

Needs Assessment Snapshot: The Effects of COVID-19 and Physical Distancing Measures on Staff who Serve People with Developmental Disabilities in Residential Settings

What we did and what we asked:

An on-line survey was sent to Developmental Agencies in Ontario with the request that it be forwarded to staff. The survey was open from April 5 – 22, 2020 and asked about the effects of COVID-19 and physical distancing requirements on people with developmental disabilities, family members and staff working in the sector. One hundred and twelve of the respondents provided residential services, 83% of whom were from the Toronto area. While the results do not necessarily reflect the views of residential services staff across the province, they do provide important insights into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Developmental Services Sector.

What We Found

Staff providing residential services reported negative impacts on their work and themselves personally:

- 92% reported increased concern for client well-being
- 92% reported experiencing increased stress and/or anxiety
- 88% reported a fear of contracting COVID-19 due to lack of PPE
- 68% reported that challenging behaviours amongst residents are increasing
- 52% reported an inability to meet client needs

Other Contributing Factors

These staff also provided additional commentary describing other factors contributing to a high-risk and stressful environment for workers and residents alike. Common issues were:

- A lack of Infection, Prevention and Control (IPAC) training for staff
- A lack of access to testing for COVID-19
- Difficulty accessing hospital care when needed for clients exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19
- The difficulty clients have understanding and maintaining physical distancing
- A feeling amongst staff that they are receiving inadequate compensation and support for the current demands of their job

According to the respondents, these effects were exacerbated by pre-existing factors, such as:

- Marginalization and underfunding of the developmental services sector
- The fact that many workers are part-time and work at different homes
- The difficulties people with developmental disabilities commonly face when visiting hospitals under regular circumstances

What can be done to address the situation now?

Recommendations for Supporting Staff

Residential service providers who responded endorsed several strategies that would be helpful in supporting them:

- Personal Protective Equipment (90%)
- Information and resources to minimize risk (80%)
- Receiving up-to-date public health and medical advice (78%)
- Ongoing communication and reassurance from management (75%)
- Employee Assistance Programs (69%)
- Tools and resources for on-line privacy (41%)

These results, and other suggestions provided by the respondents, were used to create a set of recommendations to reduce risk and address issues related to the stress and anxiety staff working in residential settings are experiencing:

- Address working conditions through:
 - Wage increases for residential staff
 - Employee Assistance Programs
 - Modified work rules for residential staff
 - Limiting work at multiple locations during pandemics
- Support for Infection Control through:
 - The provision of PPE
 - Training in IPAC and the use of PPE
 - Nursing support for isolation and quarantine situations
- Regular information and supportive communication from management

Additional Recommendations to Support the Work Staff do With Clients

- Plain Language Resources, Tools, Policies/Procedures, Protocols for:
 - Keeping clients active
 - Dealing with crisis and challenging behaviours
 - Dealing with residents who have COVID-19
- A Helpline to provide:
 - Aid in addressing challenging behaviours
 - Support for negative emotions and mental health issues experienced by staff and residents
 - Support in establishing new routines and activities for residents
 - Support in planning for a resident to go to hospital
 - Support to find resources to address challenges people are facing

What long-term advocacy is required?

Many staff providing residential services expressed that their work is generally undervalued by society.

In general, advocacy for improved wages, benefits, adequate training and resources, and improved working conditions for staff would help the developmental services sector to better cope with the current, and future, pandemics. Many areas of advocacy that could be undertaken on behalf of the residents these staff serve are outlined in the full report and the bulletin titled '*Needs Assessment Snapshot: Perspective of Frontline Staff and Management on the Effects of COVID-19 and Physical Distancing Measures on People with Developmental Disabilities*'. Work on those areas would also be helpful in addressing the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and physical distancing measures, experienced by staff.

For the full report and other snapshots go to:

<https://realxchange.communitylivingessex.org/human-resources-and-policies/>



For more information contact the authors of the report:

Barry Isaacs: barry.isaacs@surreyplace.ca

Janet Vogt: janet.vogt@surreyplace.ca

Maria Huijbregts: MariaHU@familyservicetoronto.org

Sector Pandemic Planning Initiative (SPPI)