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Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union

NEWS RELEASE

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Government unwilling to listen to concerns of Social Services staff

www.sgeu.org

1011 Devonshire Drive North
Regina, SK S4X 2X4
(p) 522.8571
1.800.667.5221
(f) 352.1969

1114-22nd Street West
Saskatoon, SK S7M 0S5
(p) 652.1811
1.800.667.9791
(f) 664.7134

33-11th Street West
Prince Albert, SK S6V 3A8
(p) 764.5201
1.800.667.9355
(f) 763.4763

While the Children's Advocate calls for a greater investment in our province's vulnerable children, and highlights the need for sufficient resources and supports for Social Services staff, government is unwilling to listen to the concerns of frontline workers who support at-risk families, according to SGEU.

In his annual report, Children's Advocate Corey O'Soup notes that Social Services staff deal with complex and challenging cases, and that too often, government budget cuts undermine programs designed to improve the lives of at-risk children and youth.

"Frontline staff in Social Services have been telling us for years that workload pressures and insufficient supports make it impossible for them to do an adequate job of keeping children safe, yet the minister doesn't seem interested in hearing what people on the ground have to say," says Lori Bossaer, chair of the Human Services Component of SGEU's Public Service Sector.

A request to meet with Social Services Minister Tina Beaudry-Mellor to present survey findings about workplace issues in the ministry was postponed and ultimately cancelled by the minister, according to Bossaer.

In order to gain insight into the challenges facing Social Services staff, SGEU commissioned a survey of members working in various areas of the ministry.

"Our goal was to present objective information about working conditions, workplace stress and workload issues to the Minister," says Bossaer. "We had hoped that this data would convince decision-makers that more staff and resources are needed to keep kids safe. But the minister is not even willing to meet with us to find out what her staff have to say about what can be life-and-death issues."

The survey found that:

- Almost 90 per cent of Social Service workers reported that their workplaces are not adequately staffed on a consistent basis.

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Page 2 of 2

- 64 per cent of workers reported that they simply have too much work to do everything well.
- Three-quarters of workers reported that their workloads have increased over the past five years.
- Almost six out of ten workers attribute their workload increases to the fact that management has not filled vacancies in their workplace.

The survey's findings were backed up by a ministry memo from October 2016, which reported that there were over 30 vacant positions in Social Services' northern service area. Despite this, the ministry has been slow to fill those much-needed positions, and does not provide information about vacancies to SGEU.

When Beaudry-Mellor cancelled a scheduled meeting with SGEU, she indicated the issues should be dealt with at the bargaining table. However, government negotiators say the question of adequate staffing is not an issue to be dealt with at the bargaining table.

"It's unfathomable that the Minister refuses to even hear the concerns of frontline workers who are tasked with keeping children safe, and who face enormous pressures and serious barriers to achieving that goal," Bossaer says.

- 30 -

For more information contact:

Susan Dusel
Communications Officer
306.775.7249
306.520.4930

Lori Bossaer
Chair of the Human Services Component of SGEU's Public Service Sector
306.775.7236
306.227.1389