

# **SGEU Brief**

## **Workload, Staffing, Quality of Services, and Management Issues in the Ministry of Social Services**

**April 2022**

**BRIEF**

**SGEU**

**SGEU BRIEF**  
**Ministry of Social Services**  
**April 2022**

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>CONSULTING SOCIAL SERVICES WORKERS .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ISSUES AND CONCERNS .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1) Job Satisfaction and Effectiveness .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Quality of Service – Low and Declining.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Impact of the Saskatchewan Income Support (SIS) program .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Quality of Service to Children &amp; Families .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Child safety concerns.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Issues with Management .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2) Staffing Levels and Workload.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Understaffing.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Increasing Workloads .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Skipping Designated Breaks and Working Extra Hours .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Drive time not reflected in assigned workload .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3) Worker Well-being .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Workplace Harassment &amp; Threats .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Harassment in General .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Harassment by Managers and Co-workers .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Harassment by Clients .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Threats to Personal Safety or Property.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Social Media Impacts.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Public Scrutiny and Retaliation.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Pain and injury due to heavy workloads and stress.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Safety and health supports .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Exhaustion and burnout.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Job Security .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1) Increase staffing levels and ensure workloads are manageable .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2) Improve communication between managers and employees.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>3) Enhance resources available to support clients .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>4) Ensure safe and healthy workplaces .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>ARE THINGS GETTING BETTER OR WORSE? .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>19</b>

## **INTRODUCTION**

This brief will outline a number of serious concerns raised by SGEU members who are employed in the Ministry of Social Services.

These employees are dedicated professionals who take pride and find satisfaction in supporting Saskatchewan's at-risk, vulnerable and underprivileged residents. However, chronic and severe understaffing, unmanageable workloads, issues dealing with management, a lack of job security for term workers and other issues are having serious negative impacts on Social Services employees and the work they do.

Workers are seeing the quality of service they are able to provide to clients greatly reduced, and the personal health and well-being of workers is being compromised. Ultimately, the Ministry is losing dedicated, qualified and experienced staff because many are being driven to seek other employment opportunities.

It is critical for this situation to be addressed and resolved, especially after similar concerns have been brought to the attention of government over many years. This brief provides an overview of concerns as well as a number of concrete actions that the Ministry can immediately take to improve working conditions. Taking these steps is important but it is even more important to listen to workers, to ensure their right to be heard is respected. Workers are the ones providing front line services so they can see the effects of Ministry decisions directly in their workplaces and on their clients. No meaningful improvements will be realized without employee input.

## **CONSULTING SOCIAL SERVICES WORKERS**

SGEU commissioned an independent research company in December 2021 to conduct a poll of its members employed within the Ministry of Social Services. This telephone survey gathered responses from 236 workers randomly chosen from the Child Protection and Income Security areas of the Ministry, to collect information about their workloads, the quality of service they are able to provide, the effect of their jobs on their personal well-being, and other issues.

This survey was complemented by 30 in-depth interviews in January 2022 where Social Services workers were able to elaborate in greater detail about their working situation.

The responses from the survey and interviews identified a number of pressing concerns as detailed below. This brief also includes quotes taken directly from the interviews with Social Services workers, to help illustrate the issues facing them on a daily basis.

## ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The issues addressed in this brief are divided into three broad categories: job satisfaction and effectiveness; staffing levels and workload, and worker well-being.

### 1) JOB SATISFACTION AND EFFECTIVENESS

Job satisfaction, feeling that there is value in your work and that you are effective in making a difference through your work can go a long way toward increased workplace morale, high productivity and retention of staff.

Unfortunately, it is concerning that almost half (43%) of employees surveyed feel somewhat or very dissatisfied with their jobs.

Even with those who expressed satisfaction with their jobs, this does not translate to workers feeling positive about the support they receive from their employer or about the service they are able to provide to clients.

More than 90% of survey respondents agreed their job requires them to work quickly which sometimes impacts the quality of service they are able to provide.

More than 80% of members agreed they have too much work to do everything well and feel pressure from conflicting demands.

Almost 70% of members agreed they have enough training and have good ergonomic workstations and PPE.

### QUALITY OF SERVICE – LOW AND DECLINING

No one is in a better position to evaluate the quality of services provided than the workers actually providing those services. If they feel that they are not serving clients as well as they could and should be, then it's reasonable to conclude that clients, advocacy groups and the public are undoubtedly coming to the same conclusion.

*“If you had asked me a few years ago, it would have rated the government higher, but the SIS program is putting more people in poverty. Caseloads are so high and there is not enough staff to manage them.”*

Only 17% of survey respondents said the services provided by their workplace have improved. About 35% of members indicated services have stayed about the same and 41% feel they have worsened.

Asked about the overall job the provincial government is doing in providing quality services through the ministry, almost 75% of respondents gave a fair or poor rating. Approximately 30% offered a good or excellent rating.

The in-depth interviews also leaned toward a fair or poor rating for the services provided by the provincial government through the ministry.

*“Gone is the day where we had quality over quantity. We’re not giving quality work to the clients. I need to get out of there.”*

*“I feel like the ministers and deputy ministers are out of touch with the needs of the workers and their clients using social services. Ministers, deputy ministers, managers, policy writers (need) more awareness of the frontline work. I feel they’re very much out of touch with that, what workers are capable of doing.”*

Social Services workers identified a number of reasons why they feel they, their workplaces, and their Ministry are underserving clients. Large caseloads, burnout, short-staffing, lack of resources and inadequate management support were cited as the most common reasons that limit the ability to serve and support clients. However, there are several other issues that must also be dealt with to improve service quality and boost worker morale in the Ministry of Social Services.

## **IMPACT OF THE SASKATCHEWAN INCOME SUPPORT (SIS) PROGRAM**

Of significant note, many respondents pointed to SIS as a contributing factor in their negative ratings. Some asserted the program is insufficient and ineffective and leaves vulnerable segments of the population poorly served, contributing to a higher incidence of homelessness and addictions. This in turn increases caseload numbers and complexity of cases. Several respondents said they and their coworkers foresaw some of the problems with SIS but they feel their voices were not heard. This is just one example of workers who are feeling unable to address issues in the workplace because their frontline experience and expertise is being ignored causing some to leave their jobs.

*“The new SIS program is setting people up to fail.”*

*“The new changes to Income Assistance are devastating on people, and it has created homelessness and struggle and overdose.”*

Just over 80% of respondents said SIS has increased their workload either by a little or a lot. Fewer than 20% said SIS has not contributed to an increased workload.

## QUALITY OF SERVICE TO CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Over 50% of survey respondents described the overall quality of service provided to children and families by their workplace as either fair or poor. Fewer than half of members surveyed assigned a good or excellent rating to the quality of service provided in their workplace.

In the in-depth interviews, respondents were also asked to rate the quality of service provided to children and families by their workplace. Approximately 33% of respondents gave services a good rating while the vast majority feel it is only fair or poor.

*“With high caseloads, it’s a lot of crisis-driven work where you are just dealing with whatever is happening in that moment rather than doing the day-to-day that we’re supposed to be doing.”*

Those who offered a fair or poor rating suggested a lack of resources combined with staff shortages lead to high caseloads, leaving them without the time, means or compassion to properly support their clients. Interviewees also mentioned, the SIS program, and a centralized system out of Regina impeding the quality of services they and the Ministry are able to deliver.

In the in-depth interviews members offered several examples where they were especially concerned about the quality of service being provided to clients. One described a situation where short-staffing prevented a timely response to a distress call leading to an infant in the family home being murdered. Another expressed frustration at her lack of training to deal with a client threatening violence and suicide. One respondent spoke of a case falling through the cracks because no one had looked at a file for months. Another mentioned family visits being bumped by emergency calls.

*“Child protection workers are overworked. Their caseloads are so high, workers can’t manage them...it’s not doing any child justice.”*

## CHILD SAFETY CONCERNS

Several people expressed concern about the safety and well-being of children and youth due to a lack of placement options and the limited time available to secure adequate placement. Children are sometimes left with their at-risk family or placed in a home far from their parents, while youth sometimes find themselves homeless.

Asked to describe situations when they have been very worried about the safety and well-being of children, several interview respondents commented that the question is too broad and/or that they worry about children on a daily basis.

*“Sometimes (my workload) means triaging whose crisis gets dealt with first, and that is not okay.”*

Some respondents who work in child protection spoke of concerns they have for a child when it takes time to respond to a call, or when they lack the resources to mitigate a safety concern or apprehend a child. One worker spoke of the impact of their workload on her ability to meet the needs of children requiring services and support.

*“The low rates that income assistance is giving are not enough to pay the rent, put food on the table and keep the lights on, so children are suffering. They’re living in places that are completely uninhabitable or too small, and they’re not being fed.”*

Those working in income assistance expressed concern about the impacts on children of systemic social problems including poverty, housing precarity, homelessness, and addictions.

## **ISSUES WITH MANAGEMENT**

A good relationship and a strong line of communication between workers and their managers leads to a more productive workplace, increasing morale, trust and cooperation. Open communication and mutual respect allows workers to ask questions, raise legitimate concerns, offer suggestions, and solve problems to improve the workplace. Employees who feel they are not respected, supported or listened to by managers will not work as effectively as those who do, resulting in a lower quality of service by the Ministry.

The survey and interviews found that members currently feel their voices are not heard and often no action is taken by management and government when workers express their workplace concerns or suggestions. Members with many years of experience in the Ministry suggest this is a chronic problem.

*“We voice our concerns and anger every day, and they just don’t listen. I don’t know where it stops, whether it stops at management, whether it even goes further than that, but we feel our voices aren’t being heard and we have no support.”*

Some respondents suggested part of the problem is that some managers don’t have the training, resources or tools required to make the changes that are necessary. In some cases, managers agree that changes are necessary but they are limited by funding or policy directed by government. Staffing levels and client resources are two areas where this has an obvious impact.

Several respondents recognized that managers are often dealing with the same issues faced by frontline workers, in that inadequate programs, services and funding available to assist clients and inadequate staffing levels make it very difficult to provide high-quality services to clients of the Ministry. This leads to frustration, worry and low job satisfaction across the Ministry.

Although management is generally viewed in a positive light, there are also common

*“I don't feel like they (managers) offer a lot of support and they're not around as much as they should be. They're not checking on us, especially with the extra stress of COVID. They're just pushing you through more workload and burning people out.”*

concerns reported by workers about their managers. Fewer than 50% of members agreed that changes in their workplace are clearly communicated by managers.

## **2) STAFFING LEVELS AND WORKLOAD**

Unmanageable workloads and chronic understaffing were identified by a large number of survey respondents and interviewees, who noted these problems lead to an inability to adequately provide the level of service required by clients.

*“There's so much to be done and we're so worn thin. There's so much that could be done but that can't be done just with the staffing and the utilities we're given.”*

There is too much work and too few people to do it.

### **UNDERSTAFFING**

More than half of survey respondents noted understaffing as a significant problem in the workplace. When asked if there is enough staff at their workplace to get things done properly, 28% said there is never enough staff and 25% said there is rarely enough staff.

Only 19% of respondents said there is always enough staff and 28% said there is sometimes enough staff to get the work done properly.

### **INCREASING WORKLOADS**

Eight in ten (80%) survey respondents indicated their workload has increased over the past three years, while only a small number said it has stayed about the same and or decreased.

Among members who feel their workload has increased, 45% said either their program or area has been expanded but staff has not, while 30% said their employer has not filled vacancies. A small percentage said both are true in their workplace



Two thirds of in-depth interview respondents are not comfortable with their current workload. One theme dominated their comments – heavy caseloads mean they are often helping one client at the expense of others or providing rushed or incomplete services. They suggested already unmanageable caseloads are often exacerbated when workers are required to provide coverage for open cases left behind by unfilled vacancies or co-workers on vacation.

*“They need to reduce caseloads. They need to hire more staff. I can't even describe how burnt out and overworked those social workers are. You can't meet your deadlines. But they don't want you to work overtime. There's no way you can get everything done in that amount of time. The government needs to either hire more staff or approve overtime and pay these people for the job they're doing.”*

## **SKIPPING DESIGNATED BREAKS AND WORKING EXTRA HOURS**

The reality is that Social Services staff are working beyond their scheduled hours, taking fewer breaks, rushing to complete tasks, and enduring personal stress in an effort to keep pace with their workloads.

Survey respondents are split almost equally in their practice of taking designated work breaks with almost 52% taking them usually or always and almost 49% taking them rarely or never. That includes 20% who never take their designated breaks.

Among those who do not take their breaks, 40% attribute it to their heavy workload while 31% said they work in a crisis environment and 8% said they would get too far behind in their work.

Three in ten of members indicated, in a typical two-week period, they work no additional hours beyond their regular schedules. However, a majority said they either work one to five additional hours (31%) or five to ten additional hours (27%). About 10% work 11 or more additional hours.

Almost 25% of members indicated they never report additional hours worked while 16% do so rarely. About 60% of members said they usually or always record additional hours.

Interviewees described feeling pressured by heavy workloads and their dedication to assist vulnerable clients as leading to the need to work extra or unscheduled hours, rush through their work, and deal with the stress of feeling unable to provide the quality of service required.

## **DRIVE TIME NOT REFLECTED IN ASSIGNED WORKLOAD**

Just under half (43%) of survey respondents said they spend three or more hours per week on the road for work purposes, 16% are spending 3 to 5 hours, 13% are spending 5 to 10 hours, and 14% are spending over 11+ hours on the road. About 11% spend only two hours driving as part of their job. Many of these members felt their driving time was not reflected when workloads were assigned.

## **3) WORKER WELL-BEING**

When workers feel safe at work and are able to remain healthy, they feel valued by their employer, resulting in high productivity and the best job performance. Unfortunately, a number of Social Services workplaces do not meet this description. Social Services workers report high rates of harassment and worry and job-related stress that interferes with both their work and home lives. As a result, too many workers are being driven to seek work outside Social Services which creates turnover and deprives the Ministry of experienced staff.

## **WORKPLACE HARASSMENT & THREATS**

### **HARASSMENT IN GENERAL**

Harassment is unacceptable in any workplace and the employer has an obligation and responsibility to prevent, stop, and deal with any harassment of employees.

A majority of 60% said they had been threatened or harassed by a client, while 5% have experienced this by a co-worker and 6% by a manager. A small number of respondents (14%) said the harassment has happened less than ten times and the same number (14%) said it has happened more than twenty times.

Just over one third (36%) of survey respondents said they have not been harassed by their manager, a co-worker, or a client in the past 12 months.

### **HARASSMENT BY MANAGERS AND CO-WORKERS**

Just under 20% of in-depth interview respondents indicated they have been harassed by a manager or supervisor, and described behaviour they perceived as aggressive, bullying or micro-managing. Of the survey respondents who indicated they have been threatened or harassed by a co-worker in the past 12 months, 17% said it has happened several times a week and 75% said it has happened several times in the past year.

## HARASSMENT BY CLIENTS

Among survey respondents who indicated they have been threatened or harassed by a client in the past 12 months, 8% said it has happened on a daily basis, 28% said several times a week, 24% said several times a month, and 38% said several times in the past year. As well, 75% of in-depth interview respondents indicated they have been threatened or harassed by clients, ranging from verbal abuse, threats and harassment to physical intimidation, property damage, forcible confinement, and physical assault.

*"It's terrifying some of the situations we're getting into. We're going into drug houses. We're getting yelled at and screamed at and spit at. We don't have protection, and the police aren't there to do our job for us. We use them when we can, but they're busy, too. We're in remote areas. The fleet of vehicles that they provide us with, in rural Saskatchewan, they don't have reliable tires. We don't have all-wheel drive. We don't have traction on winter roads. It's -50, and if we have an immediate investigation, we're going. There's a risk of our car breaking down. It's terrifying."*

*"I was told by one of the clients that I should go back home. Another client told me that he's not sure about my country... And I'm Canadian. Somebody asked me, "You have a foreign accent. Why are you working here?" One lady told me, "You don't belong here. You will lose your job. You don't belong here" because of my accent."*

Many interviewees described name-calling, being yelled at, sworn at, or having racist comments directed at them based on their appearance or accent, sometimes on a daily basis.

## THREATS TO PERSONAL SAFETY OR PROPERTY

Several respondents described threats of physical harm including murder directed at themselves, their co-workers, their children, and/or their families, both at work and during personal time.

*"I've had someone come at me with a knife, another guy with a gun. I had someone tell me they're going to hurt me and my family, because they were abusing their kids and we asked them to leave. I've had lots of threats, threats to blow up the building."*

*“My personal vehicle has been targeted twice. I have had my tires slashed. I’ve had my car keyed by clients. I have never been reimbursed for those costs. You have to keep on guard.”*

Some interviewees mentioned property damage or threats of property damage to their workplace or their vehicles.

Most have also experienced physical intimidation such as clients raising their fists, showing weapons, or hitting objects. One interviewee described having objects thrown at her, another was forcibly confined to a home during a visit, yet another witnessed a client physically assault a co-worker.

Almost nine in ten (89%) of survey respondents reported not being physically injured on the job in the past 12 months, while 9% have experienced 1 or 2 incidents and 2% have experienced more.

Almost 70% of members said they sometimes or often fear for their personal safety, while 23% said they have never felt this.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACTS**

About 11% of survey respondents indicated they have been threatened, harassed or approached by clients on social media, while 89% said they have not.

Interviewees expressed concern about the widespread information available online that allows clients to find them, follow them after work, approach them in the community or find out where they live and who their family is – a problem that is especially true in smaller communities.

## **PUBLIC SCRUTINY AND RETALIATION**

Approximately 44% of members said they sometimes or often fear retaliation from the public because of decisions they have made in their job. Just over 50% said they rarely or never feel this way. Fear of public scrutiny was mentioned by 56% of survey respondents.

Sadly, workers seem resigned to threats, harassment and violence being part of their job, and share the view that management does not take their personal safety as seriously as it should. Several suggested it would be helpful if management proactively provided anti-harassment training, addressed inappropriate client behaviour, better informed or educated the public about the important and difficult work of Ministry staff, and provided workers with follow-up supports after critical incidents.

## PAIN AND INJURY DUE TO HEAVY WORKLOADS AND STRESS

Unmanageable workloads and stress on the job are contributing factors to employee burnout, illness, decreased productivity, and staff turnover – all of which can also affect an employee’s personal and family life. Employees in the Ministry of Social Services report regular symptoms of pain as well as injury.

Three in four (75%) of survey respondents indicated they have experienced pain in their hands, wrists, arms, back or shoulders in the past 12 months, including 35% who report this nine or more times. Only 25% have not experienced pain in these areas in the past 12 months.

## SAFETY AND HEALTH SUPPORTS

A majority (54%) of survey respondents said their employer does a poor job providing them with the mental health supports they need, and 35% feel their employer does a poor job ensuring they have a safe working environment when meeting clients.

In each of these three areas, just 6% of members said their employer does an excellent job.

*“... (clients) are getting so frustrated, they're not going to stop at calling us names anymore. Something is going to happen. Seriously, it's going to happen to someone. Those concerns have gone to management, and nothing is done. You know when it'll be done? When someone is seriously hurt. It's very frustrating that managers or supervisors think they know better than the worker. They say they're listening to you (but) there's no support from them, none whatsoever.*”

Seven in ten survey respondents indicated they have found themselves working in an environment that seemed unsafe. Of those, only 41% had filed an Occupational Health and Safety report regarding the situation.

Among those who did not report their most recent incident working in an unsafe environment, a majority said

working in an unsafe environment happens all the time, while 16% felt a report would not be acted upon, 12% felt it was too much trouble and paperwork, and 7% felt it would have a negative impact on the client.

## EXHAUSTION AND BURNOUT

Over 90% of members reported sometimes or often feeling used up and exhausted at the end of the day. More than 85% sometimes or often feel compassion fatigue, burnout, or anxiety. Fewer, but still a majority, sometimes or often experience trouble sleeping, job interference with family life, or feeling public scrutiny because of their job.

*“We are stressed out. It is just very stressful right now. A lot of people are going on sick leave, or they are moving onto another job so that needs to be addressed.”*

## JOB SECURITY

Seven in ten (70%) survey respondents are comfortable with their existing level of job security, while 27% are not. Of those who are not comfortable with their level of job security, a majority (56%) said this has a negative impact on their productivity.

## NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS

A number of concrete actions can and must be taken by the Ministry of Social Services to ensure that workers are able to provide the highest quality of service possible to clients.

The following actions are not an exhaustive list of the measures needed to resolve the workplace issues plaguing Social Services.

Real improvements will only be achieved if the Ministry listens closely to the concerns, experiences, and suggestions of its staff. Social Services workers are frontline service providers who experience and witness the effects of Ministry policies and practices, and they are determined to improve both their working conditions and their clients' outcomes.

### 1) INCREASE STAFFING LEVELS AND ENSURE WORKLOADS ARE MANAGEABLE

*"Our caseloads are way too high, so we don't have enough time to spend with the families like we'd like to. We'd provide the best service if we could actually meet with them more than once or twice a month. High caseloads and staff shortages stop us from providing good quality service."*

One central theme emerged in the interviews when respondents were asked how to improve Social Services in Saskatchewan – the unmanageably heavy workloads currently faced by Ministry staff must be reduced to ensure effective service delivery.

*"There's no staff retention, so there's constantly brand-new people being filtered through, and I feel like maybe not the best work is always being done. Families are on their seventh, eighth, ninth worker in a two-year span, so building relationships are hard because people just don't trust the government because it's always changing."*

Workers feel that hiring more full-time, permanent staff would reduce individual caseloads to allow workers more time to plan with and support clients and families. The Ministry must also work to retain existing staff and fill vacancies more quickly.

It was also recommended that the Ministry establish and adhere to reasonable caseload limits. These caseloads should be set according to the time required to properly serve the clients involved, recognizing case complexity rather than a one-size-fits-all system.

The Ministry must reduce caseloads for workers who are required to spend a large portion of their working hours on the road. These workers have limited time to spend on casework and the workloads should reflect this.

## **2) IMPROVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MANAGERS AND EMPLOYEES**

Listening to and valuing staff input would go a long way in mitigating staff turnover and unfilled vacancies.

Ministry of Social Services staff work directly with clients and deal directly with administering the programs provided by the ministry. Therefore, they are in the best position to assess client needs as well as the pros and cons of available programs and services. Although staff try to provide suggestions and feedback, they invariably find their input is ignored, which makes them feel undervalued and unappreciated.

Addressing the culture of overwork that currently exists in the Ministry is also important for staff recruitment and retention. Management expectations must be changed so that employees no longer feel compelled to skip scheduled breaks, work while sick or routinely put in extra, unscheduled hours.

Providing additional funding for management to address inadequate staffing levels and improving the programs and resources available to clients of the Ministry would also address some of the concerns that arise between managers and staff.

*“We're the ones down there listening to concerns, to issues, whatever is going on. They're upstairs in their offices. The supports aren't out there, and it's terrible. I don't feel supported by management at all. They don't communicate with us. If we have concerns and stuff, it's pushed aside. Management thinks everything is wonderful and we're all loving our job. If we're all loving our jobs, why are staff leaving? At least one worker/week has left social services since June, some with 20+ years with the Ministry.”*

### 3) ENHANCE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT CLIENTS

*“Programs are not efficient or effective. SIS, for example, serves employable clients and disabled clients. There is a grey area of clients that are really abandoned and not looked after properly. From a staff perspective, the SIS program is totally inefficient from a business perspective. We are still using a very awkward software. The amount of manpower this software requires is unbelievably high, so you are hiring a lot of staff. There are inefficient procedures and workflow. The poor design and executions of these programs cost huge amounts of taxpayer money to house people in hotels.”*

Survey respondents and interviewees frequently mentioned the Ministry lacks the resources to properly meet the needs of clients they are serving which leaves workers frustrated and stressed about being unable to effectively assist their clients.

The SIS program was noted several times as needing a complete overhaul because it is inadequate and often creates more problems than it solves. Social assistance rates are no longer sufficient to cover basic expenses.

Workers suggested increasing income support programs, creating more community partnerships, creating more affordable housing and shelter options, and doing more to determine and address the underlying causes of homelessness and addictions. All of these suggestions would create a more proactive approach to supporting vulnerable and at-risk residents in Saskatchewan.

*“Workers outside Regina (especially) have very few resources to help the clients meet their needs. We cover (a community) and it is (some distance) away with very few resources. If we get an immediate call, it takes us (some time) to get there. A lot can happen in that time. There is a lack of resources when we are working with families to mitigate the risks to children. It puts kids being more at risk when we can't get a parent aide in the home, or there is no addictions worker for the parent to connect to.”*



Workers noted that they have made these suggestions in the past but have been or have

*“There have been several situations where we have a very high-needs child who needs placement, and we simply don't have a placement that will manage the child. The hospital takes them for a period of time, or the child remains in the community, at risk because we simply should be removing the child but don't have anywhere to put the child.”*

felt ignored. Valuing the voice of frontline workers would help improve the quality of service provided by the Ministry and the government and would make workers feel like an integral part of the system rather than simply a cog in the wheel.

#### **4) ENSURE SAFE AND HEALTHY WORKPLACES**

The Ministry must address the growing level of harassment and threats and other occupational health and safety issues experienced by workers.

This could include increased training for managers and employees on how to deal with harassment. Enhanced safety protocols must be developed and followed when workers are dealing with clients who are often desperate and unhappy.

Other sources of stress leading to unhealthy workplaces can be mitigated by reducing workloads and changing the culture of the workplace so that workers don't feel pressured to work extra hours, skip designated breaks, or sacrifice quality service to meet expected productivity levels.

#### **ARE THINGS GETTING BETTER OR WORSE?**

SGEU has surveyed and interviewed members working within the Ministry of Social Services in the past. Unfortunately, this year's survey indicates the circumstances faced by Ministry staff are getting worse. This trend is likely to continue unless changes are made and workers begin to feel supported and valued.

Based on a comparison of results from the surveys taken in 2016 and 2022, we note the following:

##### **Job satisfaction:**

**2016** – 75% reported being satisfied including 23% very satisfied, 7% were dissatisfied

**2022** – 57% report being satisfied including 13% very satisfied, 43% are somewhat or very dissatisfied

**Effectiveness:**

**2016** – 88% felt productive at work

**2022** – 77% feel productive at work

**Quality of service - Ministry:**

**2016** – 29% felt quality of service had declined in the past 3 years, 46% felt it had stayed the same

**2022** – 41% feel the quality of service has worsened, 35% feel it has stayed the same

**Quality of service – Provincial Government:**

**2016** – more than 50% felt the government was not doing a good job

**2022** – almost 75% feel the government is not doing a good job

**Issues with management:**

**2016** – 50% felt managers did not clearly communicate changes in the workplace

**2022** – Fewer than 50% feel managers treat them with respect and fairness

**Staffing levels:**

**2016** – almost 90% believed the workplace was not fully staffed on a consistent basis, with 40% feeling there were rarely or never enough staff and 47% feeling there were only sometimes enough staff

**2022** – 53% feel there are rarely or never enough staff and 28% feel there are only sometimes enough staff

**Workload:**

**2016** – 75% reported their workloads had increased in the past five years

**2022** – 80% report their workloads have increased in the past three years

**Pressure to work quickly to deal with workload issues:**

**2016** – 75% felt pressure from conflicting demands due to their workload, over 90% felt they were required to work quickly, both of which impacted the quality of service they were able to provide

**2022** – 81% feel pressure from conflicting demands, over 90% feel pressure to work quickly

### **Skipping breaks to get the job done:**

**2016** – almost 50% reported they rarely or never took their designated breaks because there was too much work to get done

**2022** – almost 50% report they rarely or never take breaks

### **Working extra hours to get the work done:**

**2016** – 60% reported working additional hours each month, with over 50% not recording their extra hours

**2022** – 70% reporting working additional hours, with just under 50% not recording their extra hours

### **Impossible to get the job done well due to workload:**

**2016** – 64% reported they had too much work to do everything well

**2022** – over 80% report they have too much work to do everything well

### **Harassment:**

**2016** – 40% reported being harassed in the previous year by clients, coworkers or managers

**2022** – 60% report being harassed in the previous year by clients, coworkers or managers

### **Stress, exhaustion and burnout:**

**2016** – almost 90% reported feeling used up and exhausted by the end of the workday, 75% reported symptoms such as anxiety, headaches, nausea, and muscle tension including 33% who reported these symptoms often, 66% had trouble sleeping including 33% who reported having this problem frequently

**2022** – 93% report feeling used up and exhausted by the end of the workday, over 80% report symptoms such as anxiety, headaches, nausea, and muscle tension including over 50% who report these symptoms often, 72% have trouble sleeping including 39% who report having this problem frequently

### **Pursuit of other work:**

**2016** – more than 30% reported they were seeking work outside the Ministry

**2022** – 43% report they are currently seeking work outside the Ministry, 49% report they are somewhat or very likely to leave government employment within the next year

## **CONCLUSION**

The status quo cannot continue.

Employees in the Ministry of Social Services are committed to their work and want to provide high quality services to their clients – the most vulnerable residents of Saskatchewan. However, there are several factors that prevent staff from doing their best work which is resulting in many caring and experienced employees choosing to leave their jobs.

This brief has identified a range of serious issues that are negatively affecting Social Services workers and the quality of services they and the Ministry are able to deliver. It is critical for the Ministry to take immediate and decisive steps to resolve these issues. This will not only improve the working conditions and well-being of its workers, but will also ensure the Ministry fulfills its mandate of providing the best support possible to those who need its services.