

SHELTER VOICES



Shelter Voices 2022 is the eighth national survey of shelters and transition houses (THs) that serve women and children affected by violence.¹ This special issue of *Shelter Voices* was designed to contribute to our pan-Canadian Feminist Brain Drain study. Rather than a snapshot day of women and children residing in shelters/THs, we are focusing on labour issues and the impact they have on staff, organizations as a whole, and service delivery.

STAFF TURNOVER AND VACANCIES

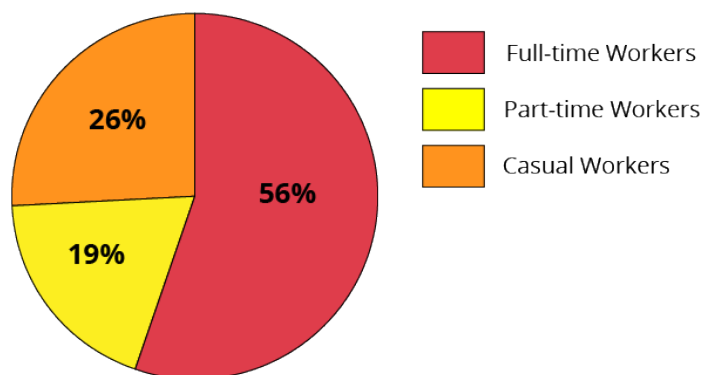
Overall, 5228 workers were reported by 243 respondents. This included 2915 full time workers (56% of the workforce), 973 part time workers (19%), and 1340 casual workers (26%) (See Figure 1).²

The survey data shows that many shelters have seen turnover of staff and/or management over the last year.³ In total, 1300 frontline staff and 126 executive directors or managers left their organizations over the last year. In relation to the total number of workers reported by survey respondents (5228), this represents 27% of the reported workforce.

While the number of staff leaving by itself is concerning, the issue is exacerbated when organizations are unable to find replacement staff quickly. More than half (56%) of survey respondents indicated that staff vacancies were being left unfilled longer than the previous year. At the time of the survey, there were 469 unfilled frontline positions and 54 unfilled management positions.

We asked shelter/TH organizations if they conducted exit interviews, and the reasons staff gave for leaving. Survey respondents indicated that staff left for a wide range of reasons, the most common being for another job (see Figure 2).

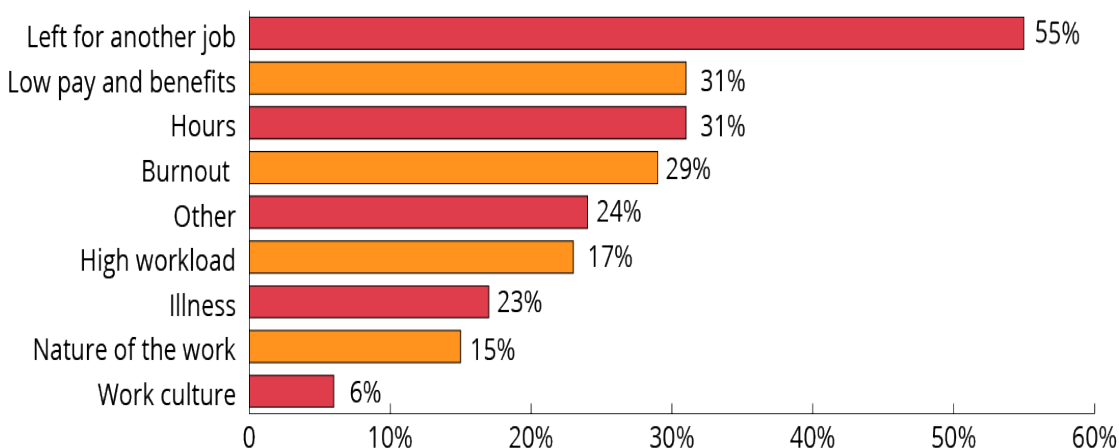
Figure 1: Number of Workers



Comments revealed that shelters/THs find it difficult to compete with other industries for employees. For example, they are unable to provide the pay or benefits of the public or for-profit sectors. Shelters feel as though they are operating as a “training ground,” with staff moving on once they have sufficient qualifications.

“Our staff are well trained [and] therefore desirable to a lot of other sectors, so good staff have more choices than ever before.”

Figure 2: Why Staff Are Leaving



Rapid and repeated changes in staffing and leadership have the potential to impact organizational stability, and staff wellness and mental health.

COVID-19 EXACERBATES EXISTING ISSUE

While labour issues in the shelter/TH sector have been a long-standing challenge, the COVID-19 pandemic deepened issues of burnout, high workload, and recruitment challenges. As with other industries, the pandemic has led to changes in service delivery, with many workers re-thinking their employment.



Since March 2020, nearly one-quarter (23%) of respondents had a turnover of their executive director. Changes in leadership, particularly during times of uncertainty, can contribute to instability and staff anxiety. When leadership leaves, this often results in a loss of institutional knowledge and relationships. While change can be positive, when it is combined with recruitment challenges and an ongoing pandemic, it can contribute to organizational strain and stress.

In addition to issues with employee recruitment and turnover, survey responses also indicate that there have been challenges recruiting and maintaining board members and volunteers since March 2020. The majority (65%) of respondents found it difficult to recruit and maintain volunteers, while 28% indicated that this was the case for board members. For many non-profit organizations, the pandemic affected the ability to engage in volunteer work, and this had not yet rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.⁴ This could be for a variety of reasons such as volunteers not feeling comfortable in a communal space or due to COVID distancing restrictions within the shelter/TH. With the loss of volunteers, this work falls to staff and contributes to increasing workloads.


“There seems to be a shortage of candidates that fit the minimum requirements. There is a crisis in finding appropriate management staff.”

Further complicating these labour challenges, the VAW shelter sector is experiencing an increase in the demand for services.⁵ *Shelter Voices 2020*⁶ documented this increase in the rates and severity of violence

that shelters/THs were seeing. Two years later, this survey shows an increase in requests for shelter spaces and outreach services. For example, more than half (60%) of shelters/THs reported that requests for shelter space increased and 73% saw an increase in demand for outreach services since March 2020. Despite the staffing issues and increased demand for services, the vast majority were able to maintain their 24/7 crisis support services (95%) and capacity (intake of new residents) (77%).

60% of shelters/THs reported that requests for space increased

73% saw an increase in demand for outreach services since **2020**



However, the impacts on staff are taking a toll. These growing demands, the ensuing workload, and navigating the pandemic professionally and personally have had an effect on the wellbeing of staff. The majority (64%) of survey respondents indicated that they had witnessed a decrease in the mental health of staff.

“We have been fortunate to continue to provide services despite all the ups and downs during COVID; as a result, however, staff are tired. They did not work from home, or have reduced days, but continued to show up everyday.”

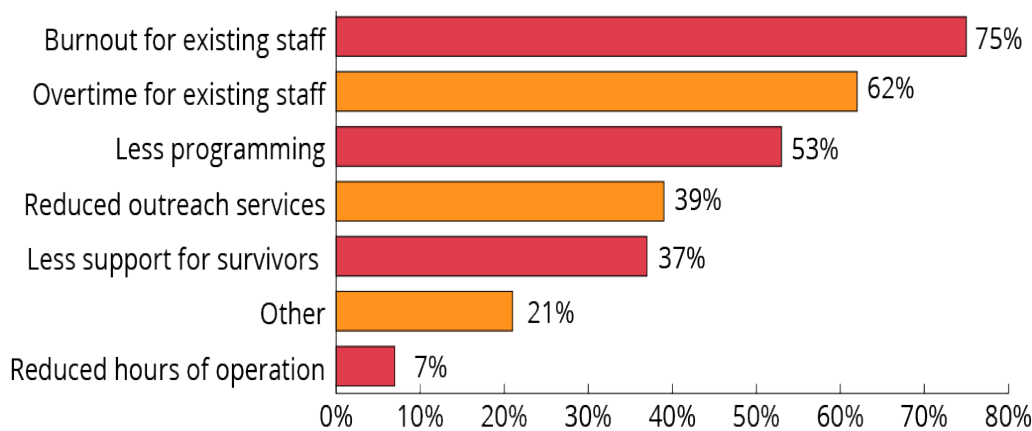
WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF LABOUR CHALLENGES?

Shelters/THs are seeing many negative impacts of staffing issues. Three-quarters of respondents are seeing burnout among existing staff and 62% indicated that staff needed to take on overtime work. Many organizations reported that staff are taking leave from work due to this stress and burnout. While organizations are trying to accommodate the need for stress and sick leaves, this also puts greater pressure on remaining staff members. Management and frontline staff have had to fill in for vacant positions, in addition to doing their own work, just to keep the organization running.

“Management is getting burned out due to having to work both front line and management to cover shortages.”

“It is hard when staff are taking time off for stress and then it leaves the rest of us short staffed, which makes us more stressed and burnt out.”

Figure 3: Consequences of staff leaving or staff shortages



Naturally, this also extends to the client experience with fewer programs, reduced outreach, and less support available for survivors. While only a very small portion of respondents (5%) were unable to maintain 24/7 operations, many did speak about the challenge of maintaining this service level. Many respondents found that when attempting to recruit staff, the long hours

and lower pay were both reasons cited by candidates for not accepting positions.

It was also indicated that staffing issues had contributed to growing wait times for those coming to the shelter/TH for support. As one responded noted:

“[It is] more difficult to support clients when you have to fill in the gaps of vacancies that can’t be cancelled. For example, the cook’s position cannot be cancelled so all staff have to take a turn to cook. Some services can be cancelled until the role is filled. Having vacancies in child support just means we can’t provide daycare services as often.”

Staff and management are both struggling with issues of burnout, under-staffing, and high workload. Many respondents noted that they or their staff were contemplating leaving their positions. For these reasons, many expressed their concerns about the future of the sector unless there are efforts to address labour issues.

Consistent with other VAW shelter sector reports, one of the key issues raised was ongoing funding difficulties. Current core funding for shelters/THs does not enable them to offer competitive salaries and benefits to employees. This leaves organizations struggling to attract and retain staff. Respondents pointed to the importance of the federal pandemic funding and the need for this type of stabilization to be ongoing, especially as costs of living continue to increase.

Staff qualifications and training is another challenge for organizations, which is also related to funding limitations. Staff and placement students will often work in shelters for a short time, gaining work experience before moving on to higher paying positions. Shelters/THs are investing in this training, but it is not staying in the sector long-term. At current salary levels, many respondents indicated that they could not attract well-qualified applicants, which was leading to employees in need of greater on-the-job training. These are all costs that shelters/THs must shoulder, without any accompanying increase in funding.

“The sector is in crisis and a huge investment of infrastructure support, training, and wages is needed to address the impact on staff at all levels, the quality of service, and the safety of survivors directly.”

RESILIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY

While organizations are struggling with labour issues, they are also proactively working to support their staff and are developing solutions that support retention. Among the practices organizations are implementing are:

- ◇ The expansion of personal or mental health days
- ◇ Revised salary grids, pandemic top-ups, and salary increases
- ◇ Increased benefits
- ◇ Wellness workshops
- ◇ Staff appreciation gifts
- ◇ Increased flexibility including hybrid work and shifting schedules
- ◇ Staff debriefing and team meetings
- ◇ Team-building and social activities



Organizations are showing their resiliency in the face of ongoing labour issues. While respondents spoke of burnout and exhaustion, they also spoke of the passion people have for this work and their organizations. Shelters/THs communicated the many ways that they are working to retain employees and improve the wellbeing of staff and morale within organizations. While working under enormously challenging circumstances, organizations continue to demonstrate adaptability and innovation to improve the working conditions for staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shelter Voices is produced by Women's Shelters Canada. We work as a unified voice for systemic change to end violence against women, while providing leadership for collaboration and knowledge exchange among shelters and transition houses across the country. WSC thanks the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions and the National Union of Public and General Employees for their contribution to *Shelter Voices*. Photos from **Unsplash**.

Learn more at www.endvaw.ca and on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at [@endvawnetwork](https://www.facebook.com/endvawnetwork).

¹The survey received responses from 243 VAW shelter organizations representing 439 shelters/THs including emergency, second stage, and mixed shelters. This included responses from every province and territory, urban and rural areas, and Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) shelters.

²Percentages add up to 101% due to rounding.

Last year refers to September 1, 2021 – August 31, 2022.

³ Last year refers to September 1, 2021 – August 31, 2022.

⁴ Barr, C & Jensen, E. (2022) Priorities and Challenges for Nonprofits in the First Quarter of 2022. Imagine Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.imaginecanada.ca/en/360/priorities-and-challenges-nonprofits-first-quarter-2022>.

⁵ Trudell, A.L. & Whitmore, E. (2020). "Pandemic meets Pandemic: Understanding the Impacts of COVID19 on Gender-Based Violence Services and Survivors in Canada." Ottawa & London, ON: Ending Violence Association of Canada & Anova. Retrieved from <https://endingviolencecanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FINAL.pdf>; Women's Shelters Canada (2020). Shelter Voices - Special Issue: The Impact of COVID-19 on VAW Shelters and Transition Houses. Retrieved from <http://endvaw.wenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Shelter-Voices-2020-2.pdf>

⁶WSC 2020.