



The Personal Support Worker in Ontario 2001 – 2017: An Occupation in Crisis

Impact of PSW Shortfalls: Home Care Risks

Department of Human Resources

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**The Ontario Personal Support Workers Association
101 Holiday Inn Drive
PO Box 29045
Cambridge, Ontario
N3C 0A0
866.723.9082**



Introduction

The impact of the current critical shortage of Personal Support Workers in Ontario is beginning to be felt across all spectrums of our society and the effect is a steady erosion in both the quality and quantity of care. This erosion of care, both in-home care and in long term care homes, exposes our entire society to greater risk of both human and financial injury.

In general, the population of Ontario hopes to be able to age with dignity in their own homes for as long as possible. In response governments and various health associations have steadily worked to increase the capacity of in-home care in Ontario. This transition has an added benefit of not only being the preferred method of healthcare delivery but also being significantly cheaper than long term care facilities.¹²

Fig A.

Average Cost of Care (for one week for 424 seniors)	
Hospital Bed	\$2.5 million
Long-term Care Bed	\$374,000.00
Care at Home	\$125,000.00
Average Per Diem Cost	
Hospital Bed	\$842.00/day
Long-Term Care Bed	\$126.00/day
Care at Home	\$42.00/day

¹ <https://www.homecareontario.ca/home-care-services/facts-figures/publiclyfundedhomecare>

² (2011) HOME First Shifts care of Seniors to HOME. LHInfo Minute, Northeastern Ontario Health Care Update

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This transition however has not been without its challenges as adequate planning has not been carried out by past provincial governments. The result has been an unwieldy collection of agencies, home care companies and freelance PSWs covering any shortfall left by the Local Health Integration Networks. These companies work to hire and retain PSWs to work for clients that have been identified by the LHINs as needing homecare.

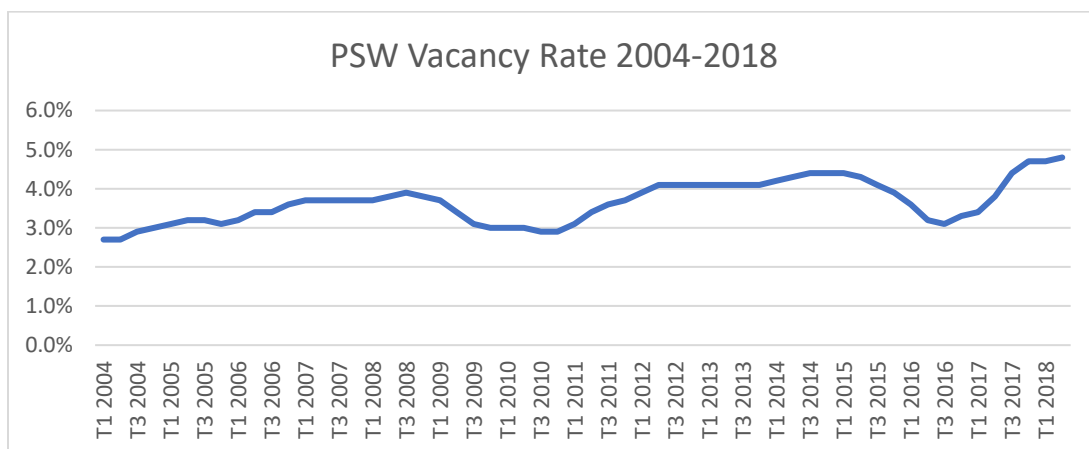
For a period this combination of public and private delivery worked well and was able to provide adequate home care coverage for the needed population. However as this arrangement continued it became increasingly susceptible to financial and criminal abuses.

The reason for this became clear, unlike other members of Ontario Health Care, the PSWs are not regulated. This has in effect placed the population of Ontario and the delivery of home care entirely on the back of the unregulated Personal Support Worker. This unsurprisingly has resulted in recent media reports of criminals posing as PSWs to gain entry to a person's home in order to commit burglary and/or physical injury even in some instances death.³

Consequential Risks

The cumulative effect of this has been the tarnishing of PSW profession by people who have no relation to health and serve only to deter new people from entering the field. While, the immediate impact of this is hard to measure it can be said with some certainty, that most care providing companies are engaged in a costly struggle to recruit and retain PSWs. When a comparison of rising vacancy rates⁴

Fig. B



³ See Appendix A

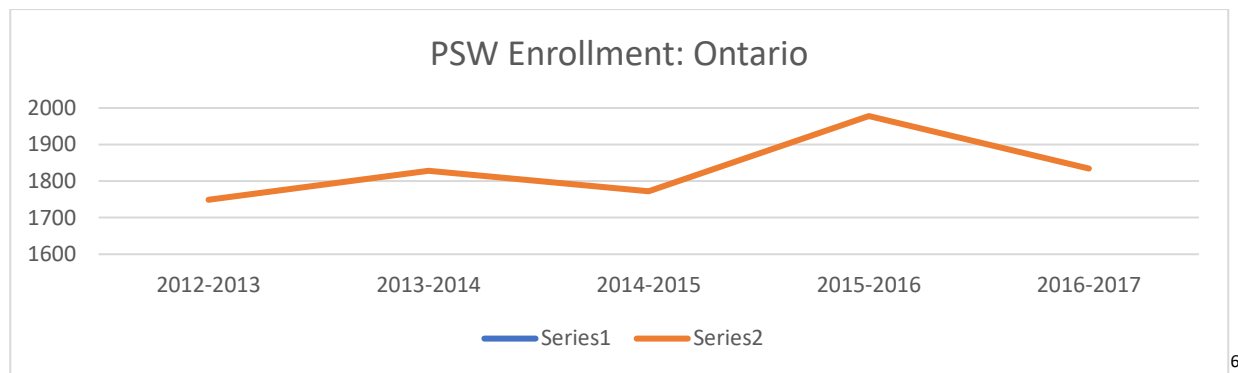
⁴ <https://www.cfib-fcei.ca/en/research/help-wanted-private-sector-job-vacancies-q2-2018>

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and declining enrollment⁵ are taken into consideration it becomes clear that recruiters will be spending more time and money competing for an ever shrinking pool of PSWs. Worse still, in order to maintain their operations, recruiters are oftentimes forced to hire staff as PSWs but are not able to verify this persons credentials nor confirm the absence of a criminal history.

Fig C.



Despite not being able to see the direct impact numerically, it becomes clear that the end result for these firms is an increase of risk to their firm's reputation, financial viability and future insurability.

Aside from this direct risk to their overall operations, care providers will undoubtedly face further exposure to risk of liability residing from continuity gaps in their clients care. These gaps take many forms, but in essence it arises when a client is faced with a PSW staff rotation which results in the client being unable to build a rapport with any of their PSWs.

The inability to build a professional rapport with one's health providers exposes clients and the companies they employ to greater risk of becoming a victim of fraud, or even criminal assault. This risk is furthered heightened when one considers the physical and psychological capacity of their clients.

Future Challenges to Home Care Population: Fire

There are many risks that occur when there is a gap in a person's care; a fall, a medical emergency such as stroke, heart attack etc. While any one of these pose a significant risk to the home care population, it is the singular threat of fires that has the greatest costs both financially and socially.

⁵ <https://www.ontario.ca/data/college-enrolment>

⁶ <https://www.ontario.ca/data/college-enrolment>

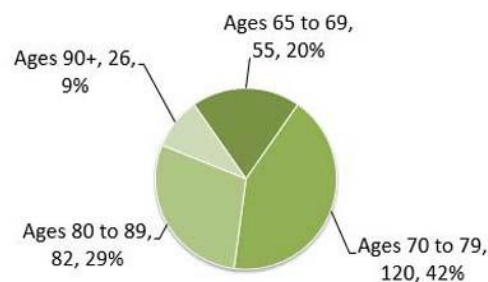
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A closer examination of the statistics released by the Ontario Fire Marshall demonstrate that the current major cause of fires in the homes of people 65 years and older were the result of cigarettes igniting furniture and by those with a physical disability. It must also be noted in the Figure D that the highest rates of deaths due to fire were those in the 70-79 year demographic and who were physically disabled, a demographic which the PSW actively serves.

Fig. D

2007 – 2016 Residential Fire fatalities: 65+ Age Groups



What's different about fires involving victims age 65+?

- ◆ The largest percentage of fire deaths were in the 70-79 age group.
- ◆ More incidents where furniture ignited by smokers materials.
- ◆ More victims physically disabled.

Dec. 2017

Office of the Fire Marshal and Emergency
Management

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While it is impossible to say for certain how the PSW shortfall will impact home care, what is clear is that there is an increased risk of fires to our home-care population which will add significant financial and societal costs to both the commercial providers, insurers and the population of Ontario at large.

What is known is that this shortfall has been largely borne by the PSW profession, while corresponding acknowledgement from health care leaders remains a constant rarity. The effect has been an unsatisfied and disrespected workforce. This dissatisfaction results in tension in and around the PSW health care teams which further serves to erode their professional image.

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This sadly remains the operational norm in Ontario healthcare. However, efforts are underway to challenge these perceptions and to restore confidence in this vital profession.

Conclusion

In 2010 an effort to mitigate risk to the profession of Personal Support Workers undertook the formation of the Ontario Personal Support Workers Association (OPSWA). As the sole professional association for PSWs in Canada, the OPSWA has made efforts to reverse this trend by creating a 'red seal' for Personal Support workers in Ontario. The intended impact of this organization is to promote the PSW profession, advocate for the self-regulation of the PSW in Ontario and to provide safeguards (liability insurance, criminal background check) to protect care provider companies, the public and the Personal Support Worker profession as a whole. Consequently, the OPSWA is fortunately positioned as having one of few mechanisms in place to limit the financial and social exposure to this risk.

In conclusion, it is the formal recommendation of the OPSWA that stakeholders in health care work to build a new standard in front line health care. Furthermore, to make significant efforts to direct public and governmental energies to the immediate promotion of this profession to reverse current trends and to ultimately help to mitigate future risk to Ontario.

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Works Cited

1. www.homecareontario.ca/home-care-services/facts-figures/publiclyfundedhomecare
2. (2011) HOME First Shifts care of Seniors to HOME. LHInfo Minute, Northeastern Ontario Health Care Update
3. <https://www.cfib-fcei.ca/en/research/help-wanted-private-sector-job-vacancies-q2-2018>
4. <https://www.ontario.ca/data/college-enrolment>
5. https://www.mcscs.jus.gov.on.ca/english/FireMarshal/MediaRelationsandResources/FireStatistics/OntarioFires/FireLossesCausesTrendsIssues/stats_causes.html

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Appendix

A:

<https://www.inhalton.com/burlington-support-worker-arrested-for-third-time-facing-new-charges>

<https://www.chch.com/two-psws-charged-fraud-burlington/>

<https://globalnews.ca/news/3694880/elder-abuse-allegations-mackenzie-health-richmond-hill/>

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<https://globalnews.ca/news/4716850/personal-support-worker-charged-mississauga/>

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