

A large, stylized graphic of a plant with multiple leaves. The leaves are rendered in two colors: a dark blue and a yellowish-green. The leaves are layered and overlap, creating a sense of depth and movement. The background is a solid dark blue.

CSW

CONFERENCE
OTTAWA 2015

We're at the heart of our communities

Conference Report:
Communities in
Crisis & an Action
Plan for Renewal



Community Service Workers: At the Heart of Our Communities

Oct. 28-30, 2015 | Château Laurier, Ottawa, Canada

Conference Overview

Introduction	1
History	2
Lack of Awareness	2
Worker Sacrifice	3
Privatization	4
Community Services Action Plan	5



Over the last 20 years, we have witnessed a relentless chipping away at community services. Now they are horribly broken. It boils down to this: Can we work together despite all our differences? If we can do that, we've got power. The power to do good. — James Clancy, NUPGE National President, Ottawa

For more than two decades, Canada's community services have been in slow-motion crisis. Public awareness and public funding have both dwindled, leaving community service workers overworked, underpaid, and unsafe while more and more community service clients have been denied the support they deserve and have been left to fall through the cracks.

The consequences of this are real, and all Canadians suffer because of them. Our jails are overcrowded and dangerous. Our food banks can't meet the demand, and families and children are going hungry. More and more people are living on the streets.

But during a national conference in Ottawa in October 2015, a group of nearly 100 Community Service Workers (CSWs) from across the country resolved to turn the tide. They decided that by working together through their unions, they'll be able to remind Canadians of the benefits we all enjoy when our communities are kept strong.



History

The Constitution solidified the idea that people were entitled to quality services and that they were entitled to those services in every province. But now, we are facing two problems: not enough money from the feds and the provinces are not being honest about how those dollars are spent. — James Clancy, NUPGE National President, Ottawa

The need for federal funding for community services was first recognized after the devastation of the Great Depression and the Second World War. But since the 1990s, successive federal governments have reduced federal funding to the point where there are more and more gaps in the social safety net. As delegates heard, \$46 billion in federal funding has been cut from community services since the Canada Assistance Plan was scrapped in 1996.

Because it is the most vulnerable people in society who are most affected by the cuts, the loss of funding is more than just bad policy. It's an attack on basic Canadian values of fairness and empathy.

Lack of awareness

Delegates identified the low level of public awareness of community services as an obstacle to getting problems addressed. When people hear the term “community



services,” they don’t always realize it covers services that they or loved ones are using. That in turn makes it harder to mobilize support when fighting funding cuts.

Worker sacrifice

Fundraising happens all the time. It’s become normal for us. Constantly giving time away from our families to make up for lack of funding. — Melissa Dvorak, foster care services worker, Manitoba, MGEU

We do the work because we care about it, but it’s outrageous to ask us to subsidize it with poverty wages and volunteerism. — Anne Davis, transition house worker, British Columbia, HSABC

From stories delegates shared, it became clear during the conference that it is only the sacrifices of front-line workers that are keeping many services going.

Things like fundraising for one’s employer outside of working hours have become so commonplace that workers don’t even think about it when asked about how funding cuts are affecting their jobs. In one case, staff at a northern Manitoba children’s shelter had to fundraise for something as basic as an outdoor play area.



Working through breaks and unpaid overtime are common because workers worry about consequences if the work isn't done—like a client's hydro being cut off.

Basic security measures are also put on the back burner. For example, someone doing a student placement was staffing a group home by herself. Again, it was an example of corner-cutting that had become so common that the worker had to think a bit before mentioning it as an example of how funding cuts are affecting services.

Privatization

There's something particularly obnoxious about privatization of community services. Profiting from the vulnerable is immoral. Anti-privatization contract language isn't just about protecting our jobs. It's about protecting our communities so they're healthy and prosperous places to live. — Andrew McNeill, NUPGE privatization policy expert, Ottawa

Delegates discussed the threat posed by the combination of new forms of privatization and corporatization of non-profit agencies. Both divert funding from front-line services.

With privatization, profits for investors eat up desperately needed funds. And new layers of management and higher salaries for senior managers are issues with both privatization and corporatization.



Community Services Action Plan

At first, I didn't understand why I'd been invited to this conference. I work in health care, addictions. I didn't see what I had in common with people working in community services. But meeting you all, hearing about the work you do, it's clear to me that we actually have a huge amount in common. We have similar goals. And very similar challenges. — Patrick Daigle, clinical therapist, Nova Scotia, NSGEU

What defines the sector right now is this fundamental question: Where is the money? It's morally reprehensible to cut funding from community services, but it's also stupid public policy. We're spending more later to solve the problems we're creating today. — James Clancy, NUPGE National President, Ottawa

The Community Services Action Plan discussed at the conference sets out both policy objectives and the strategy needed to achieve them.

A separate federal transfer for community services, the Community Services Transfer, is a first step to ensuring adequate funding. This would be accompanied by a Canada Community Services Act to set national standards.

Implementing this will require a commitment at the national, component and local levels. Escalating actions and events will be used to mobilize support among members and the community, leading to National Days of Action.