



COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE CIRCUMSTANCES
SURROUNDING THE DEATH OF PHOENIX SINCLAIR

Commision Disclosure 2119



WINNIPEG CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES
SERVICES À L'ENFANT ET À LA FAMILLE DE WINNIPEG
MEMORANDUM

To: Supervisors and Social Workers -
Services to Families and Children Program

From: Elaine Gelmon

Date: December 9, 2002

RE: Focus Group Report

Last year, arising from discussions between Agency management and representatives of the Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union, the Agency undertook to engage an external research company, Viewpoints Research, to conduct focus groups with current and former Family Services social workers. The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain comments and perspectives on employees' experiences within the Agency and their general job satisfaction that could inform strategies designed to retain social work staff. A joint Management/MGEU working group provided guidance to the facilitator regarding both the questions to be asked and the overall process to be used.

Three focus groups were conducted. One group was comprised of staff who had worked as a Family Service social worker for five (5) or more years. The second group was comprised of those who had worked in a Family Service social worker capacity two (2) years or less, and the third groups was comprised of former Family Service social workers. Participants were randomly selected by the Viewpoints researcher, from lists of all current and former staff who met the specified criteria

Following receipt of the report, Services to Families and Children supervisors had an opportunity to review it and make recommendations to address some of the issues identified. Senior management also reviewed the report along with the recommendations from supervisors. A response was then prepared which contains many of the recommendations from the report, additional recommendations from the supervisors, and outlines what actions have been undertaken and what further actions will be taken to address the issues/concerns. What can and will be done has been considered within the context of our imminent transition to government, the AJI- CWI, and the realities of our human and financial resources.

A copy of the Focus Group Report and the accompanying response have been distributed to each supervisors in the Services to Families and Children Program and you can arrange with her/him to read it.

As was agreed, copies of both the report and the response have been provided to members to the Union Executive (Table Officers and Stewards). Copies of both documents have been provided to Viewpoints Research so that they can mail them to the focus group participants.

c.c. Darlene MacDonald, Program Manager
Linda Burnside, Glenda Edwards, Rhonda Warren, Assistant Program Managers

EG/mw



WINNIPEG CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES
SERVICES À L'ENFANT ET À LA FAMILLE DE WINNIPEG
MEMORANDUM

To: Staff
From: Executive Management
Date: December 9, 2002
RE: Focus Group Report

As you know, the Agency contracted with Viewpoints to conduct focus groups with current and former Family Services social workers in response to the Agency's struggle to retain staff in these frontline positions. The purpose of the focus groups was to better understand the factors that contribute to staff turnover and identify strategies for retention.

While there were varied reasons and factors raised by participants in the focus groups, a few primary themes emerged. In many respects, the identified themes are not surprising, as they are consistent with the professional literature: child welfare is incredibly demanding and stressful work; a supportive supervisor and supportive team are vital to job satisfaction in child welfare; and, orientation and training are essential for new staff to master the complex requirements of child welfare work. Certainly, the role of the supervisor was emphasized as key, in providing support, direction, opportunities for professional growth and development, and confidence building.

The following outlines the recommendations that were made by the focus group participants, as well as the recommendations made by Family Services supervisors, and details the efforts that have been made within the Agency to address concerns and respond to these recommendations. Unfortunately, our ability to respond to the recommendations in the way we would like is tempered by our current, complex realities: the transition to government services, the AJI transition process, and our available human and financial resources.

1. Training of Supervisors

- Staff have recommended that supervisors receive better training that will contribute to their knowledge, ability to support staff, and result in better service to clients.
- Supervisors have recommended earlier access to the Competency Based Training Program for supervisors. They also feel that the role of supervision needs to be clarified, especially for new staff, so that the purpose and goals are better understood.

In May 2002, all Family Services supervisors (as well as the Assistant Program Managers and Program Manager for Family Services) participated in a training workshop facilitated by Tony Morrison, involving a very practical, worker-and-service-focused approach to child welfare supervision. Each supervisor also has a copy of his

manual. The APMs are attending to the transfer of learning process, by encouraging and assisting supervisors to implement the models and practices that were presented in the workshop. Additionally, a committee is being struck by the Program Manager to develop an agency supervision policy, which emphasizes that workers have a right to supervision, identifies the purposes of supervision, and clarifies the roles and responsibilities of both workers and supervisors in the provision of supervision. This training curriculum is being reviewed by the Provincial Training Coordinator, for future workshops on supervision practice in addition to Competency Based Training.

The majority of supervisors have now attended Competency Based Training for supervisors, with the last round finishing in the winter of 2002. It is unfortunate that the Province is unable to offer this training more frequently, so that new supervisors could access the training in a more timely manner, but the small number of registrations does not permit the program to be offered more often.

Additionally, the collective agreement for supervisors has established an Education Fund, intended to assist supervisors in developing their knowledge and skills in degree and certificate programs. Over the past year, two supervisors completed a course in supervision offered the Continuing Education at the University of Manitoba. Other supervisors have completed courses toward a Master of Social Work degree. The Agency continues to encourage supervisors to pursue professional development opportunities in this regard.

Program Management has also discussed establishing a professional development committee, comprised of supervisors, senior managers, and social workers, to make recommendations to improve training opportunities for supervisors. This committee would research and make recommendations around the specific skills/knowledge that could be incorporated into Agency-based training and complement Competency Based Training. This training could also be available to senior workers who have the potential to move into supervisory positions in the future.

2. Orientation and Training for New Workers

- Staff recommend more training opportunities, especially at the start of employment, which is practical, skill-based, and assists in understanding the Agency's policies and practices.
- Supervisors also recognize the need for better orientation and training for new staff, and struggle to meet the training needs of new staff with the high turnover in Family Services. Over the past year, many supervisors have participated in initiatives to address this concern. They also recommend earlier access to Competency Based Training for workers, more in-house workshops, and ideally, would be in favour of having a Training Supervisor and a Training Unit which would give new workers a more supported and protected environment in which to learn the job.

Program Management certainly recognizes the need for better orientation and training for new staff. Over the past year, some initiatives have been developed to try to address

this. A Mentor Program was established in April 2001, which endeavours to match new staff with trained mentors who have volunteered to share their expertise and offer support, supervised by the Mentor Program Coordinator. It is recognized that this initiative draws upon the voluntary efforts of front line staff and one supervisor as an add-on to their responsibilities. However, participants identify the intrinsic rewards of their involvement in the Mentor Program as being most beneficial, despite the additional time and work. (Since the preparation of this response, the Mentor Program has unfortunately been discontinued because of the workload demands on Family Service Social Workers.)

A group of supervisors have also revised the Orientation Manual and prepared it for easy access on the Agency's Intranet site. The Manual is available in print format and email document while it is being converted to the Intranet site.

There are some training opportunities in-house that are offered to staff, facilitated by supervisors, Program Staff, and/or Assistant Program Managers. These include the For the Kids training on interviewing in sexual abuse cases and the Foster Care Orientation session. There are other training ideas that need to be developed (for example, a legal workshop), and the entire menu of training opportunities needs to be better coordinated.

The APMs have explored the possibility of creating a training unit, or designating a supervisor position to training and orientation responsibilities. While we are very much in favour of this, we do not have the additional staff resources at the present time to implement, nor are we able to restructure our current staffing to accommodate such a unit without compromising service to clients throughout the program.

In the past year, HR provided several 'Brown Bag Lunch' information sessions, and there is a commitment to explore other topics and enhance this training opportunity in the future. However, with other priorities (the AJI process and the transition to government services), HR is not in a position to coordinate additional information sessions at this time. Family Services units are encouraged to use their unit meetings, Team Day, and staff development funding for their training/information needs.

3. Appreciation and Value

- Staff are looking for indicators that their work is valued and appreciated within the agency. This recognition might come in the form of higher salary, financial incentives, other tangible forms of recognition, praise and personal appreciation, etc.
- Supervisors also agree that strategies to recognize staff for their hard work and accomplishments is important. Some discussions have occurred within supervisor teams to share ideas, and some supervisors attended an HR-sponsored Brown Bag Lunch on the topic.

Program Management recognizes that emotional support, validation, and appreciation are vital components of staff well-being, and that modelling such behavior begins at the top levels of the agency. It is acknowledged that whenever one is feeling disempowered and unappreciated, it is difficult to provide others with affirming feedback, and supervisors need to feel valued and appreciated in order to more effectively convey these messages to staff.

Unfortunately, the current challenges facing the agency affect the sense of efficacy at all levels of the agency, which has significant implications for all of us to support and value one another. In times of change and uncertainty, it becomes even more important than ever to appreciate and celebrate the excellent work that occurs under very difficult circumstances. This is a theme that warrants attention, especially with the changes facing the agency this coming year. Program Management has made staff morale a priority, but morale is more than just the responsibility of management; it is shared by us all.

Financial compensation or incentives as a means to express the value of the work that social workers perform is a more challenging strategy to implement. This kind of strategy has implications for the agency's budget, Joint Job Evaluation, unions, staff morale (in terms of other staff feeling 'less valued' if changes are made) and should be part of a broader initiative that examines the 'value' of child protection work throughout the province, not just the agency. At the present time, it is a suggestion that is not feasible. Research also suggests that financial compensation may have short-term benefits to staff's sense of being valued, but it is not sustained.

4. Stability

- Staff have expressed frustration with the constant state of change that the agency has experienced, particularly in recent years. Much of this change seems to be beyond the control of the agency, but staff expect management to strategize for long-term stability and attention to effective services, not so much of a political agenda.
- With regard to this theme, supervisors recommend that internal change that is within Agency control (eg. forms, procedures, etc.) be introduced only when 'mission critical'.

Stability, control over our future, long-term planning . . . there is no disagreement with these goals from Program Management. It is difficult to find our place in setting the direction of the Agency when the changes that have such a significant impact occur mostly at an external level. The challenge is to find ways to influence the development of these changes, advocate for the clients and staff of the agency around the impact of externally-imposed changes, and minimize disruption as much as possible.

We also need to focus our energies on those things over which we do have some control. Program Management is aware of the emotional impact of change and arranged a "Change Management" workshop for supervisors, facilitated by Blue Cross in April 2002. Kim Thomas has been assigned to the AJI Change Management

Committee, which is strategizing how to move staff through the AJI transition process in a supportive way. An internal change management committee will also be struck to determine what interventions will assist staff with the transition to government services.

5. Quality of Supervision

- Staff have identified the need to ensure that they receive regular supervision, supportive supervision, and that supervisors are held accountable for their actions. Further to this, staff expect management to address issues involving supervisors, ensuring that workers are not penalized for raising concerns about the nature of supervision.
- Supervisors have also expressed a commitment to regular supervision, clarification of the roles and responsibilities of social workers and supervisors in supervision, and the participation of social workers in the performance appraisals of supervisors through an anonymous feedback form.

As noted above, supervisors in Family Services have recently completed training in practical supervision skills, which aim to enhance the quality of supervision and, subsequently, the quality of service provided by workers to their clients. One of the outcomes of this training is the development of an agency supervision policy, as described above, which will be completed in December 2002.

Many supervisors currently advise their staff when their performance appraisal is being renewed, encouraging staff to forward feedback to the APM. Other supervisors have not engaged in this practice, but have expressed a willingness to do so, recognizing that some staff may prefer a formal structure, such as a confidential feedback form, to facilitate this. The Supervision Policy Committee is examining this as a component of the policy.

6. Workload

- Staff have made many recommendations around workload concerns. These include decreasing caseloads, capping caseloads, transitioning work to other programs within the agency, reducing paperwork (or allowing more flexibility in meeting paperwork demands), allowing new staff to start with smaller caseloads, and attending to the impact of systemic changes on the Agency's workload.
- Supervisors are also in favour of graduated caseloads for new staff, reduced caseloads for all Family Services staff, involvement of other agency programs in casework, and the creation of social worker float positions to assist with managing vacant positions or units in crisis.

Workload is a pressing issue that is identified in most child welfare agencies as being a major contributor of stress and job dissatisfaction. It is also a complicated issue to address, partly due to the difficulty in accurately measuring workload, partly due to the lack of resources required to adequately meet the demand for services.

Program Management agrees that workload is a critical issue throughout the Agency. The role of other Agency programs in providing services to clients is under review. Many of the strategies identified by task groups under the 'Days Care Initiatives' recommend involving these Agency programs in different ways, focusing on particular client groups or services issues.

Program Management also follows how other agencies across Canada are handling workload challenges. We are open to considering ideas from other agencies. However, as in other jurisdictions, the current political climate is not sympathetic to strategies that involve increasing staff. Provincial standards often add to workload and time constraints, and the Agency tries to balance between challenging those standards where appropriate and assisting staff to meet them in a responsible manner.

7. Quality of Service

- Staff are dedicated to the provision of quality service to clients, and have made recommendations that this be an Agency priority. Services that are client-focused and validate social workers' skills and decision-making abilities would assist in improving quality of service. Workload issues also impact on quality of service, as do the lack of resources (both internally and externally).
- Supervisors are also concerned about quality of service. One suggestion to improve internal quality of service is to strengthen relationships among units and between programs, such as by having designated contact persons between service units and other programs, and by arranging social events to facilitate the development of informal networks and relationships.

Program Management is also committed to the provision of quality services to our clients. Some recent initiatives are intended to improve the quality and coordination of services. For example, projects under the 'Days Care Initiatives' are intended to enhance services to clients. As well, the Family Support Program has recently launched a new process which will facilitate the provision of services to clients. Additionally, the training that supervisors received in May 2002 emphasizes the link between quality supervision and quality service to clients.

EG/mw

**Report on
Focus Group Research**

prepared for

**Winnipeg Child and Family Services and
The Manitoba Government Employees Union**