

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the interest of the social services sector in the development of a long-term human resources strategy, a consortium of academic and professional organizations partnered with each other and the sector Partnerships Initiative of Human Resources Development Canada to undertake a multi-stage sector study process. The partner organizations are:

Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW)

Canadian Committee of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (CCDDSSW)

Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW)

Regroupement des Unités de formation universitaires en travail social (RUFUTS)

As an integral part of the sector study process, a Steering Committee was struck to guide and monitor all aspects of the endeavour. The Committee was composed of representatives from the consortium organizations as well as a number of other professionals from across the social services sector. The Steering Committee met regularly to review findings and develop the Strategic Directions document that concludes the research report.

The efforts of the consortium as a whole covered some five years, starting with the development of the consortium, then contracting two studies to assess the feasibility of subsequent research, and then contracting out the full-scale resources study.

Sector Study Methodology

The methodology for the final study relied on collection of data from an array of sources, both qualitative and quantitative. Analytical techniques included extensive analysis of labour market statistics covering a 10 year period, projecting trends for the future, and content analysis of interview data.

The research was based on the following data sources:

- Literature review update (from preliminary feasibility studies)
- Labour Market Analysis of social services sector, including five occupational categories, two primary industries and six sub-industries. Data were drawn from the Census, Labour Force Survey, National Graduate Survey and other sources,

- include social work associations, government program administration records and educational institutions.
- Fax-back survey of 109 employers across Canada
 - Supplementary telephone survey of 51 employers drawn from fax-back respondent pool
 - 338 in-depth, open-ended interviews (largely in-person) with key stakeholders. These included: employers/managers from government social service and health ministries, educators at college and university levels, students, employers in the private and not-for-profit domains, employees, and a small number of consumers. In that some interviews were focus groups, the actual number of respondents is appreciably larger.

Highlights of Research Findings

The social services sector is at the nexus of two opposing forces – an increase in the scope and intensity of service needs and an ever-shrinking resource base for those they serve. The structure of service delivery is undergoing radical alteration, as the traditional primary service source, the public sector, devolves by contracting for services with private and/or not-for-profit organizations. At the same time that standards are raised for the certification and accreditation of workers, there is a concurrent, contradictory trend toward increased use of other professionals or even non-social service workers in “allied” fields for positions once held by social workers as a professional group. Decreasing job security, loss of autonomy in the name of multidisciplinary, lack of support for the stresses and demands of the job all contribute to a negative synergy in the workplace.

Part and parcel of this dynamic tension is the continued diffusion of the identity of the social work profession itself, and a perceived concomitant devaluation of social services as a whole. The widely reflected need to develop a coherent, clearly defined professional identity is seen as a crucial building block for strengthening the position of the social service sector as a whole.

In the face of this concatenation of change and its often daunting impacts, the labour market statistics show that in sheer employment terms, the social services are a relatively good place to be, if unemployment rates alone are considered. There was strong employment growth for much of the 1990's. The social services labour force also has one of the lowest unemployment rates of any sector in the country. However, earnings are lower than in many other professional fields. There is more to working than these basic numbers, and one of the strongest themes of the research is the on-the-job stress reported by the full range of respondents. Increased workloads, having to do more with less, and service users who are experiencing more intense, multi-dimensional challenges to their social, psychological and economic survival - all contribute significantly to making social service employment both extremely demanding and sometimes very dispiriting.

Future employment growth in the social services sector will continue to be a balancing act between societal needs and public policies as to how best to meet those needs. High

growth of the geriatric population will require extensive, innovative health and social services programming. The rapidly growing Aboriginal population, with its significant needs and commitment to developing appropriate service delivery models will account for even higher demand for social services. In some provinces, new areas of service need are emerging from the significant immigrant and/or visible minority populations. Policies to support social services are expected to be somewhat more expensive, but also to continue to emphasize cost-contained community-based responses. The sector is expected to show overall employment growth that at least matches the overall Canadian population growth rate. Within social services, the occupations that are expected to be higher than the overall population growth rate are social workers (usually defined as having a BSW) and - even more so - specialists in a range of counseling services.

Context of the Sector Study

It appears that there will be enough of a supply of social service sector employees, based on the numbers being produced by the colleges and universities. However, sheer numbers on the supply side does not mean that there is always a match between the supply of workers and the demands of employers, in terms of skills and experience necessary to serve the evolving client profile well. The findings from employers and from the analysis of educational institutions indicates that more work remains to be done to prepare recent graduates - or to enhance the skills of existing workers - to respond to the demographic and cultural changes flagged in the research.

Relatively few universities provide courses at either an elective or required level in most of the subject areas identified in the research as high skill and/or service needs in future. This includes programming that focuses largely on Aboriginal peoples, poverty, youth at risk, immigrant groups, the aging, substance abuse, and child protection. The demand for high skill levels in child protection work continues. Need for employees to have enhanced computer skills and more of the “employability skills” of self-direction, communications, and teamwork are also identified by employers as an area for strengthening training of workers in the social services sector. These appear not to be explicitly addressed at a course level in university social work programming. There is a sense that college courses tend to be more closely linked to meeting labour market demands, but the research did not pursue this issue in depth.

Whatever the limitations of course offerings in universities, the practicum component for the BSW and college courses was universally lauded for its value in helping students focus their career decision-making and for enhancing job-readiness. Employers draw heavily upon the practicum process for their own hiring of recent graduates.

In Sum

All in all, the social services sector is a vibrant, dynamic field, occupied by dedicated individuals and organizations. Employment opportunities are good, but employment conditions are increasingly taxing and professional recognition is less robust than it has

been. The societal support of the field is weakening, as a part of the weakening of societal commitment to support the most vulnerable in society. The link between labour market demand and the supply side as related to educational preparation of future workers is seen as not being as strong as it should be to sustain and even increase the sector's viability. The need for the profession to clarify its identity, its goals and objectives is evident. In doing so, it will enable the sector to meet changes from a position of well-founded, well-documented strength. This sector study should provide an important foundation for the strategies the sector will develop to meet the changes to come.