

MEDIA RELEASE

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for immediate release

Are we already in or headed for a PSW crisis?

According to Reggie Caverson, Executive Director of Workforce Planning for Sudbury & Manitoulin, the answer is a resounding “yes.” Workforce Planning for Sudbury & Manitoulin conducted a survey of Personal Support Workers known as PSWs who are currently working in the field. Close to eighty PSWs in Greater Sudbury responded to the survey and the answers should be a warning bell to those who employ PSWs and those who require PSW services.

“Several key items jumped out at us when we did the analysis” Caverson notes. “First and foremost, PSWs are in the profession and stay in the profession because they care about people and want to help them, despite the challenges that they face, some on a daily basis.” Overall however, the survey showed that PSWs feel they are overworked, underpaid and undervalued. They work long and precarious hours, seventy-five percent receive twenty dollars an hour or less in wages, fifty-seven percent receive no benefits and they are often not considered part of the healthcare team, even though many of the duties that were once in the domain of the nursing profession have been downloaded to PSWs.

Caverson says that these are some of the bigger challenges facing this occupation, but there is more. “It’s hard for any of us to imagine working in our job, where on a daily basis, we could experience the risk of rude and abusive clients, physical injury, verbal abuse, impossible workloads, safety issues such as vital client information that is missing and sexual harassment. In some cases, there isn’t even time to grieve a client the PSW has been caring for, who has died.” Although the survey did not ask how often a PSW may have endured these experiences close to ninety percent reported dealing with difficult clients and fifty-four percent physical injury.

All of these issues should be a wake-up call. Caverson emphasizes that “we rely on PSWs to care for our loved ones whether it’s in their home while convalescing or needed for additional care to remain at home, in our hospitals and in our long-term care and nursing home facilities. PSWs are caring, compassionate professionals and we need to make sure that they are treated and respected as such. We need to listen to what they are saying.” Addressing working conditions such as exhaustive workloads, high client to staff ratios and low compensation are critical, as just over fifty percent of PSWs surveyed said they plan to leave the profession in the next five years. Just over half of them plan to go into nursing. With enrollment in PSW programs declining, meeting workforce demand will be another challenge.

To put this into perspective, it is estimated that there are approximately one hundred thousand PSWs working across Ontario and more will be needed as our population ages and lives longer. Several provincial PSW associations have formed to support and advocate for PSWs, but there is no provincial regulatory body to ensure that fair wages and policies are in place to mitigate this escalating crisis. Caverson says “we need to look at these survey results with an eye to addressing and fixing what we can now.” Currently she is in discussions with the City and other stakeholders about the results of the survey and interest in exploring ways to address some of the survey findings and recommendations.

Workforce Planning for Sudbury & Manitoulin is one of twenty-six planning boards across Ontario mandated to conduct labour market research into a range of occupations and various industries to understand current and emerging issues related to growth and demand, training requirements, recruitment practices and other labour market factors. All of this is done to assist communities and planners make sound and evidence-based decisions that support economic and business growth and workforce development and sustainability.

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