

High expectations, low wages: Worker feedback on wages in the sector

Does this look like a job advertisement that would attract you?

Seeking hard working, dedicated, skilled and trained staff for rewarding work supporting people with disabilities. Job tasks are widely varied and ...

People who are first attracted to work in Community Disability Services do so for various reasons. They stay because they love what they do. This hasn't changed for many of us, but as a workforce that began in the late 70's and is dependent on a service model that is government funded, we continually find ourselves cycling in and out of crisis. This crisis is created by a flawed process that does not provide sustainable and predictable funding that promotes a viable consistent professional workforce.

We would like to share with you some of what today's workforce is experiencing through the comments we received from the most recent ADWA survey of Community Disability Support Workers. 90% of the 1258 people who completed the survey were **not satisfied** with their current wages. Workers were asked if they had any additional comments regarding wages. 1001 people provided additional information. The general level of dissatisfaction with their current wages is clearly reflected in the summary below.¹ We have included as many quotations as possible while trying to not be too repetitive and have left worker's direct quotations in blue text, so they stand out. Each quotation is from a separate worker.

Low wages

Overwhelmingly, the comments about wages were that they were far too low both in absolute and relative terms. Many people talked about living near or in poverty.

"It is sad what we get paid in this field. With the cost of living sky rocketing, it's hard enough to make ends meet in a two person working household, (so) I could just imagine a single person working household. We are worth so much more than we are getting paid."

"The wages are low for the expected job responsibilities. It feels like a slap in the face to barely be making more than minimum wage. A consideration should be made on the livable wage rather than minimum wage! An increase in wage should decrease employee turnover rates and make employees feel more valued."

"The current wages for a single person is at the poverty line. Costs continue to rise, yet wages have been stagnant for a decade. I am living paycheck to paycheck."

The low level of wages in absolute terms is most keenly felt by direct-service workers (frontline support workers and practitioners).

¹ It should be noted that these were topics raised related to comments about wages, not about other workplace issues. Comments related to other aspects of the job will be reported in future summary documents.

“The wages for the staff I supervise are very low. These staff work with children with disabilities in family's homes and in the community. The hourly wages range between \$15.75 and \$17.85. There is no guarantee of hours for these staff. The wages are determined by the funder (Family Supports for Children with Disabilities).”

“The wages for the frontline workers is barely enough to live comfortably off of. People work as many hours as they are allowed to and then work at other agencies, just to try and make ends meet. This puts people at risk as they are unable to get adequate amounts of rest to be able to do the job safely.”

“I am very concerned regarding frontline wages. Currently, frontline employees are earning below a living wage. We were deemed an essential service by the provincial government and our staff earn a wage that forces them under the poverty line or the need to work multiple jobs just to put food on the table. This sector has not seen an increase in wages for almost 8 years (unacceptable), however the cost of living has risen significantly”.

It is not just the direct-service positions impacted by low wages.

“I can barely keep my head above water. When I was just working one job as a Team Leader, I had to borrow from my line of credit every month just to pay my mortgage. I don't spend money on luxuries like restaurants or haircuts and discontinued cable to cut expenses. The debt on my line of credit was slowly building each month until I got a second job as a supportive roommate. Now I work 24/7 with the exception of 1-2 weekends per month when my roommate is away at respite and I am slowly paying down the debt on my line of credit. Financially, I regret getting into this field.”

“The wages we receive for work may seem like they are sufficient, what must be kept in mind however, and especially for positions like Supervisors, Managers and Directors, is that we have not received any increase to our wages for at least 10 years from the government. Frontline staff have received increases but we have not, so there is no cost of living increases and you end up making the same wage for many, many years as the cost of everything continues to rise. The job requirements for my position are extensive, and intensive as well as working on-call shifts and supervising staff and clients, hiring staff, training staff, managing client programs, sitting on committees... Burnout is something we fight with every day and not feeling compensated financially for the amount of work we do in a day is very frustrating.”

In an attempt to compensate for low wages, workers complete many hours in their primary position, have multiple jobs with the same employer and sometimes multiple employers.

“The frontline wages in particular are insanely low. Any agency or even families managing an FMS contract know that the wage is not high enough to sustain long-term staff, so turnover remains very high. ... I know a lot of frontline staff who work a regular 60 hour work week between positions because we are not able to offer a competitive professional wage based on the rates our funders will approve for wages, and majority of frontline staff do not view their role as their permanent career given the wage expectations.”

“The wage we receive in this field is barely enough to make end meet. That's why so many people in this field work 2 or 3 jobs which makes them burnt out and it affects their job

performance. It would be nice to be able to do normal work hours and be able to live off of it but not this field.”

“Wages in the sector are terrible. There is no way a dedicated employee should have to work 3 jobs to try to make ends meet because of the low pay. The low wages also do not help people see this as a career so we will continue to get untrained individuals who are not invested in staying.”

This has a profound impact on their lives, the people they support and their families.

“I have to work 3 jobs to make ends meet. That can cause lower quality of care due to tiredness and burnout.”

“I do not think the wages weigh fairly with the level of training, responsibility and legal liability, we are required to have. The wages are not enough to sustain the necessities of life as even a second income in a typical family household in Alberta. I and 75% of my coworkers require second jobs that stretch us beyond a healthy number of working hours outside of the home. All of those (overworked) coworkers also have children at home. The hours away from our own families are just creating problems with our mental health and our children’s health & wellbeing.”

“We need a living wage as most staff have multiple positions to be able to support our families. This puts our participants and families at risk as staff are often overworked, short staffed and unable to afford to take time to have a work and life balance.”

Given the broad range of tasks performed by workers in each position, it is not surprising they compare their wages to those that do similar tasks in government positions or in other sectors.

“I feel like our frontline workers are under compensated for the work they do as well. Supervisors are working a lot of frontline during this pandemic and are still required to complete their own job. We are on call 24/7 due to staffing shortages because of the pandemic and a lot of the requirements for licensed facilities add additional work on top of a full workload. We serve a very vulnerable sector and the job duties are very taxing but yet I could take a different job and make the same amount of money and have a quarter of the responsibilities that I do now. This is especially true for frontline workers. Why would someone chose to take on the workload we are faced with when they can work someplace else, make the same amount of money but do much less work. This sector definitely needs to be recognized for the job we do.”

“The wages in the sector from frontline and up are well below comparable jobs done in private and government unionized agencies. There has been no increase to wages in this sector in over 7 years and the field is in a crisis. A sustainable workforce is needed. Wages in the disability sector are often forgotten. We were cheated out of the frontline workers bonuses that other sectors got due to capping of the limits. We haven’t seen a pay raise since 2015. With turnover rates nearing 40% many agencies are struggling to retain staff. For family managed care, this gets worse as the lower wages and irregular work hours make this sector even more difficult to find staff. We were quick to recognize the hard work and efforts of healthcare workers as we navigate through Covid, but frontline disability support workers, many who did similar work as health care aides, were forgotten and their efforts forgotten.”

“As a Disability Support Worker, ensuring the well-being of my clients while in my care, I couldn’t stress more on how poorly we are over-looked when it comes to wages. I think Nursing Homes

and Community Support Workers should receive the same salary. This field is physical, emotional, and mentally exhausting, so it should be appreciated well paid.”

“I think my wage at my government job is always fair -- \$27 compared to my Disability industry which is \$20.61 for 5 years now. Not even a cent raise for 5 years now.”

“Wages in the sector do not match the wage our counterparts in government receive....Poor wages contributes to a high turnover rate as well as under qualified staff. This results in the necessity of staff to work beyond their normal scope of hours to deal with urgent situations that require immediate attention.”

“My second job is working as an education Assistant. I get paid \$30/hour and do similar work. I also haven't got a wage increase in this job for over 10 years.”

“We perform the same tasks as any health care assistant in the hospital and retirement homes. The only difference is the setting. It is only right that we be compensated the same way that they do. The prices for gas and basic goods has gone up in the last couple of months. It's only fair that the government should also look into increasing the minimum pay on all sectors.”

“The wages for sure are not livable wages. Most of the people in the sector do this job during school or have other jobs to be able to make any type of living wages. Please research and see firsthand what the supports of people with disabilities do day in and day out to see that they deserve a wage very similar to those in HCA or nursing. Many times the nurses we see during the stays in hospital (that being under psychological care) are afraid and do not know how to support our individuals. How is it that they get paid their crazy high wages and our workers including myself get just over minimum wage? Please start to recognize this sector as a profession and maybe the staff in these programs will not use our clients' needs for services as a revolving door.”

“I cannot survive on my current wage. The cost of living has gone up tremendously. Why are gov't workers getting paid more money than me? I also perform more daily tasks than some of them as I know the laundry/cleaners etc. @ Michener Centre are subbed out so staff do not do those chores. This leaves me performing more tasks throughout my shift and am being paid much less than Michener staff. How has this been fair?”

“I feel that it is very unfair to have PDD, funded by the government and making way more money than us while doing much less work. I am not undervaluing the importance of their work and positions, but it is very frustrating to see them once a year at a meeting and you wonder, what exactly are they doing the rest of the time. They are responsible for the clients on their caseloads, but they do not know them very well. The documentation we receive from them about a client are poorly written with numerous spelling errors and do not depict the abilities of someone in a professional job or someone who should be getting paid a wage for doing sometimes deplorable work.”

Some workers also compared their wages to those working in the fast-food or other industries.

“It is frustrating when you went to university for 4 years and are making the same amount as a Tim Horton's employee who has a grade 10 education. This is a necessary service that we

provide and we require a lot of skills and training to keep our clients, staff and community members safe.”

“Wages in the sector are extremely low, when you can work at any retail store and make as much if not more than staff in Disability Services who are essentially responsible for people's lives it's a pretty sad situation.”

“The amount of work we do for the wage we receive is unfair. We get paid equivalent to a high school student flipping burgers at McDonald’s, but are responsible for the welfare of our most vulnerable human beings.”

“How is it possible that we are entrusted with the lives of our client, yet we get paid the same wage as fast-food-workers? That is why this sector of work has a lot of turnover. Some places do not even provide you insurance (benefits), even if you are a full time employee. Yet we are expected to shut up and take it. We put our lives on the line during the Covid pandemic, and in return we are not paid fairly. It’s SICKENING. That is why I am leaving the industry, and will warn others about how they will be treated in this line of work.”

“I strongly feel that the CDSW's wages should not even be available. Why would someone come and do personal care, etc. when they can work at Walmart or Tim Horton's for not much less money and they have the potential of moving up and getting promotions which increases their wages? We have to wait for PDD to issue our money (which has been a very, very long time) but they are constantly demanding more from us agencies and the staff.”

“We have responsibility for individual’s lives, happiness and well-being. And aren’t paid much more than burger flipping at McDonald’s.”

“Our wages are very low. As a Supervisor, I am responsible for hiring frontline staff. We start staff at \$16.05/hour and then it goes up based on experience and education. We are not getting qualified staff for positions as people are more willing to work at McDonald's or Tim Hortons for more money and less responsibility.”

“The frontline staff start around \$15 an hour which is the minimum wage. This is way too low as the demands on this job emotionally and mentally (sometimes physically) are way more than any other entry level minimum wage job I have seen. When I started in frontline minimum wage was under \$10 so my starting wage of \$13.50 was amazing. Now it doesn't make sense to come and work in this field when you can find a much less stressful job for the same or more pay.”

“Frontline staff is a very important job. Frontline staff should be receiving more than a 16 year old at a fast food restaurant for what we do, for the knowledge we have and for the experience we have. I find with my job we have to take safety first and keep us safe. With the cost of living going up each year, we fall lower and lower on our bills. We do our job because we love it, we want to help people, but if we aren’t paid accordingly than it will be harder to find reliable employees and who really suffer is the clients.”

In addition to low wages, the sector is often exempt from labour protections (learn more about this information under the Caregivers Act ([Caregivers – Employment standards exceptions | Alberta.ca](#)) provided to other sectors. Workers talked about no paid overtime, paid vacation time, shift differentials

and many other “benefits” received by workers in other sectors (e.g., pensions, bonuses, critical worker bonuses during Covid, etc.).

“Alberta Labour Standards has ABUSED the workers in this field. The fact that frontline and supervisors have to work over 260 hours to be considered for OT in a 4 week period is not okay. Or the fact that there we again fall through the Labour Standards cracks for a proper on-call policy. We are allowed and expected to be on-call 24/7 without a scheduled break. Also, only getting paid the time TL's put in for on-call is not fair. If I have to stop my life on my day off to deal with a work problem I shouldn't get paid 15 minutes when no other field would allow that.”

“As a TL I am on call 24/7. There is no compensation for being on call every day. This interrupts my personal life at every level. I not only care for the individuals within the residence but also handle budgeting, issues with guardians, employment concerns for individuals working and one of the biggest areas is the personal hygiene/care along with medical/health issues for each of our individuals. I am responsible for leading a team of 8+ staff. With the high turnover of staff, supervisors are constantly in stress to find relief coverage and train new staff regularly. As the increase of the cost of living continues to rise it has become more difficult to make ends meet with no wage increase in sight in the near future. I have had to take on a relief position in order to try and earn extra income as I am unable to work a secondary job outside of the agency as I am on call all of the time. This means even more hours put in a high demand field causing a person to become worn down. There is a need for those who work in this field to be compensated accordingly to the demands of the job. Although I personally have a desire and a heart to continue serving the vulnerable individuals in our society, I too have to survive in our ever changing world.”

“This job is very demanding physically, emotionally and staff do NOT get proper breaks nor do we ever get vacations days with our own family. Often times we are running short staffed and are made to work in situations we are told we would never have to do such as working with clients alone. This is unfair, and often I feel totally taken advantage off!”

No increases

A very common theme in worker feedback about wages was discussing the lack of increases in wages for many years. The sector has not received wage increases since 2013-14 (with the exception of the general increase to minimum wages which impacted overnight-asleep positions predominantly and some workers received a one-time \$1,200 essential worker pay bonus in the spring of 2021, although not all workers were included in the latter). As a sector that was already low-waged, having no increases in the last 8 years have been especially stressful.

“I have been doing this job for 17 years I have not had a raise for almost ten years.”

“I feel that wages have needed to increase for a while now. I have been working the same position for several years and am at the maximum wage of \$18.79 and have been for 5 years.”

“I am sad/disheartened that there has been one pay increase in the 10 years I've worked where I am. No bonuses. I understand we aren't in this field to 'get rich', but the prices of absolutely everything have gone up so much over the years and our hourly rate has stayed the same (at least 5 years now). People often have more motivation when they are paid more as well.”

“As sub-contractors (supportive roommates) we’re often overlooked. We’re expected to comply with all agency protocols/ changes, and be effective team player, but were often overlooked when wages, incentives are considered, we’re not classified as agency employee... I truly believe the level of care/support we provide on a day-to-day basis should factored in. There are professions such as nursing aides, care aide in facilities, hospitals that compensate their employees well. In our profession it’s often overlooked.”

“No raise has been given from the government for years. The Alberta offered a 1200 “bonus for working during Covid,” then found lots of reasons to not give it.”

“I think it is incredible that there is no potential for me to increase my wage, even if I do excellent work, and that is because my agency is almost entirely monetized by government funding. The lack of monetary support is very hard for anyone working in the public disability sector. I love helping people, but I cannot afford to support a family (wife and soon to be 2 kids) with my current income and that is sad.”

“I have worked for over 30 years in this industry and the lack of cost-of-living increases is frustrating as everyone around us is getting increases. Our job is more challenging these past two years with so many changes and I know it’s not anyone’s fault but we feel more isolated and forgotten than ever before.”

“The wage we receive is fair at first, but when it caps out and there’s zero room for raises after that, it’s insulting.”

Increases in the cost of living (COL)

Given the low wages in the sector, what has hit particularly hard in the last couple of years are the cost-of-living increases.

“There has not been a wage increase in our field for more than six years. Wages do not keep up with inflation. It is difficult to recruit new staff with any training and experience when starting wage is just above minimum wage (\$17.00 per hour).”

“With the increased cost of living over the past 8 years full-time people do not make enough money to support their families. This makes it hard to retain staff and causes burnout among long time staff.”

“I enjoy working with my clients and enjoy the work but with cost of living going up, (it is) time to start looking for other work.”

“Wages for CDSW used to be a livable wage, but with the increase in rent and living expenses working 37 hours a week for \$20/hour before taxes isn’t enough to make ends meet. I love the work I do, and the support I offer and I feel like I would have more energy to offer myself and my individuals if I could make ends meet with one income, instead of two jobs with minimal down time.”

“I have worked for this particular company for 4 years the increments to obtain a wage is discreditable. I started at \$16.31 and in 4 years only making \$16.64. How can this be? When the cost of living is \$20.00 dollars or more!”

"I know it's been a frustration for my coworkers and me, but it's now become a huge concern with the jump in prices, for food, and gas. Some people are struggling just to get into work. I know some people have had to quit because they needed to find something closer to home. Also, with the removal of some of our holidays and sick time some of us are struggling with our mental health, the over burden on what is expected of us for less and less every year."

Recent increases in the cost of running a vehicle (increasing insurance costs, gas and vehicle maintenance) and other work-related expenses have hit workers especially hard.

"I have not had a raise in eight years!!! Because I sometimes transport clients I need to pay more money for car insurance. It is recommended we have a cell phone. We deserve a raise and due to the high cost of living need one. ... When you contrast what we do with say a restaurant server or a person who works in a grocery store, neither of whom must have a car to keep their jobs. I am required to have a car to transport clients."

"I am expected to use my car to drive clients to and from their jobs. I am not compensated for this wear and tear nor the gas I use and although I may be able to claim some of these expenses back at tax return time, this is money out of my pocket that I am asked to cover till my tax return is filed. Working full time at \$18/hour does not cover my monthly expenses. Furthermore, I complete daily reports for each client I work with and do these reports on my own unpaid time. I have 2 university degrees and cannot make enough money to support myself. I am currently looking for other employment because I cannot live on these wages."

"When I started in this profession 9 years ago the starting wage here was \$5 above minimum wage. Minimum wage and the cost of living has increased several times and our wages have remained the same. You now enter this profession at minimum wage and you have a lot more responsibilities than you do at a regular job. This makes it really hard to get new people into the field or to stay once they realize that they are responsible for other people's safety, security, and wellbeing. Whereas they can go to a fast food joint, have very limited responsibilities and make the same amount of money. Also just working in this field ends up costing you about an extra \$500 a year as you have to have 2 million liability on you vehicle and that increases your insurance premiums significantly."

"The wages have been too low and impractical for far too many years. The cost of living is skyrocketing and we basically are barely able to live pay cheque to pay cheque. God forbid any appliances need repair or replaced or that the vehicle, that is a job requirement in most areas of the sector, needs work done on it. Fueling up your vehicle is costly enough, never mind replacing tires, having tune up, oil changes, etc. We seldom get any kind words or shown appreciation for the work and services we do and then to slapped in the face with the criminally low wages we receive."

"For years wages have not even kept up with the cost of living. People aren't even "surviving" paycheck to paycheck they are struggling. With the requirements of certain jobs i.e., car, the gas, maintenance and even insurance has left people with few choices. Gas so they can work or groceries so they can eat. Car maintenance or rent. In order to keep your job you must maintain your car so now you are behind on rent. Insurance comes due but you have to choose between utilities or insurance, the choice is insurance so you can work. Far too many csws, dswws are working 2 and 3 jobs at a time just to keep up. Despite not being considered health care, we do a lot of tasks that are health care related. But not compensated as such. No raises, not even cost of living increases."

The inability to keep up with rising Cost of Living will have a significant impact on the sector.

“Wages should increase with the cost of inflation. The system appears to be broken. The only time wages increase for this sector is when there is a crisis. Wages/benefits should be looked at through a long-term, sustainable lens. This sector is rarely looked at as a profession of choice and more a stepping stone to get experience to aid in finding employment in other fields. Unless changes are made, we will not be able to attract or retain qualified, educated and experienced employees.”

“Canada's inflation rate rose to 18-years high, a significant jump in cost of living. And wages in this field is comparatively so low, that to support their living employees have to look for other sources of income. That makes them feel undervalued and exhausted. Wages needed to be higher, so employees feel motivated/valued and stay longer in the field they are passionate about.”

“I have not received a pay increase in the seven years working for this company and nobody can deny the cost of living has not increased in the past seven years. We undergo mental and physical abuse to our bodies on a daily basis and feel very underappreciated in our field. WHEN THERE IS NO CONSEQUENCE FOR POOR WORK ETHIC; AND NO REWARD FOR GOOD WORK ETHIC; THERE IS NO MOTIVATION! This is the way most employees are feeling now.”

It would be reasonable to assume that any workforce that is paid such low wages there would be similarly low expectations of the employees for work duties and the skills needed to complete them. According to employee feedback it is quite the opposite. Employees talked about excessive work expectations, demands, complexity, safety concerns and much more.

“The wages for direct-support workers are totally inadequate given the requirements for the positions. They are literally responsible for almost every aspect of people's day-to-day lives. It is not like other supports, even within the health care sectors, where workers are responsible for only one aspect of an individual's care. These workers can be personal care attendants, cooks, cleaners, medication administrators and health care providers, financial advisors/supporters, advocates, drivers, companions and much more, all in one shift. To make less than \$25/hour for all of those requirements is ridiculous.”

“I am a building coordinator and I am in charge of 10 staff and 18 individuals who have hearing, vision, mobility issues and some are in wheelchairs. Also, I have one individual who is one-on-one and another individual that we support at home with 2 staff. My responsibilities as a supervisor are many and my hourly wage is just \$21.50.”

“Shame on those controlling wages. Every day we are wearing so many hats, while cleaning up human waste of all kinds, and giving meds, providing full time care and supports and cooking, cleaning, doing office/ paperwork, providing emotional supports, driving to and from appointments, budgeting money, advocating and continually protecting people and so much more while keeping humans safe and well cared for. We deserve far more than we've been getting paid.”

“We are responsible for teaching individuals life skills such as cooking and cleaning, social and community skills, money and financial skills. We are responsible for all their medical needs and behavioural needs. We are responsible to help them create community connections, form and

maintain friendships and maintain contact with family. We are responsible to transport them everywhere they want to go. We deal with behavioural issues and have put our own safety on the line to meet their needs. Staff in this industry often spend more time caring for the residents than they do with their own families... Staff sacrifice a lot to keep the people we work for happy and healthy and loved. The majority of the staff I know who work in this industry work two jobs minimum because they cannot make ends meet. The amount of responsibility put on frontline staff is far greater than the compensation we receive. Isn't someone's life, their physical and mental health, worth far more than minimum wage? Isn't it worth a raise for those of us who have committed our lives to making someone else's better? I've worked with the same 3 people for 24 years. They are worth more than what I am paid and long term staff know things about the people they work for that cannot be learned from reading a log book. 24 years of service and I make \$20.10 an hour awake, \$15 overnight and no shift differential. I have no pension plan. I work two jobs and I average more money an hour serving beer than I do ensure that someone gets the correct medical attention. It really makes no sense."

"The individual I support has constant insomnia, so my current average is to expect to be awake for 24 hours at least once in my 72/96 hour shift rotation. I can't sleep until he falls asleep which can last 24-48 hours. Sometimes the individual is quiet and peaceful, sometimes he is active and busy, and sometimes he can have aggressive behaviours. His support structure is one-on-one 24 hour care, so it's just me when he's insomniac."

"I feel that we are so underpaid. We deal with different kinds of behaviour including verbal and physical abuse and aggression. We risk our lives at our job and there has been incidences where the support workers has been hurt and even killed. We do everything from meal preparation, house cleaning, medication administration, taking individuals out in the community to involve them in different activities, personal care, the list goes on. Hence I feel that we deserve same respect and wage that do justice to the type of work we do."

"During my shift it is my continued support for making meals, keeping the house clean and sanitized, laundry, giving medications at proper times, being vigilant over new meds and their time changes as well as changes in client diet concerns. Changing furnace filters if necessary, practicing drills such as fire with clients and then recording on [reporting software], adding meds to [reporting software] under client name. Weather permitting and ensuring the clients safety I weed the gardens, water lawns, remove snow. I have to know and understand Catalyst and to [reporting software]. Keeping on top of new items on to [reporting software] in regards to client or the residence itself. Keep on top of all company emails which are very many in one day most times. I remain flexible when I can to come in early or pick up extra shifts. I also need to keep on top of my qualifications and new ones are added and dictate whether I can even work for the company. I continue to take courses off of Surge and now I have to take the First Aid course on my free time many times and I have to pay for the course, do not get reimbursement nor do I get paid for the hours it took to take the course. I as I work alone and am expected to take...courses during my work hours but it's impossible on one shift as I work alone and cannot give my proper attention to clients and the residence itself. The other shift I do work another but in-between doing my duties and trying to focus on the computer it too is very hard. Most times I find myself having to do the courses at my own home and my own time. It is now becoming in reality that we have to be more qualified and stay on top of new qualifications added to our job descriptions but we do not get cost of living raises, we are paying out of pocket for courses just to keep our jobs. I feel that is very wrong. I have to work 2 jobs to stay on top of bills and emergencies that arise, such as car, furnace, etc. I try very hard to give my energy equally to both jobs but feel that this job demands more from me now and I get less financial support, the cost of everything is going up except my worth and wage."

Many workers talked about the increasing complexity of the work in the sector. In some cases, this related to working with individuals identified as having complex service needs.

“Work in a complex needs’ residence. Have worked with my clients for almost 7 years with no raise. Have received injuries as a result from my clients. And no raise, and feels like we are viewed as less than workers.”

“In our work, we do lifts, tube feeds, administer medication, manage behaviour, and risk potential violent outbursts. We also work long shifts alone or with short staffing. Furthermore, we are trained to do our job and do regular annual training. What we do is important and because of our wage, it is not a desirable job, leaving the individuals we support with sometimes inadequate staffing, and also causing regular burnout, potentially causing good staffing to leave. Increased wages would make a difference here.”

“I feel that as we move forward and the environment changes around us, the responsibilities and expectations for workers in our field increase with elderly individuals aging in place or younger individuals entering the system with more complex needs we are being asked to perform more complicated or high-risk practices without fair compensation for the tasks.”

“Having had several clients with complex needs and behavioural issues, I feel I wear many hats in my role as outreach support worker. The role can be very challenging and demanding and I feel that the hourly wage I earn does not reflect the complexity and dynamics of the role.”

“Would be really good if there should be a wage difference on complex houses, esp. that I work in different houses and I noticed that one house is tougher than the other but still get the same pay.”

In other cases challenges relate to increases in the number of people they support.

“I believe, that personally my workload has increased significantly over the years without an increase in pay to reflect this. Also, it has been many years since we've had an increase. Also, the rapid increase in inflation has eroded my income considerably. I do believe it would be fair to have a significant increase in pay for those who are doing the work I do.”

“Paid appropriately for your caseload size (for practitioners) a caseload of 5 vs a caseload of 30. I had a caseload of 6 when I started 10 years ago and now have 30 (obviously unmanageable, but could at least be paid better).”

Others mentioned COVID and pandemic-related protocols as adding to the complexity of the work.

“I haven't had a raise in eight years. I have worked in the field for over thirty years and have always had at least two jobs to make ends meet. I have a supportive roommate who stayed home from mid-March of 2020 until July of 2021 from his day program and received no additional assistance/funding.”

“Starting wage is very close to min wage, raises are very low and capped in some cases, practitioners and team leaders take on a huge workload and receive little compensation for their extra work and stress. We received the 2 dollar "Hero Pay" during the peak of Covid but only for

a pay cheque or two before it was stripped away. Most of us have been working straight through the entire time while other industries shut down.”

“Working as a frontline staff during these difficult time without any hesitation, governments should compensate everyone in disability service field fair. Other provinces are giving extra dollars with basic salary.”

High demands and low wages are taking a toll on the sector.

“Our wages are too low compared to all the work we do. We support our individuals in their houses, day program, community plus all the paperwork the company asks us to do. We care for all our individuals but for us to keep paying our bills we had to have always a second job. We are really exhausted and this is affecting our mental and physical health. Many of my coworkers decided to leave the company and join a different sector with much better opportunities to grow, wages and benefits. I hope something can change soon. I really love my job but I'm felling than I can't continue working 2 jobs any longer.”

“In this sector, staff are expected to do personal care, administer medication, have knowledge in all medications we administer, be knowledgeable in mental and physical ailments, provide healthy meals, budget money for food, personal items, and bills. Arrange transportation and plan activities both inside the home and within the community, we arrange and accompany (people we support for) Dr visits, dentist appointments, optometrists, haircuts, foot care, etc. We are the ones who call an ambulance when needed, go along, stay at the hospital and comfort the individuals we serve. We are the ones who ensure many of our clients experience Christmas with gifts and holiday meals. Additionally, sometimes are put in dangerous situations when extreme behaviors occur. As a disability worker we are continuously being trained and certified. We are involved in every aspect of our client's lives and constantly strive to provide them with the best always doing our best to accomplish that. We are not compensated to the same degree to which we are accountable for or the standards we hold ourselves up to and for this reason many great staff understandably leave for better monetary offers.”

“The combination of low wages and higher expectations is leading to stress and burnout amongst the workforce. Having to juggle multiple jobs and long hours, especially during the pandemic is having its toll.”

Given the low wages, somewhat contradictorily, the education and training expected for the sector is high.

“I went to college and received my diploma in disability services. I spent \$40,000 on an education to have a career in a field desperately needing qualified care providers. My \$18/hour wage barely allows me to pay rent, not to mention utilities, groceries, gas, etc. Increasing wages will keep employees in their positions. There are so many vacancies in this field because people can get jobs that pay higher, with less physical and mental stress, leaving our individuals with inadequate care and highly burnt out staff. People with disabilities are still PEOPLE! They have as much value as a human being as the rest of us do, and I am so disgusted that those in the government see them as peons and societal drags. It's time for government to step up and acknowledge these people, and their care providers.”

Stress, burnout and quality of life for sector workers

Not surprisingly, the combination of low wages and high expectations has a fundamental impact on the health, stress, burnout and quality of life for workers in the sector.

“The wages are way, way too low for the amount of work we do. This is a stressful job working in the mental health sector. We have not had a raise for years while all bills, daily commodities and everything needed to survive has gone up over and over. We end up working too many hours just to make ends meet. This way of life is putting too much stress on our families. Never have time to spend with children and spouses. No time for self-care we go to work while sick because if you don't go you worry about making ends meet.”

“I have had many conversations with people who work in this sector and have found the general consensus is that we are overworked, understaffed and underpaid. This position causes serious mental and physical strain and without a wage to match, it becomes a revolving door business. Good employees can't afford to keep working the way we are expected at such low wages. New staff are hired and quit on a daily basis. There isn't enough funding for training or providing the supports needed for the best service, and it's the clients that suffer the most. A higher wage would ensure stability in the employees, saving extra funding for training as less people would be leaving after. It would allow for higher requirements for hiring, ensuring that the clients are getting the best possible care.”

“This is an emotionally and mentally taxing job that is under paid and often does not have affordable benefits or paid sick days which are essential in maintaining a healthy life/work balance and allowing time for self-care which is so important in this sector. Without self-care a person can burnout very quickly which leads to mistakes in the workplace or losing a competent and valued member of the team.”

“Frontline workers are under paid so they compensate by working more hours to have a decent lifestyle that they don't get to enjoy because they're at work all the time.”

“I believe our sector is vastly underpaid for the amount of responsibilities staff take on in our position on a daily basis which can lead to staff dissatisfaction and burnout.”

“I work with complex young adults and these individuals require more attention and care from staff. Sometimes staff are burnt out due to excessive pressure from work and there is lack of adequate resources for self-care. I strongly believe staff working in the disability sector require an increase in wages. Inflation and COVID 19 effects are causing a lot of people to live below standards leading to poor performance and lack of team work. Disability support workers definitely need an incentive or an increase in wages.”

“Providing a higher wage could promote a healthier job market within the sector, making it more competitive and desirable. Additionally, with higher wages would improve standards of hiring making staff more competent and foster longevity/ consistency for both the agency and the individuals we work for.”

Inevitably, the result is turnover of qualified staff which has a negative impact on everyone.

“Wages in the sector are terrible. There is no way a dedicated employee should have to work 3 jobs to try to make ends meet because of the low pay. The low wages also do not help people see this as a career so we will continue to get untrained individuals who are not invested in staying.”

“The low wage is a direct reason there is high staff turnover, which in turn affects clients ability to form healthy attachment and rapport with people that are sometimes all they have. This is especially difficult when a diagnosis is complex and stems from trauma. How can one progress when their support staff is constantly changing, I cannot imagine the frustration! It (poor wage, demanding job and working multiple jobs) is a direct reason that people are burnt out and struggle to manage their own family dynamics and self-care. We work in a field where we preach self-care to our clients but have limited funds to actually invest in our self-care. Wages need to match inflation as well! This is huge, if food is going up then our wage needs to follow. Cost of living, healthcare needs, gas etc. I'm disgusted that our government has frozen wages for this long, it makes absolutely no sense, based on inflation!”

“I had to find employment in other sectors due to the low wage. For the amount of work and situations we deal with the wage is not adequate.”

“In general, within non-profit and social serving or human services wages are not typically high, however, an individual working in these areas does need to earn at minimum a living market wage. Sadly, I have worked in social serving since 2009 and as much as I love the work, I am planning to retrain through post-secondary and switch careers to work in Human Resources in the private or public sector.”

“Our work requires a lot of care and patience and hard work. Without proper compensation for that a lot of our staff burn out easier due to high stress work environment as well as a stressful home life due to lack of finances. The constant turnover of staff upon the individuals that receive our care is NOT fair and hurts them, which defeats the purpose of the service that we provide. Caregivers should be compensated fairly for all of the hard work that we do.”

No value, no respect

Given all of the above, it should not be surprising that the end result is staff members feeling devalued, taken for granted, not being treated as professional, treated unfairly, receiving no recognition and no respect and more than likely will leave this work.

“I supervise around 45-50 people, liaise with 7 guardians, 6 families, 3 public guardians, 4 trustees, train 23 staff, handle all hiring for my teams, sit on 3 committees, co-chair another committee, volunteer holidays to help clients, expected to physically help my individuals move, and I could go on. I also receive ZERO compensation for driving, though I'm expected to. There is no one in the private sector managing that many things and staying that busy with as little pay. I'm great at my job, likely the best in my agency and think every day to quit and move to something that pays me what I'm worth.”

“I believe that everyone working in the disability services sector (non -profit organizations) are under paid as the population we serve are under-valued as individuals.”

"I love my job as a practitioner. I work a lot of hours and enjoy it. But unfortunately, the wages are nowhere near fair. I am able to do this job, at this rate, because my spouse is employed and is the main earner in our home. If I were to be supporting myself and had children, I would have to work elsewhere. We are consistently hiring but unfortunately the wages are too low for people to take on this job."

"Inflation is a serious issue right now, and I feel like my job is undervalued to the public and the government. This is a very difficult job, and even with all the training and degrees were still paid barely enough to meet our basic needs. I'm surviving I'm not living. We live in Canada. This SHOULD NOT be happening."

"The disability field as a whole needs an overhaul. I have worked for 15 years in this field and I love my job. I do not love feeling invisible in the community or in Alberta in terms of people not knowing or valuing the jobs we actually do every day. The fact that many of us had to fight for the Critical Worker's Benefit is proof that our government does not understand our jobs, and certainly does not value what we do every day. This is a field that needs recognition and a voice right now because the people we are supporting are the ones who will be affected the most. If workers do not feel valued in terms of the wage they make, they will move on to other jobs that do and because of that, we often lose many great staff."

"I do not believe we are given a fair wage. I would agree with the forgotten statement. We work with clients that have disabilities and who are also medically fragile. We administer medication and take care of personal care just like a nurse would. The job can be physically demanding and mentally depending on the unit. Also we are frontline workers in a pandemic where we take care of clients that have COVID-19 as we put ourselves and family members at risk because we are taking a chance of exposure. I do believe we deserve a wage increase that would reflect the wage we receive with the work that we do."

"The disability sector is overlooked and underpaid for the care provided. Compensation is unfair and does not recognize the hard work individuals complete each day for our vulnerable people."

"I am an essential part of the society, I give the people and families with disability support and should be treated better by my society and employers which starts from the remuneration I get."

"We do a lot but are hardly appreciated. We take lots of risks for the individuals we support but the appreciation is nothing compared to input."

"I believe it is a major slap in the face to go to school to study to be in this field and be paid only a few dollars above minimum wage, as the starting wage is a little over 17 dollars. I believe we should be paid higher as we are working jobs where we are responsible for someone(s) life during the day. We are working with individuals to ensure they are exceeding in life, reaching goals, and being treated fairly, this is just small examples of what we do. However our pay does not reflect the hard, dedicated work we complete for our individuals. Our wages need to reflect the respect for workers in this field."

The bulk of the anger for the situation is directed at the Government of Alberta, but also sometimes directed at others.

"I am feeling better about my wages but that is based purely on the fact that I have recently been promoted and got a raise. Had I not, I would still be making \$18.50, and had no raise in the over 3 years I have worked for the same company. This has nothing to do with the company I work for but the fact that the government does not see our sector as a viable place to invest money."

"I have worked in this field for 16 years. We do not get cost of living raises. What other sector would someone have to work 13 hours a day. Just to pay the bills. We are working and supporting human beings. No wage increases in 7 years. When money is sent to agencies none makes it down to the frontlines. Yet administration keeps hiring in the office. More demands placed upon frontline staff."

"We have not had a wage increase in several years. Not even cost of living. It's an insult when Kenney can give wage increases to his cabinet members but not to those caring for the vulnerable Albertans."

"It is extremely frustrating to have expectations from PDD increase substantially every year with no compensation. Workloads have increased every year, and there is no acknowledgment. I am a single income household, and as a manager, I can't pay my bills with wages the way they are. Cuts to all areas are making it impossible to survive. I work extra hours as a host to try to make ends meet. This is not right in any way."

"I feel our industry is significantly underfunded, AND undervalued by our government. We haven't seen a wage increase in years & years. Yet our job is critical to the quality of life of many excellent people. And our wage is directly related to being unable to attract/retain qualified trained staff. Which then dominoes and affects the consistency of quality of service in some cases. It's extremely frustrating."

"The wages have been abysmal, and it is very upsetting. The company expects an arm and a leg from us employees, but to thank us or to compensate us, they give us a pat on the back with a very generic and monotonous 'thank you'. We do so much for the company and for the people we serve, but the compensation we get back is a fraction of what we do. Considering how some people who have worked years at the company but are stuck at the top of the pay grid because that's how the 'system' works, it is embarrassing to be part of this industry at these wages."

"I believe that management should make less money and the frontline staff should make more money hourly. I don't receive benefits because I have sleep over shifts. I am away from my family for more the 30 hours a week. I have also completed my HCA certificate. If the staff make more money they don't mind working. If they pay more than they will have more staff because the work we do is tough and gross at moments. I strongly believe that management shouldn't benefit from the final decision that comes from this survey."

"I believe that the wages in our sector are a direct reflection of the value the government and greater community see in our work, but I believe if they were based on the value our participants and the families we serve that they would be significantly higher."

“Nearly 8 years without a wage increase is bull crap in my opinion. It means our government neglected us all and many left to make more money elsewhere. The Alberta Government should be sued for neglect.”

“We all know times are tough; however this is no excuse for dishonouring the cost of living allowance which would keep these wages more in alignment with reality. At an absolute minimum this should be reinstated immediately to facilitate people staying in the sector, if for no other reason.”

“There are people who have worked in my profession (for the same company) almost 25 years and they make \$2 more than I do (and I’ve only been in the industry 5 years).”

“There should be no cap because loyalty is worth so much. The amount we do for our individuals goes beyond the job requirements, we treat them like family so they feel supported and safe, all while being away from our own families. In the Association I work for, we don’t even receive a pension, and that alone is an insult, because they don’t care about our future in the slightest. To our employer we are all dispensable and it shows in how we’re paid long term.”

“I consider that as people who work with people we feel not appreciated and underestimated for what we do. In my role I work with staff and do administration work. The load of work is extensive. Dealing with behaviors and constant situations is not an easy task, but when you like what you do it makes it easier. The part that is not easy is not feeling appreciated for what you do and it is not reflected when you receive your paycheck. People who work in this field are as important as a nurse in a hospital or a baker in a bakery, there is no difference.”

Implications for the sector: Are headed for, or are already in, the perfect storm?

Reading all of these direct quotes from individual workers gives one a strong sense of the state of the sector. Some of these worker quotes give us an idea of the overall impact that low wages, high demands and low appreciation are having on each individual worker, the sector as a whole and on the people who rely on us for support.

“As the HR Coordinator, I am noticing how increasingly difficult it has become - and is still becoming - to recruit quality employees with such a low wage for our frontline workers. Our organization has worked very hard to set standards of required education and ongoing training to ensure our supported individuals are receiving the very best supports in a safe, professional and empathetic environment but with wages being such a huge barrier, it is feeling like we are fighting a losing battle. As a result, we have vacant positions and our amazing staff are filling in for these positions working their maximum allotment of hours, which in turn puts them at risk for burnout. Just this last week, I had a new hire come to me with many apologies and a letter of resignation after being with us for two weeks because he was unexpectedly offered a position outside of our sector—making \$7.00 more per hour! He asked if we would be able to match that wage—or come close to it—because he loved his new job, his coworkers and our organization's values and would have preferred to stay on with us. Unfortunately, we couldn't come close to matching and so, as the main provider for his family, he had no choice but to move on. This is happening more and more and is painstakingly frustrating for us at multiple levels of our organization. I am sincerely hoping that your efforts will reap some much overdue wage benefits for our staff! Thank you!”

“Although my wage is higher due to having a supervisory role and additional responsibilities, I recognize that our field’s wages are dangerously low. The expectations on support workers are increasingly demanding. We must regulate and confidently display to the Government of Alberta we are competent professionals. Regulating education requirements for our entire sector is essential to giving us credibility, and without that we will remain marginalized and wages will struggle to increase. Otherwise, we will have to all go into poverty and demand a bailout minimal increase to keep our sector above water. Education regulation is absolutely critical and must be prioritized and mandated into policy of our funder (PDD).”

“Support workers in this sector are underpaid for the wide variety of expertise required. I work in secure units with highly complex individuals where violence can and has occurred. We often act as people’s main support system, while trying to improve people’s overall quality of life. We keep the home clean and safe, prepare meals, administer meds, ensure community inclusion, plan outings, support clients through mental health crisis, manage and take clients to appointments, help maintain family relationships when possible, ensure accurate documentation each day, and maintain up-to-date training requirements/certifications. On top of all this, most positions require the use of your own vehicle with added insurance and gas costs. It seems that in order to make a decent income as a support worker people must work a ridiculous amount of hours. Many work at more than one agency. If we want to continue attracting educated and highly skilled workers to this field, wages must increase. Having a healthy work/life balance is incredibly important to avoid burnout and ensure the highest quality of support to the clients. I am a full-time student at the University of Calgary, so during the school year I only work part-time. I am worried that after I graduate, my current wage will not be enough for living expenses and to repay my student loans, especially with the current rate of inflation.”

“I would love to stay in this sector and am a very capable and productive worker but the lack of wages consistently puts strain on my mental and emotional health and forces me to constantly evaluate other options. I feel like I’m always on the edge of quitting and trying other professions that pay more. I have demonstrated that I am more than qualified for the work and exceed job description and expectations consistently as well as maintain a positive working relationship with the individuals I support. ALL OF THAT CONSIDERED AND STILL NO RAISE. I know of few other sectors where those who demonstrate exceptional skill and productivity remain at the same pay level. Essential work and still no raise. Changing lives for the better and still no raise. Working in a complex mental health situation and still no raise.”

“I am more concerned with the wages afforded for our front-line workers. They are compensated only marginally above minimum wages as provided by PDD. This is a challenge when our "competition" becomes fast-food and retail sectors. We often have trouble recruiting and retaining employees based on low wages. The low wages also add pressures for the workers who find themselves needing to work multiple jobs to afford living costs in Alberta. This is troubling because they end up dealing with burnout, health concerns and mental health challenges from working too much. In the end, this results in a lower quality outcome for the individuals accessing supports. I think a higher wage is necessary for the disability services sector.”

“We go above and beyond our job titles every day. We work with challenging behaviors and high needs. When you have people tell you, “Wow I couldn’t do that job.” That’s a job right there that needs to be recognized and paid for the work we do. Yes it is rewarding and fun that’s why I’ve been in the field for 15 years but it’s also hard and there are a lot of times myself and my

husband who is also in this field feel burnt out. We put our all into our jobs and some days feel like we have nothing left for our kids. It's at a point now where we question the extra responsibilities we have taken on and don't want to do the extra work as we are not getting compensated for it. It's just not worth it. We are getting more challenging clients for intakes again no increase but more work load and stress put on us. Cost of living increases every year has my husband and I thinking of career changes. We can hardly afford child care with two young children groceries and bills. We love our jobs but something has to give and soon. Things are dire!!"

"The lack of increases by funding bodies are unacceptable. Requirements and expectations continue to increase with no increases to compensation, not even cost of living increases. Organizations continue to be asked to do more with no increase to funding. Frontline workers are barely above minimum wage, yet we are asking people to be trained, educated and responsible for providing services to highly vulnerable individuals in often challenging conditions. The wage gap between people working in public sector jobs completing similar tasks continues to widen. Finding trained employees continues to become more difficult for organizations. People are not attracted to a field where education is difficult to come by, expectations are not in line with compensation and wage progression does not exist. This is detrimental to all parties. It is more difficult for organizations to provide quality serves, it is more difficult for people to enter the field and it is more difficult for individuals being served to receive consistent quality services."

If we want to ensure that educated, trained and skilled workers are there for future generations of people with disabilities in Alberta, it is incumbent upon all of us to come together to rebuild our sector. People's lives are literally dependent upon us taking decisive action now.

For more information about the Essential but Forgotten campaign: www.adwa.ca

To contact ADWA about the campaign or to share correspondence sent or received: campaign@adwa.ca

THANK YOU!