

FEDERATION MEMBERSHIP SURVEY ANALYSIS #1

INSIGHT INTO THE HEALTH AND
SUSTAINABILITY OF B.C.'S COMMUNITY
SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR

REPORT 1 OF 4



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THE FEDERATION
of COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICES of BC

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Introduction

At the root of many of The Federation's Strategic Priorities lies the need for good data. If The Federation is to be successful in its efforts to lead the way in social policy and community programs (Priority #1) and to influence public policy by building stronger, better informed, and more supportive connections between the sector, government, and the public (Priority #2) current and accurate information about the sector is required.

In order to gather the information needed to undertake the advocacy required, Federation staff currently:

- Dedicate time to staying abreast of current research on the health and sustainability of the sector.
- Work with other groups both locally and beyond to share best practices on information gathering within the social care sector.
- Work with other groups that have similar research interests in order to coordinate information sharing and advocacy efforts.
- Request information from Federation member organizations.

This report is an analysis of the findings from two different surveys completed by Federation membership. The findings are discussed within the context of social sector research in B.C. and other jurisdictions. The two surveys are:

- Federation Member Survey 2015 ("member survey") which asked questions on a wide variety of topics covering the previous year's data.
- A study done in partnership between The Federation and The University of Victoria's School of Public Administration ("UVic survey") commissioned specifically to compare the financial health of the sector between the 2008 and 2015 fiscal years.

This report (the first in a series of four) focuses on the three main themes addressed through these surveys:

- I. Meeting the needs of clients**
- II. Costs and funding of services**
- III. Recruitment and retention of workers**

Meeting needs of clients

INCREASED DEMAND

The findings of both surveys revealed that it is increasingly complex for social service organizations to meet the needs of clients.

The UVic survey results showed that the number of clients served by Federation members more than doubled between 2008 and 2014 (see **FIGURE 1**) rising from approximately 46,000 to well over 100,000.

Responses from both surveys indicated that the size of wait lists also substantially increased compared to previous years. In addition, 82% of members reported an increase in overall requests for services.

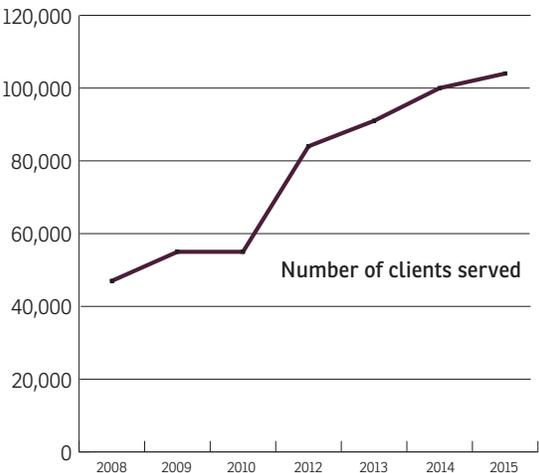


FIGURE 1

Findings from the UVic survey indicated that members are seeing a growing number of clients who are facing increasingly challenging social situations (i.e. homelessness, poverty). But when asked about the complexity of the client’s issues, members reported little change.

In essence, these findings seem to indicate that the larger, contextual obstacles clients face are becoming more daunting even though the client’s specific issues are not. This raises questions about the impact on client and staff well-being when the current system fails to address client need.

COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

The Federation member survey identified specific variables that provide more detail on the increasing complexity of this work.

As **TABLE 1** below shows, organizations experienced significant changes in the following specific ways: increased requests for services which they are mandated to provide (82%); increased requests for services that fall outside their mandates (53%); increased requests to aid access to other services (47%); fewer organizations to which they can refer (27 % decrease); a greater need for professional development (89%); and increased workloads (86%).

Both surveys also indicated that the service provision environment is perceived as becoming more complex and more labour intensive.

	Increase	Decrease	No change	Unknown	N/A
Requests for services provided	81.7%	1.2%	15.9%	0.0%	2.4%
Requests for services beyond mandate	53.2%	0.0%	33.8%	7.8%	5.2%
Wait list for services	48.8%	5.0%	36.2%	2.5%	8.8%
Requests for help accessing other organizations	46.8%	0.0%	36.7%	8.9%	8.9%
Number of organizations to which you can refer	9.0%	26.9%	56.4%	3.8%	3.8%
Organizational workload	86.4%	0.0%	11.1%	0.0%	2.5%
Need to increase staff knowledge and skill	89.0%	0.0%	8.5%	0.0%	2.4%

TABLE 1

DATA TRACKING

Both surveys indicated that tracking data has become a challenge for organizations. As such, information on client access to services (including actual numbers and actual wait lists) is difficult to calculate accurately. Other research confirmed this trend within the social sector and non-profit sectors more generally. One such study from the Mowat Centre articulated the extent to which staff in such organizations are already overburdened with their daily work and fear increased data tracking would become a distraction from service provision.¹

OTHER RESEARCH

Similar trends have been found in other studies. Increasing demand for services has led to the Ontario Nonprofit Network's new Decent Work initiative² which is using extensive and sustained research on the labour-market challenges and conditions of Ontario's social sector to inform pilot programs and immediate actions. A recent study by the Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute³ also found a growing demand for services and increasing complexity of people's needs.

MEMBER EXPERIENCES

"We have wait lists for most of our programs and especially for our family programs: we have five to six families on a regular basis. Our program for children who witness abuse usually has six children on it. We try to fit them into groups but that is not always appropriate for every child. We need more staff."

"It is hard to maintain best practices and evidence-informed practice when there is no money in our funding agreements. There are increasingly new things to learn about in this sector, for example, trauma informed practices, working with families with complex mental health issues, or who are experiencing situational stresses (finding and keeping jobs, food, safe and affordable housing). Participating in training often requires travel and staffing to fill positions while people are on training. We simply do not have that money in our budgets."

Costs and Funding

ORGANIZATIONAL COSTS

The UVic survey found that total organizational costs have increased by 54% between 2008 and 2015 (**FIGURE 2**).

The following cost pressures were experienced by survey respondents:

- 84% noted increased staffing costs.
- 87 % experienced increasing costs related to doing business (rent, goods, services).
- 82 % reported that funded dollars for contracted services do not cover the true costs of service provision.

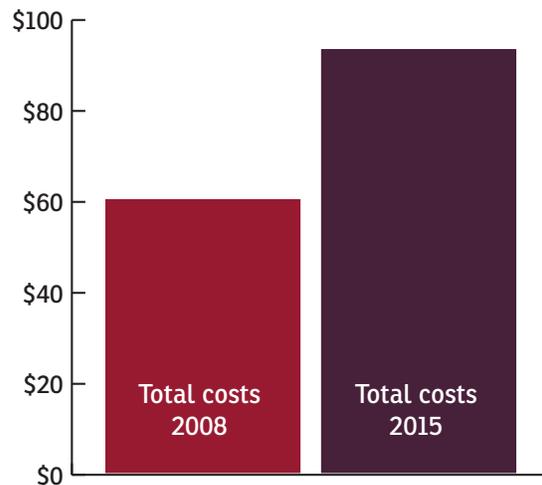


FIGURE 2

More than half of the organizations that responded were uncertain about whether or not their current contracts would be maintained. 21% felt pressure to reduce service delivery because of revenue uncertainty.

Looking at the eight years between 2008 and 2015, the UVic survey results showed that total government funding increased between 2009 and 2011 but has roughly stayed the same since then. (This corresponds with The Federation’s review of provincial budget spending on social services.)

The Federation member survey asked specifically about organizations with budget changes of more than 10% over the previous year. 29% of members indicated an increase while 15 % experienced a decrease (56% indicated no significant change of overall budget year over year).

NON-GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Interestingly, data from the UVic survey also showed an 18% increase in non-government funding for government-funded programs between 2008 and 2015. Over this time period, while government funding had remained stable, recourse to non-government funding had increased.

This suggests that other sources of funding are being used to make up the difference when government funded programs fall short financially. The necessity of accessing funding from elsewhere to subsidize government contracted services was echoed throughout the Federation member survey.

In other words, community investment is shoring up services that are contractually provided by government through community service providers. Community agencies invest money in services to meet community need, compensate workers fairly, and/or manage the costs of doing business. The fact that government investments have not kept pace has been—and continues to be—a hidden problem for the sector.

OTHER RESEARCH

The Federation's research shows that similar funding challenges are experienced elsewhere. In Ontario, after years of researching the precarious funding situation of the nonprofit sector, a partnership has been established between the community nonprofit sector and the provincial government. The goal is to reform funding so that both parties "spend less time on administration and more time on program delivery and improving results."⁴

The Ontario Nonprofit Network found that the most important issue facing organizations was funding reform. While providing services on "behalf of government", they too struggle with administrative requirements as program rules and budgets become more restricted, restrictive, and rigid.⁵

In Australia, Pro Bono Australia's Sector Survey (2015)⁶ gathered data from more than 1,100 leaders, volunteers, and sector managers. The majority of responses came from social services (29%) and identified two priorities: the need to invest in organizational capacity and stable government funding.

In British Columbia, the Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute (2016)⁷ found that sustainability has become significant challenge for the non-profit sector. 88 organizations participated in the survey and identified the number one challenge as “funding”.

Additional research in Ontario (Mowat 2015) found that “too often, program demands are pitted against investment in organizational support and management.[...]For the sector, this means that fewer people are helped and less progress is made on social issues.”⁸ They stressed that the connection must be made between the health of the sector as an employer and the sector’s ability to achieve its social objectives.

MEMBER EXPERIENCES

“The funding we receive to provide services does not cover the costs of providing the services. We sometimes are able to cobble together bits of money from other sources in order to create positions such as a receptionist. We cannot have our clients, who are often in distress, arrive and not be greeted.”

“We are the workhorses. If we want a society where everyone is taken care of, where our streets are not filled with people who have no homes, where we have recreation opportunities and places for kids to socialize safely, then we need people to make that happen. The people who make that happen are us. We are the workhorses. But, we are now the ones left to beg on the street corners for what society wants. It is the government’s role to monitor the workhorses to make sure we are doing our jobs. But, something is twisted: why are we the ones being so closely monitored and checked on so intensely? It’s disheartening.”

Recruitment and retention

The UVic survey identified recruitment and retention of staff as the third highest concern amongst organizations. The Federation member survey indicated that this is a significant challenge for many social sector organizations:

- 68% find it either challenging or very challenging to recruit front line positions.
- 66% find it a challenge to recruit people with specific educational qualifications.
- 60% are challenged to retain staff because of opportunities elsewhere.

The main reasons behind recruitment and retention challenges faced by organizations can be categorized into three themes: precarious employment, wages, and qualifications.

PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

The precarious nature of the sector's labour force makes it difficult for many to recruit and retain staff. Many organizations can only offer part-time or casual work that is unsuitable for a large number of potential workers.

The fact that many "entry level" positions in the sector are low paying and demanding means that people will often try to move on to "better" jobs quickly. This contributes to high turnover which, in turn, impacts the clients and other staff creating a cycle of "undesirable" and vacant positions.

Many Federation members reported losing good staff either to more secure jobs elsewhere in the sector or because the staff are leaving the sector all together (for example, going to the resource industry).

Short funding cycles and annual contracting arrangements also impacted job stability as staff must find new work when a program wraps up and/or because staff are always on the look out for positions with more job security.

WAGES

Wages are typically low due to contractual restrictions. When organizations are able to provide benefits, there can be parity issues between union and non-union community social service organizations as well as between the community sector and the public service.

QUALIFICATIONS

The Federation member survey results indicated that recruitment and retention of staff, board members, and general volunteers was a daunting challenge. Many organizations reported how difficult it can be to find people with the combination of certification, personal attributes, and experience required to do the specific work required in the social sector.

It is not uncommon for staff members to move on to more stable and desirable work places once they have received sufficient on-the-job training. This problem is compounded for those in rural and remote communities.

Our findings on the challenges of recruitment and retention are echoed in other recent studies.

Ontario has embarked on a Decent Work campaign following years of research on the non-profit labour force. A recent report by the Mowat Centre (2015) identified that the ever-changing funding environment must be addressed in order to improve the overall work environment of the sector.

Other changes in donor behaviour, funding models, and legislative and regulatory structures result in organizations struggling to adapt as they are forced to seek new forms of revenue. This not only contributes to a increasingly competitive funding environment, but also hinders long-term planning and organizational flexibility.⁹

Workers in the social sector are passionate about what they do. This work is meaningful and it benefits society. But as the Mowat report noted, “there are also many symptoms of distress” concerning people across the sector. These include employment stability, limited benefits and retirement plans, high rates of part-time and contract employment, little investment in training and professional development, and a poor work/life balance.¹⁰

MEMBER EXPERIENCE

“We are struggling with keeping staff because of our low salaries. Two of our full-time staff members have additional jobs just to make ends meet. That’s not so they can go on vacation; it’s to get by.”

Implications for Next Steps

Clearly, Federation members are stretched!

These results support the arguments The Federation and others have made to government regarding the gap between funding, costs, and the increased demand for services—issues that have been consistent themes in Federation responses to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, The Plecas Report, reports from the Representative for Children and Youth, and the provincial budget (among others).

Organizations are stretched and have to manage their administrative needs on ever shrinking budgets. That is the reason The Federation is involved in government's cross-sector Innovation and Sustainability Initiative. It is also why The Federation is working with CLBC and WorkSafe BC to reduce the costs of workplace injury claims. Ongoing recruitment and retention issues are one reason why The Federation dedicates time and resources to the Leadership 2020 program.

But these initiatives are only part of the solution. Community based social care in this province is vastly underfunded. In order to make these issues a priority, in order to increase the investment of provincial revenue, The Federation must continue to challenge the narrative about social care in this province and change the way the general public, bureaucrats, and politicians understand the work of the social sector.

At The February Social Policy Forum there were a number of action items championed that touch upon the issues flagged in these surveys. There is good data with which to tell the story of the sector and its value. There challenges involved in gathering such data but The Federation remains committed to working with others to improve these processes.

In the coming months, The Federation will share more knowledge gained through the surveys as it relates to other activities and goals of the organization.

Our thanks to Federation member organizations who contributed a significant amount of their time to provide the valuable information collected by these two surveys. It is because of your commitment to this work that The Federation is truly Altogether Better.

Citations

¹ Mowat Centre. (February 2015). *An Open Future: Data priorities for the not-for-profit sector*. Retrieved from: https://mowatcentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/107_AnOpenFuture.pdf

² Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) & Mowat Centre. (September 2013). *Shaping the Future: Leadership in Ontario's Nonprofit Labour Force*. Retrieved from: https://mowatcentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/74A_shaping_the_future_final.pdf

³ Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute. (January 2016). *Exploring Characteristics and Capacity of the Non-Profit Social Sector in the Columbia Basin-Boundary Region*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cbrdi.ca/wp-content/uploads/Exploring-Characteristics-and-Capacity-of-the-Social-Non-Profit-Sector-RDI-Report-on-Survey-Results-Winter-2016.pdf>

⁴ Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN). (May 2015). *Vision 2020: Transforming the funding relationship between the Government of Ontario and the community nonprofit sector*. Retrieved from: <http://theonnn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ONN-Vision-2020-Funding-Reform.2015.pdf>

⁵ Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN). (2016). Retrieved from: <http://theonnn.ca/our-work/sector-financing/government-investment-funding-reform/>.

⁶ Pro Bono Australia. (2015). *Sector Survey: Gauging the State of the Not For Profit Sector*. Retrieved from: http://www.probonoaustralia.com.au/sites/www.probonoaustralia.com.au/files/sector-survey-50_pages_interactive_0.pdf

⁷ Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute. (January 2016). *Exploring Characteristics and Capacity of the Non-Profit Social Sector in the Columbia Basin-Boundary Region*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cbrdi.ca/wp-content/uploads/Exploring-Characteristics-and-Capacity-of-the-Social-Non-Profit-Sector-RDI-Report-on-Survey-Results-Winter-2016.pdf>

⁸ Mowat, NFP. (December 2015). *Change Work: Valuing Decent Work in the Not-For-Profit Sector*: <http://theonnn.ca/our-work/our-people/decent-work/> p. 3.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 26.