

March 21, 2012

Employee well-being key to job satisfaction and commitment for government social workers

Edmonton... *Tommy comes to school late again, unkempt, with a bruise on his cheek. He says that Mom and her boyfriend were up all night fighting. When Tommy tried to intervene, Mom's boyfriend hit him, so he ran off scared to school. The teacher and principal call government child protection.*

Handling a case like this is just one of the many challenges Alberta government social workers face every day. This work is demanding and can take its toll, so it's best done by those who love what they do. That's why the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) commissioned a study to learn the reasons some social workers flourish in child protection while others falter. The results of *Flourishing in Child Protection* will be presented publicly for the first time at the 2012 ACSW annual conference March 22 to 24 at Edmonton's Shaw Conference Centre.

Study author Val Kinjerski, PhD and principal consultant with Kaizen Solutions, is a leading authority in the field of employee engagement and former senior manager and social worker in child protection. Her study shows that a two-pronged approach is needed to increase the number of social workers who flourish in government child protection work—one directed at improving working conditions and the other at increasing employee engagement or what she calls “spirit at work.” “Together, these two factors contribute to two-thirds of social worker well-being at work,” she said. “When social workers are fully aware of and feel good about the contribution they are making to society, feel recognized and valued for the work they do, and are wholly supported by their supervisors and managers, child protection work can be most fulfilling and meaningful.”

Lori Sigurdson, ACSW Professional Affairs Coordinator, says the ACSW is excited about the results because government social workers represent about one-quarter of the College's membership. “Action on this study's recommendations can dramatically improve the work lives of many of our members,” she said. “This will lead to better results for vulnerable Alberta children and their families.”

The study, which was conducted last fall, is based on results from 338 completed responses to an online survey sent to all 1,386 ACSW members (registered social workers) who work in government child protection. It compared results for those social workers with well-being scores in the top 25 per cent to those with scores in the bottom 25 per cent and found that social workers who are flourishing:

- perform 21 per cent better at work,
- are at 36 per cent less risk of stress,
- enjoy 52 per cent more spirit at work,
- are 73 per cent more committed to stay with the organization,
- experience 77 per cent more well-being,
- report 90 per cent more job satisfaction, and
- are 100 per cent more committed to their organization.

Study results also found overall psychological well-being at work to be only moderate for government social workers. Those who reported the most well-being at work said they received:

- 75 per cent more managerial support,
- 74 per cent better management and communication of change, and
- 54 per cent more supervisory support than their colleagues who reported the least well-being at work.

To increase well-being at work for all social workers, the study recommends that government:

- make managerial and supervisory support a priority,
- better manage risk factors at work such as demands, control, relationships and change, and
- help employees to improve their spirit at work, for example, by including them in the change process, helping them appreciate how their work makes a contribution, promoting a sense of community at work where positive connections and trust prevail, and encouraging them to practise self-care.

See Backgrounder 1 (attached) for the study's complete recommendations and more results.

ACSW staff and Kinjerski are meeting with government about the study's results. "We are committed to working in collaboration with the Alberta College of Social Workers and other partners to support child protection staff in the complex, challenging and invaluable work that they do on behalf of Alberta's children and families," said Human Services Minister Dave Hancock. "Our support includes funding for an additional 30 child intervention supervisors, creating enhanced opportunities for engaging all Human Services employees, and celebrating the many successes of our ministry."

The ACSW is the designated regulatory body for the practice of social work in Alberta and sets the professional standards for the province's 6,000 registered social workers. A copy of [Flourishing in Child Protection](#) is available on the ACSW website: www.acsw.ab.ca, and the results will be presented in detail during a workshop at the ACSW conference on March 24. Information about the conference is provided in Backgrounder 2 (also attached).

Editors' Note: Media are welcome at the ACSW Conference keynote speech in Hall D of Edmonton's Shaw Conference Centre, Friday, March 23, starting at 8:30 a.m.

Attachments:

- Backgrounder 1: Recommendations and Results from Study on Flourishing in Child Protection
- Backgrounder 2: 2012 Conference for Alberta Social Workers

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Recommendations and Results from Study on Flourishing in Child Protection

How can Alberta Human Services support social workers to flourish and improve their well-being at work?

1. Make social worker well-being a strategic direction.
 - a. Actively recognize and value social workers doing child protection work.
 - b. Set short- and long-term targets to increase the well-being of all employees.
 - c. Create a workplace wellness strategy for managers, supervisors, and team leads, so they are better able to support each other and their staff.
2. Make skilled managerial and supervisory support to all social workers a priority.
 - a. Clarify and provide direction for the role of managers, supervisors and team leads through clear organizational policy.
 - b. Provide resources, supports and training to managers, supervisors and team leads to meet the expectations for their roles.
 - c. Enhance the Ministry's ability to manage workplace stressors by elevating the management of risk factors from below average to above average.
3. Provide opportunities for increasing factors that positively contribute to employee engagement and for social workers to cultivate their spirit at work.
 - a. Cultivate a philosophy of service to children and families while helping social workers appreciate how their work makes a contribution.
 - b. Include social worker input and representation in communication and organizational change initiatives and strategies.
 - c. Celebrate what is working and the social workers who are thriving.
 - d. Promote a sense of community among social workers where positive connections and trust prevail.
 - e. Seek input from social workers on the best ways to manage work demands and increase control over their work.
 - f. Facilitate opportunities for social workers to practise self-care.

How do social workers feel?

- Only two in five feel supported and encouraged by their managers.
- Less than a quarter feel that their work is recognized or appreciated by others.
- Only a quarter feel that organizational change is managed and communicated well.
- Less than one in three feel they are full members of the organization.
- There's a disconnect between the passion social workers report for their work and their lack of satisfaction with "where they are" at work.

What's going on for them at work?

- Social workers feel extremely capable (95%) of doing their job, and 86% feel that they know what to do in their job. Yet, only 59% know their value as a worker.
- Over 80% of social workers get along well with and value the people they work with. Yet, only just over half have a relationship of trust with the people at their jobs.
- Three-quarters of all social workers care about the functioning of the organization and want to take initiative in their work. Yet, only 29% want to be involved in their organization beyond their work duties.

2012 Conference for Alberta Social Workers

The Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) is expecting about 1,100 Alberta social workers to converge on Edmonton's Shaw Conference Centre from March 22 to 24, 2012, for its annual conference *Social Work: Celebrating the Person and the Profession*. Highlights of the conference include a keynote speech on the *Gifts of Imperfection*, nearly 60 educational workshops, Rapid Fire Theatre, an award celebration, and an art exhibit by iHuman.

Keynote speaker Dr. Brené Brown, a professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, kicks off the conference's educational sessions Friday morning by talking about her unique research into vulnerability and its pros and cons. Dr. Brown is an award-winning teacher and her work has been featured on PBS, National Public Radio, and the Oprah and Friends Radio Network. See her website www.brenebrown.com for more information.

Conference Schedule ([full conference program](#))

Thursday, March 22

3:30 - 8 pm	Registration/pick-up conference packages
4 - 6 pm	ACSW Annual General Meeting
6 - 7 pm	Cocktails and appetizers
7 - 9 pm	Conference Social with Rapid Fire Theatre Improvisation Group

Friday, March 23

7:30 am - 4:30 pm	Registration/pick-up conference packages
8:15 - 8:30 am	Co-chair welcome
8:30 - 9:30 am	Keynote Speaker: Dr. Brené Brown
9:45 am - 12:45 pm	Workshops
12:45 - 2 pm	Lunch (on your own)
12:45 - 1:45 pm	ACSW Awards Ceremony Luncheon (pre-purchase your ticket)
2 - 5 pm	Workshops

Saturday, March 24

8 am - 2 pm	Registration/pick-up conference packages
9 am - 12 pm	Workshops
12 - 1:30 pm	Lunch
12:15 - 1:15 pm	Luncheon presentation on the Social Policy Framework for Alberta
1:30 - 4:30 pm	Workshops
4:30 pm	Conference ends

iHuman youth art will be on display in the Hall D foyer Thursday evening and on the meeting room level for the remainder of the conference. iHuman Youth Society exists to help Edmonton youth, aged 12 - 24 rebuild their lives through creative self-expression. More information about iHuman can be found at www.ihuman.org.