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NEWS RELEASE

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Drastic decline in Social Services workers hurting northern communities

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A drastic decline in the number of Ministry of Social Services workers in the north is contributing to the current crisis among children, families and communities, according to SGEU.

A growing number of Social Services positions are vacant, aggravating the chronic understaffing and heavy workload pressures facing Social Services staff, especially child and youth protection workers, says SGEU President Bob Bymoan.

“Northern communities are dealing with unthinkable tragedies, and yet vulnerable families and at-risk youth are still not getting the support they need,” says Bymoan. “Now more than ever, government needs to respond with action. One basic step is to ensure vacant positions are filled by permanent staff and that new positions are created to meet the critical need.”

“We are concerned that the recently announced hiring freeze in government could prevent this from happening,” he adds. “We urge government to make Social Services staffing a priority, despite current austerity measures.”

The Ministry of Social Services has identified more than 30 vacant positions in its northern service area this month.

Vacancies in Social Services and other ministries have increased across the province following government's Workforce Adjustment Strategy, which eliminated 15 per cent of the government workforce between 2010 and 2014. The strategy reduced the number of budgeted Social Services positions by 234 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions.

“It is irresponsible and dangerous to cut the jobs of people who provide support, programs and services to vulnerable, at-risk groups, especially children,” Bymoan says. “The stakes are too high. When a tragedy strikes, you can't turn back the clock. Lives are damaged and, sometimes, lost.”

“Many frontline Social Services staff struggle to manage high caseloads, knowing that families and children desperately need help, but there isn't enough time or resources to adequately respond,” he adds.

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A survey of SGEU members employed by Social Services identified high levels of stress due to the pressures of work overload. The research, conducted by an independent research firm, found that:

- Close to 90 per cent of Social Service workers reported that their workplaces are not adequately staffed on a consistent basis.
- Three-quarters of workers reported that their workloads have increased over the past five years.
- Sixty-four per cent of workers reported that they simply have too much work to do everything well. This includes a full one-third of workers who felt very strongly that their workloads made it impossible for them to do their jobs properly.

“It is unconscionable to put frontline Social Services staff in this situation. They have tremendous responsibilities, but are not given the time and resources to fulfill their duties in a way that ensures that vulnerable clients will be safe,” says Bymoén.

SGEU has attempted to meet with Social Services Minister Tina Beaudry-Mellor to discuss these issues, but the Minister has yet to agree to a meeting date.

“Government has \$2 billion to spend on the Regina P3 bypass, millions for LEAN consultants, and money for questionable land deals for its Global Transportation Hub, but not enough to adequately staff Social Services,” says Bymoén. “There’s something wrong with this picture.”

SGEU will continue to call on government to recognize the special needs of northern families and communities, and to make full staffing in the Ministry of Social Services a priority.

“We need to do better for the most vulnerable,” says Bymoén. “The cost of cutting staff and services is too high, and is borne by those who need help the most.”

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