. Conduct a comprehensive review of all child welfare caseloads be undertaken across the province. This review will assess whether caseloads are at, below or above acceptable caseload norms and will distinguish between active cases and those that have been dormant on a caseload for a specified timeframe. In addition, there needs to be an analysis of the percentage of time over the past 2-year period that an FTE SW 1-2 position has been unfilled/ vacant due to extended leave of absences greater than 2 weeks (i.e. 1 month STI; 3 month LTD; 4 month unfilled back-fill of parental leave, etc.). Overall, this review will determine what the necessary and appropriate FTE compliment for each office should be. This analysis will be shared with all Labour Management Committee Members.
- b. Establish new maximum caseload norms for each child welfare program area (i.e., Intake and Investigation; Long-Term Protection; Temporary Care and Custody; Permanent Care and Custody; Foster Care; Adoption and Regional Resources). In addition, it is recommended that there be a review of which cases are to be counted as part of the caseload. It is strongly recommended that *Youth Over Sixteen*, *AFC Care Providers* (whether or not the case is in court) and all children in *Non-Party Supervision Orders (S3’s)* be counted as part of a caseload, which is currently not occurring. It is recommended that these new caseload norms be established in consultation with front-line child protection social workers, supervisors, service delivery managers and CYFS program representatives.

- c. Acknowledging there is a high turnover rate of child protection social workers due to staff changing positions within and outside of the Department, it is recognized that this results in a chronic increase in both workload and caseload for the remaining social workers. The chronicity of these changes contributes to low morale, increased stress, extreme fatigue, feelings of inadequacy, decreased work life balance, and illness. Coupled with frequent/prolonged vacancies for reasons outlined throughout this report, it is strongly recommended that labour and management undertake discussions for the purpose of developing a “*Relief Pool*” of Social Workers. This “*Relief Pool*” will be utilized to address staffing pressures when it is assessed that workload and/or caseloads are at unacceptably high levels.
- d. Build on the *Reclaiming Social Work* project, and conduct a review of the Child Welfare Policy Manual be undertaken to identify policy requirements
 - that may be more suitably assigned to other child welfare programs that either have a greater capacity to meet the policy requirement and/or are more relevant and aligned to the policy requirement;
 - that can be assigned to other non-social worker staff (i.e., Cultural Connection Tools/ Eco-grams/ Genograms, administrative tasks for Places of Safety, etc.);
 - that can be lessened, amended, or eliminated to allow Social Workers adequate time and capacity to meet directly with clients and to decrease the time Social Workers spend completing required paper and computer documentation (i.e., Children in Care Social Workers being required to complete a Pic Tool each and every time the same child requires respite).
- e. Establish a standing committee to ensure that written policy results in best practice. This committee will include a representation of front-line social workers for the purpose of recommending Child Welfare Policy additions, amendments and/or revisions.
- f. Prioritize a review of all forms that are required for child protection files. Said forms are currently available electronically as linked through the policy manual; however, many are not fillable, cannot be saved, and of those that can be saved, they cannot be edited after saving. In addition, they have limited space for information sharing, limited drop-down options and some are redundant. Addressing these issues allows for efficiency and effective time management and reduces stress on front line staff.

3. PART (After Hours Programs)

Recommendations:

- a. Include non-representative (non-designated; non-agent) social workers on the PART on-call rosters. Given challenges with travel times and responding to emergency calls in rural areas, it is strongly recommended that an on-call relief staff roster be developed for areas outside of HRM.
- b. Change the process so that Child & Youth Caring Facilities rely on their own resources rather than dispatching after hours Social Workers when children in care need transportation to/from the hospital; and/or require supervision while the child is being treated or assessed. This is related to recommendation b in the safety category.

- c. Engage in discussions with NSGEU to increase the standby rates outlined in Article 20.01 of the Collective Agreement, the current Standby Compensation Rates are \$16.21 (Regular Rate) and \$32.40 (Holiday Rate) for each 8-hour period.
- d. Develop policy and procedures to address the safety issue related to employees working full days and then being required to transport clients after hours. It is recommended that consideration be made to having a second Social Worker or employee available as back-up for general assistance/driving. In addition, it is recommended that policy and procedures be developed to address the safety issues related to some rural offices requiring social workers to report to work for a regular workday after being on-call the previous evening.

4. SAFETY

Recommendations:

- a. Consider expanding the alert function on ICM and when CCM is being developed to assist in identifying safety risks such as varying safety alerts, animals, weapons, history of violence or mental health crisis prior to attendance at a home. The alerts would be discussed in consultation with a supervisor and would support the investigative plan. In addition, it is recommended that the Memos forms sent to PART be adapted to include a review of the alert section and information be included when sending said Memos. Currently, there are no drop-down buttons available in ICM to include these additional safety issues noted above.
- b. Explore whether or not the Access and Transportation Program be utilized as a solution to transport children/youth after-hours.
- c. Provide education to staff regarding Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), which would include the following:
 - that OHS training be included as part of the Foundational CORE training;
 - that OHS refreshers be mandatory for all staff; be assigned periodically; and participation tracked (i.e., every year or every 2 years, when changes are made to policy/ legislation).
- f. Obtain satellite phones/packages to be available for areas where cell reception or coverage is poor or unavailable.
- g. Develop a policy that protects workers from being identified or targeted through social media.
- h. It is recommended that PPEs such as reflective vests, gloves, or naloxone kits be readily available for staff who face potentially dangerous and risky situations. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the implementation of PPEs such as face masks, hand sanitizer, and gloves and these supplies continue to be required; however, a similar policy be implemented to support the use of PPEs in day to day work when there is potential or known risk. This could include items such as naloxone kits, hazmat suit/ materials, shoe covers and so forth. It is recommended that these items be

made available for staff to access as needed, especially after hours when most admin who often manage said materials are not present.

- i. Develop agreements with local police and RCMP to adequately support social workers in the field during business hours, as well as after-hours. It is recommended that all social workers and law enforcement be trained and aware of said policies as they are developed.

5. RETENTION (Social Worker 1-2)

Recommendations:

The following recommendations are made in recognition of the difficulty faced in retaining social workers in the child protection programs where workload and caseloads are uniquely challenging and complex. These workers often move on to more desirable Social Worker positions (Adult Protection, and DSP) or leave provincial service altogether. The movement of Social Workers is extremely disruptive to working with and establishing trusting relationships with the families and children we service; they impact the ability to address risk; and they place added responsibility on the remaining staff who are already faced with significant caseload and workload constraints.

- a. Consider a financial incentive in targeted areas to retain Social Workers in the following child protection programs of DCS: intake, long term, temporary care and custody, permanent care and custody, and PART (provincial afterhours response program). It is forthwith recommended that Social Worker 1-2 and Social Worker 3 positions be eligible for this incentive, which could be in the form of a retention bonus provided only after a period of uninterrupted service (2 years).
- b. Enter into negotiations with NSGEU to establish a Memorandum of Agreement for Social Worker 1-2 positions be added to the Civil Service Master Agreement, limiting Permanent employees' ability to EOI (Expression of Interest) to another Social Work 1-2 position to once per fiscal year.
- c. Establish an onboarding program for new Social Worker 1-2 hires that includes a period of a minimum of 6 weeks, during which time they will not be permitted to assume a caseload. It is recommended that supervisory approval be required for onboarding to end and only after the 6-week period is complete. During this 6-week (or more) period, the new employee will be required to job shadow with current employees; participate in training opportunities; and complete an array of related tasks under the supervision of another Social Worker/ team member. It is recommended that the Manager "double incumbent" the position to support this onboarding period unless the team has the capacity to do so.
- d. Create virtual training sessions (via webinars) for some components of the Foundational CORE and other role specific training to new hires in the Social Worker 1-2 positions. This recommendation is in recognition of the reality that staff often wait a year or more for formal training and much longer to be granted Representative status. There are components of the CORE training that are review for many staff given their academic credentials and there are other components that are required for new hires to be able to fill their specific role effectively and efficiently. Access to timely training would aid with the retention of child protection Social Workers.

- e. Eliminate the requirement to of the completion of a final assignment after completing all required Foundational CORE training for child protection social workers. It is recognized that this practice is redundant, time consuming and of little value or impact on fulfilling the day-to-day role of Social Workers. Often social workers have already been completing these tasks day to day for up to a year or more before training is available. In addition, these assignments are held for assessment for a considerably long period of time hence further delaying the Representative designation. The time this practice consumes causes delays to staff receiving the Representative designation and continues to place additional responsibility and strain on senior staff. With a period of onboarding (as recommended above), the social worker would have immediate guidance and a clearer understanding of the role much sooner. It is recommended that Representative status be granted once all required training is complete, and recommendation is made by the Supervisor.
- f. Develop a mentorship program to support the new learning needed for child protection social workers. Social work retirees could be considered for casual relief positions to fill the role of mentors, so this task does not fall to already overburdened senior staff.