

Examination of recruitment and retention issues in the supportive housing and homelessness services sector in Newfoundland and Labrador

Executive Summary

Prepared for:

Industrial Adjustment Service (IAS) Research Sub-Committee

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Executive Summary

Background to Study

In 2008, the St. John's Housing and Homelessness Network and the Transition House Association of Newfoundland and Labrador received funding through the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Labour Market Development Agreement to develop a comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy for the supportive housing and homelessness services sector. To lead this initiative an Industrial Adjustment Services (IAS) Committee was established with representation from the sector's diverse stakeholder groups and an independent chairperson.

The need for this process grew out of a recognition that the sector had been focused on developing facilities and services (with notable success in doing this through partnership approaches), without the required attention to coordinated human resource planning across the sector. The IAS Committee was tasked to facilitate a comprehensive examination of the current and emerging human resources issues/challenges facing the supportive housing and homelessness services sector workforce, and recommend tangible human resources and labour force adjustment solutions (effective practices/approaches/actions) and capitalize on identified opportunities.

The IAS Committee engaged Goss Gilroy Inc. to conduct research to inform their work. This research focused on developing a profile of the organizations and workforce in the sector, identifying issues related to recruitment and retention of workers, and making recommendations for actions to address these issues.

The study included a review of the literature and promising approaches in other jurisdictions on human resource management and training for this sector, gathering of information from service organizations in the sector through a written questionnaire and interviews, interviews with other stakeholders, a survey by mail of current sector workers, and telephone interviews with former workers in the sector. The study was carried out from September 2008 to March 2009.

Overview of the Sector

The community-based supportive housing and homelessness services sector helps individuals/families living on the street, those considered to be hidden homeless (e.g. living in unsafe housing), those at risk of homelessness, individuals who require support to maintain their housing, and/or those who access shelters in times of crisis.

Services are provided by 15 organizations along a continuum of emergency shelters, transitional housing, supportive housing and other services – eight of which are located in St. John's. Elsewhere in

the province, there are six transition houses for women and their children and the Labrador Friendship Centre which serves primarily Aboriginal people. There are also three sectoral organizations that provide broader leadership and supports for the sector. The total workforce is estimated at 412.5. The sector serves an estimated 14,340 people annually.

The community-based organizations examined for this study are part of a broader continuum of supportive housing services in Newfoundland and Labrador. While relatively small, the supportive housing and homelessness services sector is dynamic and has grown and diversified in response to the changing needs of the people the sector organizations serve and with the support of investments of the federal and provincial governments. Public policy developments signal that building capacity to address homelessness is increasingly a priority and that the community-based sector is considered a partner in this public policy response.

The sector offers challenging but rewarding work. Workers do make a difference in people's lives. Organizations in the sector have been successful in attracting managers and staff with the commitment and personal attributes needed to carry out their varied mandates. As well, the majority of respondents to the survey of workers felt that they benefited professionally and personally from their work.

The people being served by the sector are now presenting with more complex needs, in particular with mental health and addictions issues. This situation adds to the already complex nature of the work and has implications for entry-level training, professional development and the supports needed in the workplace.

Human Resource Management Structure and Capacity

The majority of organizations in the supportive housing and homelessness services sector provide a public service on behalf of government through third-party delivery contracts and service agreements. It is recognized that there have been considerable government investments in the sector and managers and staff in various departments and agencies have been effective champions for the resourcing of organizations. However, funding sources and funding arrangements vary, and there is an over-riding concern that the sector is not adequately resourced to carry out its work, regardless of the funding arrangement. As a result, there are challenges to adequately staffing organizations, offering longer-term employment, and paying competitive wages - all of which are factors that impact on recruitment and retention.

The majority of positions in service organizations are full-time, but a significant proportion is relief status (22.8%). The entry-point for most frontline positions is through these relief positions which offer irregular hours and shifts. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining relief staff create human resource management challenges for organizations including the provision of adequate orientation and training for staff when there is high turnover.

Just under 50 percent of the workforce has union representation. Salary scales for positions vary with those offering what are considered competitive wages being unionized or classified under the provincial government system or a comparable system. Those that do not fit into these categories typically do not offer competitive wages. The inconsistency in compensation across organizations and, in some cases, within organizations contributes to challenges in recruiting and retaining staff for the lower-paying positions.

The majority of organizations in the sector offer a range of benefits to permanent staff. A minority of organizations, mainly those with collective agreements, offer benefits to temporary staff. Most organizations do not have a funded Employee Assistance Program and this is seen as a key gap in benefits given the challenging nature of the work.

Other factors which contribute to difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff include the increasing competition for a diminishing supply of workers, particularly in St. John's. Further, there is a concern that the sector will face even greater challenges in competing for new recruits and retaining current staff given the labour market demographics (higher numbers of people retiring) and government initiatives which create more opportunities for better paying jobs within government.

Over the past year, the turnover rate across organizations was 11.2 percent overall and 32 percent among relief staff. Hours of work, pay and benefits, lack of promotional opportunities and working conditions are factors contributing to turnover. Most workers who leave their jobs move into other jobs in the sector, to other community-based sectors, or to government positions in line with their career/compensation interests. It is clear the work in the sector is preparing workers for other opportunities. The challenge is to ensure organizations in the sector have the capacity to be employers of choice while also developing opportunities for workers to move across the broader continuum of housing and related services. Through this approach both workers and the sector would benefit from turnover.

In an increasingly complex service environment and in an effort to support recruitment and retention organizations have adopted varied approaches to supporting staff and creating quality workplaces. Most respondents to the survey of workers were satisfied with most aspects of their work. Aspects rated somewhat less favourably related to career progression, compensation and recognition of the work.

Promotion of the Sector as a Career Option

There are prevailing misperceptions about the sector that keep it from being considered a career option, and a need to do better promotion of the sector at the high school and post-secondary levels and with the public more generally. There is currently no entry-level post-secondary training available that is

tailored specifically to the needs of the sector. Given the growing complexity of the work, there is a need for such programming.

Workers in the sector are predominantly female which is seen as being a result of the helping nature of the sector and societal perceptions of male and female roles. While in general this has not been an issue, a better gender balance would benefit organizations and the people they serve and so there is a need to raise awareness of the sector as one which provides career opportunities for both males and females.

Professional Development

Organizations have very limited budgets for professional development. Despite this, a majority of workers have accessed at least some professional development in the past few years. The St. John's Housing and Homelessness Network has also increased the availability of offerings. Given the increasingly complex nature of the work, there is considerable interest in more professional development and a wide range of priority topics.

Some organizations are partnering to provide professional development and this is a good foundation on which to build. There are also a number of models used in other jurisdictions for training and professional development for the supportive housing and homelessness service sector that could be adapted to the Newfoundland and Labrador context.

Summary of Recruitment and Retention Issues

The overall recruitment and retention issues result from:

- the varied capacity of organizations to provide stable employment offering competitive wages and benefits in an increasingly competitive labour market
- insufficient and irregular hours for relief positions which are the primary entry point to the sector
- the lack of promotional opportunities in smaller organizations
- working conditions and safety standards
- the need for increased professional development opportunities
- limited awareness of the many positive aspects of the sector as a career option
- the lack of entry-level training tailored to the sector.

Recommendations

Recommendations to address recruitment and issues identified were developed in collaboration with the IAS Committee. These focus on:

- Continued efforts to build awareness of the sector's role in the continuum of supportive housing within government and to explore options for achieving more consistency in funding arrangements and adequate funding levels
- Further research on the issues to recruiting and retaining relief workers and related solutions
- Exploration of ways to bring more consistency to job descriptions and classifications and wage rates across organizations in the sector
- Identification of any changing staffing requirements and new positions that would provide for more lateral and upward mobility
- Exploration of additional activities and actions to further develop quality and supportive workplaces for this sector
- Exploration of the potential for a sector-wide approach to funding an Employee Assistance Program
- Identification of funding to develop a comprehensive model for training and professional development tailored to the needs of the sector
- The development of a communications strategy to raise the positive profile of the housing and homelessness sector
- Development of a module on the housing and homelessness sector for inclusion in the high school Career Development 2201 course
- Formation of a small working group from the sector and key government departments to act as the catalyst.