



Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Social Workers

Quality of Work Life Survey

Executive Summary

November 2007

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A growing body of literature suggests that social workers are experiencing stress related to a variety of factors including the quality of their professional practice environments and balancing the demands of their professional and personal lives. The quality of professional practice environments is known to affect factors such as job satisfaction, recruitment and retention, and ultimately client outcomes. The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW) has a mandate to promote excellence in social work and believes that understanding and improving the quality of work life for social workers supports excellence in practice.

The Quality of Work Life Project

The Quality of Work Life Project was initiated by the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW) with the intent that the survey would be replicated in other jurisdictions “*in order to create a national databank and to enable regional and national comparisons*”.

The OASW survey was adapted for use in Newfoundland and Labrador. Information from this survey will be used to inform existing efforts and to develop new strategies to improve the professional practice environments for social workers locally and nationally.

Goals of the Project

1. To obtain quantitative and qualitative data about factors affecting the quality of work life of social workers,
2. To utilize the information to support advocacy to improve the quality of work life for social workers, and
3. To contribute to the creation of a national databank to enable regional and national comparisons.

Survey Design

The survey was conducted using an online survey hosting service. All practicing social workers in NL received information about the survey through the electronic newsletter *NLASW Update*. An email with a survey invitation was sent to all NLASW members with valid email addresses. In addition, information about the survey and a link were placed on the NLASW website. The survey was available from September 2006 to January 2007.

At the time of data collection there were 1133 members of NLASW. Responses were obtained from 368 individuals for an initial response rate of 32.5 percent. When incomplete responses are removed (n=26), the response rate is 30.2 percent.

Major Findings

- ***Survey respondents are similar to the general social work population***

Respondents of this survey are representative of the Newfoundland and Labrador population of social workers with respect to age, gender, region, and percentage employed in the public sector. The percentage of respondents in the field of child welfare was high and this should be considered when interpreting the results.

- ***Social workers are busier than ever***

The majority of respondents in all fields of practice report an increase in their workload compared to the previous year. Those employed in the general field identified as child/family services were the most likely to report an increase in workload. The field of practice categories in this study are not entirely reflective of the organization of social and health services in Newfoundland and Labrador. They are consistent with the national categorization system and will be utilized to make national comparisons.

Sixty-three percent think that there are not enough social workers employed in their area to complete work at an acceptable standard. More than half report that their employer has had trouble filling vacancies in the past year.

Sixty-four percent normally work overtime in a given week; three-in-ten are working more overtime than last year. Social workers are taking extra measures to keep up with their work. Three quarters report that they have skipped meals or breaks in order to stay on top of their work and 92 percent go to work when they are sick.

- ***Working conditions are taking a toll***

Nine-out-of-ten social workers feel rushed at work. The volume of work (74.6%), increased documentation (62.8%), complexity of workload (66%) and fast pace of work (52.1%) are reasons for usually/often feeling rushed.

Almost two-thirds (62.6%) agree that their working conditions have negatively impacted their family and/or social life, forty percent get sick more frequently, and a third (33.3%) experience feelings of depression as a result of their working conditions. The negative influence of working conditions appears to impact respondents' personal lives (e.g., negatively impacting family/social lives, getting sick more frequently) more than their work-related responsibilities (e.g., more irritable with clients, making too many mistakes).

- ***Balancing personal and work life is difficult for members of the profession***

More than half of social workers report having care-giving responsibilities (54.4%), primarily for children (84.9%), and most are experiencing difficulties balancing their work and care-giving responsibilities. The average score on a scale from 1 (Very Difficult) to 10 (Not At All Difficult) is 4.9.

Factors rated as very important for alleviating the stress associated with efforts to balance work and care-giving responsibilities include a supportive supervisor/manager, ability to take paid leave, flexible hours of work, and ability to receive personal calls at work.

- ***Health system restructuring has negatively impacted quality of work life***

Comments from respondents indicate that they are experiencing stress and frustration as a result of the changing work environment associated with restructuring. They report loss of supervision or difficulty accessing supervisors, loss of positions, increased workload and challenges associated with interdisciplinary teams.

- ***Supervision is a significant issue***

Supervision was raised as a significant issue either because it is lacking within the organizational structure or because the supervisor is not available when needed. A respondent identified that “*the SINGLE MOST important factor (there are definitely others) mitigating the quality of my work life is the presence of...adequate supervision by a QUALIFIED, knowledgeable, motivated individual.*”

- ***Technology has been a blessing and a curse***

Half of respondents report that technology has had both positive and negative effects on their work. Positive effects include improved ability to communicate and making responding more immediate. Negative effects are increased volume of work and increased feeling of being rushed. Two-thirds report the feeling of being rushed as a result of technology has increased compared to three years ago.

- ***Four-in-ten social workers reported having experienced harassment in the workplace and threats to personal safety as a result of their work***

Forty-seven percent of respondents claim they have been the recipient of unwanted attention, comments, or behavior in their workplace. Greater than 60 percent of those who report workplace harassment experienced general intimidation.

Forty percent report that they have experienced threats to their person, family or property as a result of their current work. Almost all threats were from a client or the family/friend of a client.

- ***Training opportunities are available to most social workers but opportunities for advancement are limited***

Opportunities for training or upgrading skills in existing jobs are available to eight-out-of-ten respondents. Only 14 percent do not have such opportunities in the workplace. One or two day workshops, conferences or seminars are the most common types of training available.

Nearly three-quarters (73%) report that their opportunities for advancement within their current organization are limited or none.

- ***All things considered, career satisfaction is relatively high for most social workers***

In spite of the challenges experienced, social workers report that they are generally satisfied with their careers. On a scale from 1 to 10, the average score is 6.4. With the exception of the field of identified as child/family services, all fields rated their career satisfaction as 7 or higher.

Only one-third would not recommend social work to a child or friend; the remainder would at least consider recommending it.

Future Directions

This study contributes valuable information for social work in this province. It clearly supports other reports that have raised concerns about the quality of the work environments in which social workers are employed. Significant attention to improving the quality of work life is a necessary step to ensuring that we are able to retain a safe and healthy workforce and that we continue to attract new people to the profession. Findings from this survey will be used to inform strategies for improved practice environments for social workers.