

Getting to the Heart of What Matters



# **Flourishing in Child Protection**

## **Creating Environments that Helps Social Workers Thrive**

**A Report to the Alberta College of Social Workers  
by Val Kinjerski, MSW, PhD, RSW**

January 2012

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Creating Environments that Helps Social Workers Thrive  
A Report to the Alberta College of Social Workers**

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January 2012

Val Kinjerski, MSW, PhD, RSW is a leading authority on employee engagement and spirit at work. Her passion for spirit at work builds on a long standing concern for employee and organizational well-being. Prior to making spirit at work her life's work, Val worked in child protection for 18 years in positions ranging from front-line to senior management so she appreciates the many challenges and rewards experienced by social workers.

Val has demonstrated that spirit at work can be developed and as it increases, so too does personal well-being and work-related outcomes. Her research is published in management, leadership, health care, and career journals and presented at national and international conferences.

Today, Dr. Kinjerski applies this knowledge to assist individuals and organizations flourish. She is the author of *Rethinking Your Work: Getting to the Heart of What Matters* and accompanying guidebook.

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>10</b>
About the College .....	10
Addressing workplace stress .....	11
From workplace stress to well-being .....	12
<b>The Research Project</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Purpose .....	13
Research process .....	13
Measures .....	14
Project participants .....	15
<b>The Project Findings</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Assessing Well-Being in the Workplace .....	16
Assessing Spirit at Work .....	18
Assessing Management of Stressors in the Workplace .....	20
How do the working conditions of registered social workers doing child protection in Alberta compare with conditions across other, mostly public sector organizations? .....	23
Making the Argument for Improving Workplace Conditions .....	24
What is different for those who flourish and those who struggle? .....	25
Making the Argument for Increasing Social Worker Well-Being at Work .....	26
Linking Employee Engagement Factors and Well-Being at Work .....	28
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>34</b>

### **List of Figures**

1. Social Worker Psychological Well-Being at Work .....	16
2. Psychological Well-Being by Dimension .....	18
3. Social Worker Spirit at Work .....	19
4. Social Worker Perception of the Organization’s Ability to Manage Workplace Stressors .....	21
5. Management of Workplace Stressors: Differences in Perception between Social Workers Scoring the Highest and Lowest Well-Being .....	26

### **List of Tables**

1. Overall Assessment of Management of Workplace Stress Indicators .....	24
2. Comparing Outcomes for Social Workers Rating the Organization’s Ability to Manage Workplace Stressors as the Highest and the Lowest .....	23
3. Psychological Well-Being at Work: Differences among Social Workers Reporting the Highest and Lowest Well-Being .....	24
4. Assessment of Workplace Stress Indicators by Top and Bottom Well-Being Quartiles .....	26

### **List of Abbreviations**

ACSW	Alberta College of Social Workers
HSE	Health and Safety Executive
PWBW	Psychological Well-Being at Work
SAWS	<i>Spirit at Work Scale</i>
SW	Social Workers

## Executive Summary

Child protection work is one of the most demanding and challenging of careers. Social workers work with involuntary clients, in emotionally-taxing situations, and within the confines of legislation and limited resources. Yet, child protection work provides an opportunity to make a difference and has the potential to be most fulfilling and rewarding. It has the potential to meet the needs of more and more employees who are increasingly seeking greater purpose and meaning through their work.

What makes some social workers flourish at work, while others struggle? How can social workers be supported to move from the place of struggling to the place of thriving?

The Alberta College of Social Workers, the designated regulatory body for the practice of social work in Alberta and professional association, commissioned this study to understand *what helps registered social workers flourish in child protection*.

### ***About the project***

The purpose of this project is to better understand what helps registered social workers thrive in child protection and to influence positive action within the public service with a purpose of achieving a more engaged, healthy and productive workforce.

An online survey was sent to the 1386 ACSW members who work in child protection and 338 responses from front-line social workers, supervisors and managers provided the data for this study. The questionnaire was designed to assess the factors that contribute to social workers flourishing in child protection and to positive work outcomes.

### ***What does it mean to flourish at work?***

People who flourish at work are highly engaged and function at extraordinary levels. They build positive relationships with others and have a strong sense of well-being. Driven by a sense of purpose, people who flourish at work contribute meaningfully to the world. They are remarkably resilient to hard times and readily adapt to change.

## ***What we found***

### ***How social workers experience well-being at work***

Psychological well-being at work describes a person's subjective positive experience at work. On average, social workers' perception of their well-being at work is moderate. Well-being scores ranged from 13 to 125 (the highest possible score) with a mean of 87.

Social workers rated two factors: *feeling competent at work* and *interpersonal fit at work* as the most positive. *Perceived recognition at work* scored significantly lower than all other well-being dimensions, contributing to a lower overall sense of social worker well-being.

### ***How social workers experience spirit at work***

Spirit at work, often referred to as employee engagement, describes a state where individuals are fully engaged in, energized and inspired by work. Individual spirit-at-work scores among the social workers range from a low of 18 to a high of 108, the highest possible score. The average spirit-at-work score is 72 which is considered moderate and somewhat lower than scores of social workers working in other areas.

### ***How social workers perceive the organization's ability to manage workplace stress***

Effective management of workplace stressors are associated with high levels of health, well-being and organizational performance. Social worker assessment of the organization's ability to effectively manage workplace stressors places it below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. Five of eight areas assessed fall below the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile, indicating the need for urgent action.

Overall, social workers are clear about their work and know how to go about getting their job done. Most view their work as intense and demanding, making it impossible to complete all tasks. They feel that they have some control over their work, but not in the choice of the work they must do or the speed that work must be done. Only two in five social workers feel supported and encouraged by their managers. This increases somewhat for supervisors. Just one quarter of social workers feel that organizational change is managed and communicated well.

### ***Is there a difference between those social workers who perceive the Ministry as able to manage workplace risk and those who do not?***

Absolutely. Social workers who rate the organization as better able to manage workplace stressors report more well-being at work. They experience increased spirit at work, enhanced job satisfaction, and improved organizational commitment. Finally, they perform better at work and plan to stay with the organization.

Not surprising, social workers reporting the most well-being at work report 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 reporting the least well-being.

### ***How are social workers who are flourishing different from those who struggle?***

Not all social workers are struggling. And, in comparison with those social workers whose well-being score falls in the bottom quartile, social workers in the top quartile:

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

Moreover, social workers with high well-being at work rated the management of all, but one, risk factor above the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile, an indication that, for them, workplace stressors are well managed.

The differences between the top and bottom quartiles demonstrate the value—for social workers and the organization—of improving social worker well-being at work.

### ***Linking employee engagement factors and well-being at work***

The psychological well-being of social workers at work impacts significantly on whether they flourish at work. Not only do social workers benefit personally from enhanced well-being, organizations benefit as well. We found very strong correlations between well-being at work and spirit at work; strong correlations between well-being and the organization's ability to manage risk of stress, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction; and moderate correlations between well-being and work performance and intention to stay.

*But what best predicts social workers well-being at work?* Over a quarter of the variance of psychological well-being at work is explained by the presence of spirit at work. Another 20 per cent is explained by the management of workplace stressors and creation of positive workplace conditions. However, the interaction between workplace conditions and spirit at work contribute another 20 per cent to the variance of social worker well-being. So, spirit at work and workplace conditions, together, *account for 66 per cent of the variance of social worker well-being at work.*

These results are not surprising as both have important, but separate roles in achieving outcomes. Spirit at work focuses on the individual level, whereas workplace conditions focus on the organizational level. Such strong findings make it imperative to address both the management of workplace stressors and the creation of employee engagement and spirit at work.

## ***Recommendations***

### ***How can the Ministry support social workers to flourish at work?***

The following recommendations include long-term strategies, but many can and should be implemented immediately. Greater detail is provided in the report proper.

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 best ways to manage work demands and increase control over their work.
  - f. Facilitate opportunities for social workers to practice self-care.



## ***Conclusion***

To fully address social worker well-being and work-related outcomes, including performance and retention, interventions must be directed towards both social workers and the organization. Two key strategies include: Reducing workplace stressors and increasing social worker engagement.

Implementing a workplace intervention that will enhance the Ministry's ability to manage workplace stressors will assist social workers to better respond to the work demands, feel more in control of their work, and feel more supported by managers, supervisors and their peers, thus improving social worker well-being. It will also contribute to increased engagement, spirit at work and improved work-related outcomes.

Enhanced supervisory and managerial support can help increase social worker perception of recognition and appreciation, the lowest rated well-being dimension. Moreover, attention to the importance of strong professional managerial and supervisory relationships will go a long way to improve the low levels of trust, lack of sense of community, and perhaps an increased desire for involvement in the organization – issues identified in the study.

Increasing engagement and spirit at work will support social workers to become fully engaged in and fulfilled by their work. It will also increase social worker awareness of the contribution they are making, feel that they are part of a community, and share a sense of connection and purpose with their colleagues – again, all issues identified in the study.

Although managers and directors worldwide have identified psychological health at work as one of the most worrisome issues, organizations have been reluctant to embrace employee well-being as a strategy. This study with social workers doing child protection work shows that employee well-being matters to both employees and the Ministry. It also demonstrates that well-being can be attained in spite of the challenging and demanding work of child protection.

Increasing spirit at work and improving the management of workplace stressors will have a positive effect on social worker well-being and organizational outcomes.

## Introduction

What makes some social workers flourish at work, while others struggle? Managers and directors worldwide have identified psychological health at work as one of the most worrisome issues, yet organizations have been reluctant to embrace employee well-being as a strategic target. Employee health, effective client services and the successful operation of the organization depends on social worker well-being.

Child protection work is one of the most demanding and challenging careers. Social workers work with involuntary clients, in emotionally-taxing situations, and within the confines of legislation and limited resources. It is undeniable that stress exists in child protection work. Yet, child protection work provides an opportunity to make a difference and has the potential to be most fulfilling and rewarding. In spite of the challenges – or maybe because of them – it has the potential to meet the needs of more and more employees who are increasingly seeking greater purpose and meaning through their work.

How can social workers be supported to move from the place of struggling to the place of flourishing? To feel good about their work and their contribution? To feel valued and supported? To do the best they can do?

The Alberta College of Social Workers has commissioned this study to understand what helps social workers thrive in child protection.

### ***About the College***

The Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) is the designated regulatory body for the practice of social work in Alberta. As the professional association, the ACSW represents the interests of its more than 6,000 registered social workers across Alberta.

The mission and goals of the College are to:

- Promote, regulate and govern the profession of social work in the province of Alberta
- Advocate for skilled and ethical social work practices
- Advocate for policies, programs and services that promote the profession and protect the best interests of the public

ACSW is concerned about the high turnover, burn-out and workplace stress experienced by front line government child protection social workers.

## ***Addressing workplace stress***

The concern about social worker well-being and workplace stress is not unique to Alberta social workers. The Canadian Association of Social Workers, in their 2005 report *Working Conditions for Social Workers and Linkages to Client Outcomes in Child Welfare*<sup>1</sup>, highlighted similar concerns. Based on a literature review of child welfare system, the CASW concludes that there is an overabundance of evidence to suggest that the child protection system is not working.

The CASW report included a comment from researchers, Berg and Kelly<sup>2</sup>, who described what many people think is a general understanding of child welfare working conditions.

It is no secret that everyone has opinions about child welfare services—child protection services in particular—and that the universal opinion is that the system is broken and that something needs to be done to fix it. However, most people have no comprehensive ideas on how to “fix” the problem . . .

The *problem solving approach* has been used for more than 30 years but unfortunately it has not been an effective method to improve social worker well-being or workplace conditions. With a view to improving social worker well-being, the ACSW wanted to gain a better understanding of the conditions that help social workers thrive in child protection and use this knowledge to influence change that will result in positive outcomes for clients.

In this study, we took the opportunity to learn from those social workers who are flourishing today, within the Child Protection system, as compared to those social workers who are struggling. In addition to collecting information about how well social workers and the organization are doing, we compared outcomes for social workers experiencing the most well-being with those social workers experiencing the least well-being. And we looked at differences in outcomes for those social workers reporting on the organization’s ability to manage workplace stress as positive with those who rated the ability of the organization as negative. Based on the positive experiences of social workers working in the current system, we have been able to better understand what conditions support social workers’ flourishing and present recommendations.

## ***From workplace stress to well-being***

*What does it mean to thrive or flourish at work?*

People who flourish at work are highly engaged and function at extraordinary levels. They build positive relationships with others and have a strong sense of well-being. Driven by a sense of purpose, people who flourish at work contribute meaningfully to the world. They are remarkably resilient to hard times and readily adapt to change.

## The Research Project

### *Purpose*

This research project was designed around the experiences and knowledge of social workers who are currently working in the field of child protection. The purpose of the project is to better understand what helps registered social workers thrive in child protection. The aim is to collect information with a view to producing a comprehensive report that can be used to:

- generate more discussion about social worker well-being in child protection,
- advocate for conditions that will increase social worker well-being at work, and
- influence positive action within the public service with a purpose of achieving a more engaged, healthy, and productive workforce

in order to more positively serve vulnerable clients.

Eight questions provided the framework for this study:

- How do social workers perceive their well-being at work?
- What is their level of spirit at work?
- How do social workers perceive the organization's ability to manage working conditions that reduces the risk of workplace stress?
- What is the relationship between social worker well-being at work and personal outcomes such as spirit at work and job satisfaction; and work-related outcomes such as organizational commitment, work performance and retention?
- What is the relationship between the organization's ability to manage workplace stress and personal outcomes such as well-being at work, spirit at work and job satisfaction; and work-related outcomes such as organizational commitment, work performance and retention?
- What elements distinguish social workers who score in the top quartile of well-being from those who score in the bottom quartile?
- Can we predict the factors that are key in improving social worker well-being at work?
- How can the Ministry increase social workers' well-being at work?

### *Research process*

All members of the ACSW who work in child protection were invited to complete an online survey comprised of 122 questions, including demographic data. The

questionnaire was designed to assess the organizational factors that contribute to social workers flourishing in child protection (e.g. satisfied with their work, have a sense of well-being, enjoy spirit at work) and positive work outcomes (e.g. committed to their organization, performance, retention).

A total of 1386 members were forwarded the survey. Four hundred and thirty-one front-line social workers, supervisors and managers responded but only 338 responses were able to be used in this research, due to incorrect or partial completion of the questionnaire. These 338 responses represent 24% of registered social workers working in child protection and are the foundation of this study.

### ***Measures***

The instruments used in this study are briefly described below.

*Well-Being at Work.* The standard trend in research is to use generic well-being scales to measure employee well-being at work. Unfortunately, these well-being scales don't fit within the context of the workplace. We used the Index of Psychological Well-Being at Work Index<sup>3</sup>, a 25-item tool which was designed specifically to assess well-being at work: interpersonal fit at work, thriving at work, feeling of competence at work, desire for involvement at work and perceived recognition at work.

*Spirit at Work.* The *Spirit at Work Scale (SAWS)*<sup>4</sup> was developed in Canada and validated with social workers. The 18-item instrument has been used effectively with professional and non-professional staff within social service settings. The SAWS measures engagement, sense of community, flow, and a connection to something larger than self.

*Management of Workplace Stress.* The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) Management Standards Indicator Tool<sup>5</sup> is a 35-item questionnaire relating to six primary factors identified in work-related stress: demands, control, managerial support, change management, role and peer support<sup>6</sup>. The items are based on the best available evidence linking work design to health outcomes and were piloted with Children and Family Services in the UK. By 2004, it had been tested by approximately 30,000 employees, in mostly public sector organizations. This tool was selected because it is based on standards that, if achieved, lead to reduced risk of stress.

*Job Satisfaction.* The Job Satisfaction Scale<sup>7</sup> is a 14-item measure of job satisfaction developed for use in the human services.

*Organizational Commitment.* The Organizational Scale<sup>8</sup> identifies 15 items that assess an employee's belief in and acceptance of the organizational goals, their willingness to expend effort, and their desire to maintain membership in the organization.

*Intention to Quit*<sup>9</sup>. This 3-item measure assesses an employee's intention to change organizations.

*Work performance*. These three items, taken from the World Health Organization's Health and Work Performance Questionnaire<sup>10</sup>, measure an employee's perception of actual performance in relation to possible performance.

### ***Project participants***

Employees of all 10 Regions were surveyed. The largest representation came from Edmonton (31%), followed by Central Alberta (26%), Calgary (21%), Southern Alberta (12%), Northern Alberta (8%), and Métis Settlements (2%). Two-thirds of the respondents worked in an urban setting.

Eighty-five per cent of the respondents were female. Their ages ranged from 21 to 65 with a mean of 46 years. Seventy-five per cent are over the age of 40. The vast majority were Caucasian (81%), followed by Aboriginal and Métis (10%), Black /African American (4%), Asian (3%) and other (2%).

Eighty-eight per cent of respondents had social work education/ qualifications: MSW (14%), BSW (53%) and post-secondary diplomas (21%). Eleven per cent were grandparented into the social work registry with graduate or undergraduate degrees in other related fields.

Most respondents work on the front line: case workers (43%), intake/assessors (20%), specialists (4%), foster care/placement (3%), and other (2%). Supervisors and team leads represented 17% of the participants and managers/senior managers represented (10%).

Respondents had worked with the Ministry from two months to 34 years, with an overall average of 12 years. Eleven per cent of respondents have worked for the Ministry for less than 2 years, 2-5 years (21%); 6-10 years (18%); 10-15 years (24%); 15-20 years (9%) and over 20 years (17%).

Three per cent of the participants earned less than \$50,000; 36% reported earnings between \$50,000 and \$74,999; 58% reported earnings between \$75,000 and \$99,999; and 3% reported earnings of \$100,000 or more.

Note that throughout the report, some percentage breakdowns add up to less or more than 100% due to rounding.

For the most part, significant differences in well-being at work were not found based on gender, age, education, position or region.

## Project Findings

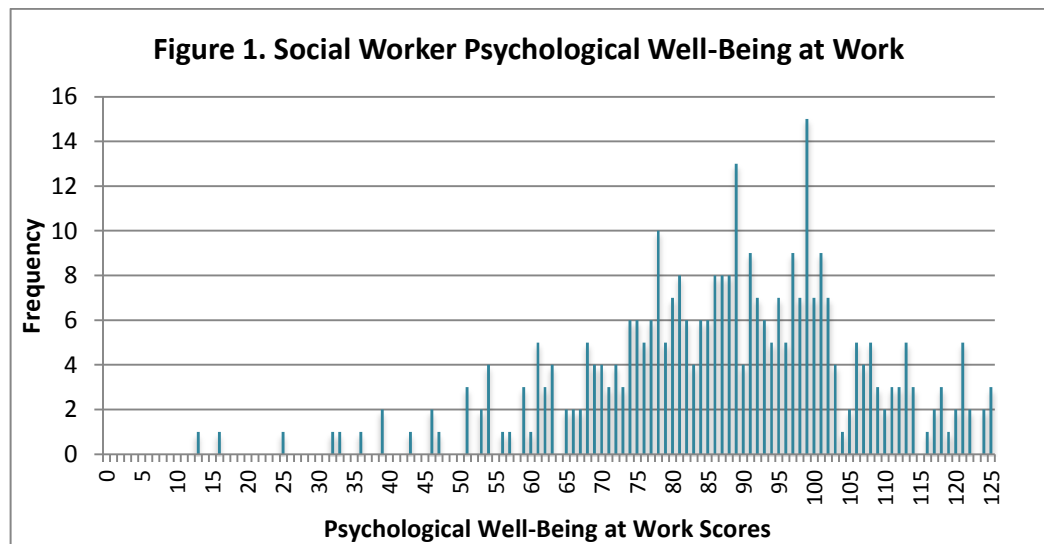
In this section, we report on social worker perception of well-being at work, spirit at work and management of workplace stress. To understand the differences between those social workers who flourish as compared to those who struggle, we compare results for social workers rating their well-being in the top 25% with those who rate their well-being in the bottom 25%. Finally, we look at predictors of social worker well-being.

### Assessing Well-Being in the Workplace

What follows are perceptions of registered social workers (including social worker in the front-line, supervisors and team leads, and managers and senior managers) working in the field of child protection with regard to their psychological well-being at work.

Psychological well-being at work<sup>11</sup> (PWBW) describes a person's subjective positive experience at work and is comprised of five dimensions: interpersonal fit at work, thriving at work, feeling of competence at work, perceived recognition at work and desire for involvement at work. Social workers' perception of their well-being at work is rated, on average, as moderate. PWBW scores ranged from 13 to 125 (the highest possible score) with a mean of 87.

The graph below identifies the distribution of individual scores among all social workers surveyed.





A description of each of the five dimensions of psychological well-being at work and social workers' perception of each dimension follows.

**Interpersonal Fit at Work** refers to the perception of experiencing positive relationships with individuals interacting with oneself and within the work context. (E.g. I enjoy working with the people at my job.)

*Over 80 % of social workers get along well with and value the people they work with. Yet, just over half have a relationship of trust with the people at their jobs.*

**Thriving at Work** refers to the perception of accomplishing a significant and interesting job that allows one to realize him/herself as an individual. (E.g. I am proud of the job I have.)

*Almost three-quarters of social workers are proud of their job. Two-thirds like their work, but only 43% find fulfillment at their work.*

**Perceived Recognition at Work** refers to the perception of being appreciated within the organization, for one's work and personhood. (E.g. I feel that my work efforts are appreciated.)

*Of all the dimensions, perceived recognition received the lowest scores. Less than a quarter of social workers feel that their work is recognized or appreciated by others. And just over a third feels that they are a full member of the organization.*

**Feeling of Competency at Work** refers to the perception of possessing the necessary aptitudes to do one's job efficiently and have mastery of the tasks to perform. (E.g. I know I am capable of doing my job.)

*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. Is this related to their lack of perceived recognition at work?*

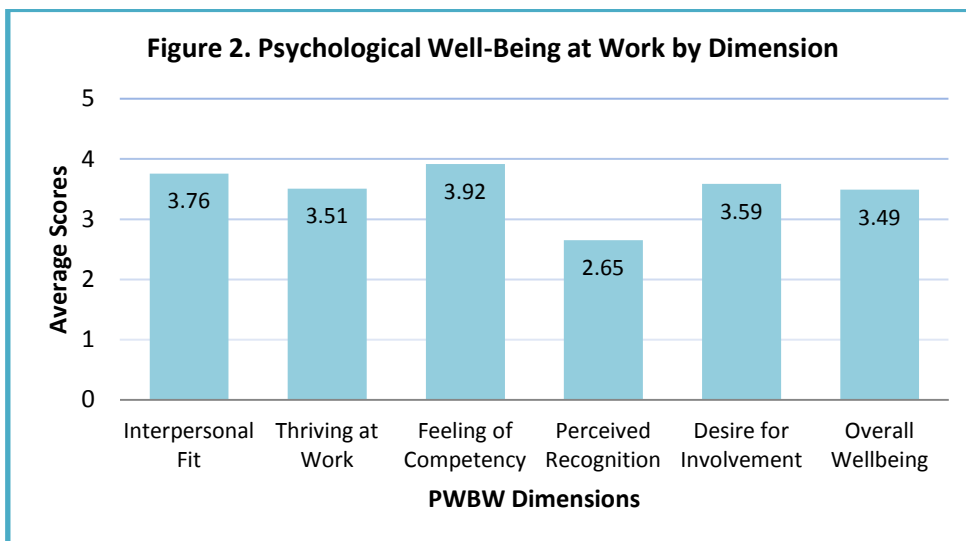
**Desire for Involvement at Work** refers to the will to involve oneself in the organization and to contribute to its proper functioning and success. (E.g. I want to be involved in my organization beyond my work duties.)

*Three-quarters of all social workers care about the functioning of the organization and want to take initiative in their work. At the same time, only 29% want to be involved in their organization beyond their work duties.*

## Highlights

Of the five dimensions, *feeling competent at work* and *interpersonal fit at work* were rated as the most positive by social workers. *Perceived recognition at work* is rated significantly lower than all dimensions and contributes to a lower overall sense of well-being at work. Social workers feel extremely capable to do their work and most report that they get along well with and value the work of others. But less than one in three feel that they are a full member of the organization and even fewer feel recognized or appreciated.

The graph below identifies the average scores among all social workers for each of the five dimensions. Note: 0= completely disagree, 1= slightly agree, 3 = moderately agree, 5 = completely agree.

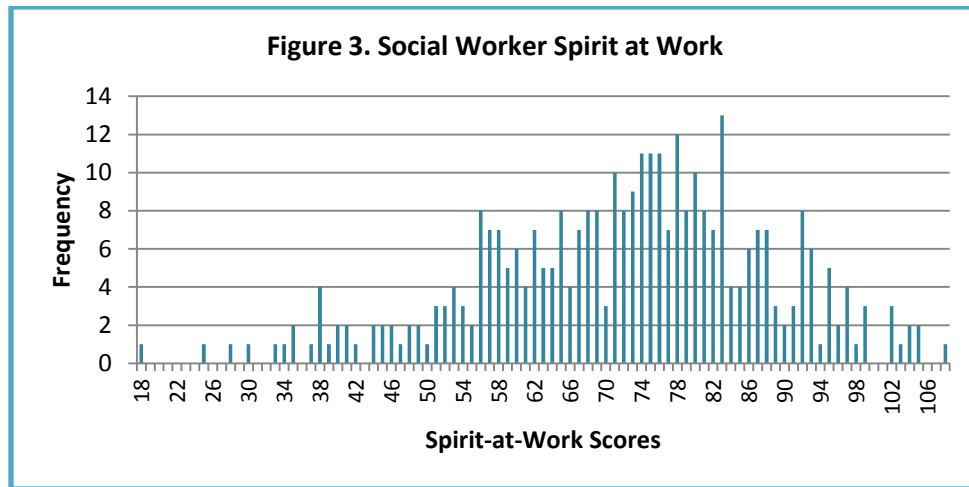


Whereas all dimensions could benefit from attention, the greatest gains in social worker well-being at work will be realized by recognizing and appreciating social workers. Valuing who they are, the work they do, and the contribution they make will go a long way to improving their sense of overall well-being at work. Moreover, recognizing, and involving them as full members of the organization will likely increase their desire to be involved and to participate, beyond the confines of their specific job.

## Assessing Spirit at Work

Spirit at work<sup>12</sup> describes a state whereby individuals are fully engaged in, energized and inspired by work. Spirit at work is comprised of four dimensions: engaging work, sense of community, a connection to something larger than self, and flow – that state that occurs when we are fully immersed in and absorbed by our work. Individual spirit-at-work scores among the social workers range from a low of 18 to a high of 108, the highest possible score. The average spirit-at-work score is 72 which is considered

moderate and somewhat lower than the scores of social workers working in other areas.<sup>13</sup> The figure below identifies the distribution of individual scores among all social workers surveyed.



Here, the four dimensions of spirit at work are explained and the results for social workers are summarized.

**Engaging work** refers to how we feel about our work, our ability to find meaning through work, and the extent we feel engaged in work that has a deeper purpose. It also includes the degree to which we feel grateful for our work, and the extent to which we see a match among the requirements of our work and our personal values, beliefs and behaviours.

*Seventy-three per cent of social workers say that they are passionate about their work, but only 47% experience a match between the requirements of their work and their values, beliefs and behaviours. Whereas 57% are grateful to be involved in their work, just over a third report being right where they want to be at work.*

**Sense of community** considers the extent to which we feel like we belong and whether we share a sense of purpose and meaning with co-workers about work. It also includes a level of trust and personal connection with co-workers.

*Forty-three per cent of social workers share a sense of trust and personal connection with their colleagues, and less (36%) share a strong sense of meaning and purpose with their co-workers about work. Only 36% feel like they are part of a community at work.*

**Connection to something larger than self** refers to the influence of our deeply held values on our work experience and to the extent that our beliefs influence everyday

decisions at work. It also involves being connected with a greater source that has a positive effect on work.

*A little over half of social workers say that personal beliefs play an important role in everyday decisions made at work and that their work is inspired or guided by their deeply held values. And just over one-quarter say that they experience a connection with a greater source that has a positive effect on their work.*

**Flow state** refers to those moments when we have a peak experience at work. It captures those times when we experience complete joy at work or the feeling of energy or vitality that is often difficult to describe. We are so involved in our work that we lose our sense of time. These are the moments that remind us why we chose our work in the first place and keep us connected to our work.

*Just over a third of social workers said that they experienced a “high” at their work or an energy or vitality at work that is difficult to describe. Just over a quarter were so involved in their work that they lost their sense of time. Twenty-five per cent say that there are moments when they experience complete joy at work.*

### Highlights

Social worker spirit at work is moderate. A sense of engagement and a sense of community is lacking for many. Few experience flow at work. Assisting social workers to understand the deeper purpose of their work and appreciate the contribution they make through work will help them become more engaged in and energized by their work. Developing positive relationships will help increase trust, personal connections, and ultimately a sense of community at work.

A disconnect between the passion social workers report having for their work and their lack of satisfaction with where they are at work is evident. As is the disconnect between reported passion and lack of fulfillment in their work (reported in the previous section.) Is this disconnect related to the organization’s ability to manage workplace stress?

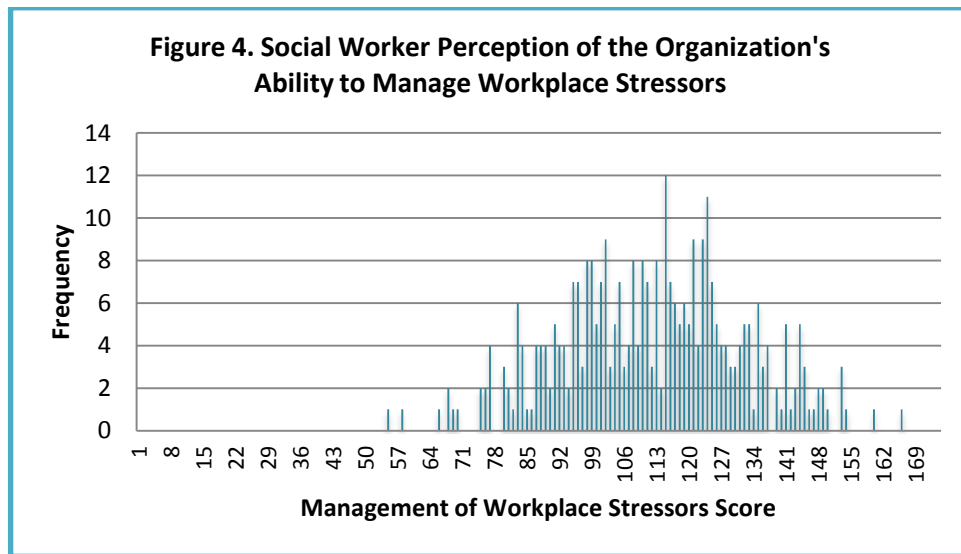
### **Assessing Management of Stressors in the Workplace**

All work and all organizations come with a certain amount of stress. But not all stress is negative. For example, a good stress is the excitement felt by people when they are confronted by a demanding situation, which they believe they can handle. And this good stress can result in positive feelings such as a feeling of fulfillment and flow.<sup>14</sup> (Flow occurs when the challenges of the task is high and is matched by the skill of the performer.) On the flip side, negative stress, such as an inability to handle a situation or workload, can lead to negative outcomes, lowered self-esteem, and even apathy.

Social workers are familiar with risk assessments. The Management Standards developed by the Health and Safety Executive in the UK identifies risk factors for employee work-related stress. There is an accumulation of evidence that six particular stressors<sup>15</sup> – demands, control, support, relationships at work, role, and organizational change – have the potential to impact employee well-being and productivity, regardless of the type or size of organization

The Management Standards also define the characteristics of an organization where the risks from work-related stress are being effectively managed and controlled. These standards represent a set of conditions that, if present, reflect a high level of health, well-being and organizational performance. Standards, not properly managed, are associated with poor health and well-being, lower productivity and increased absence as a result of illness.

The following assessment helps to identify the areas requiring attention. Higher scores are indicative of the organization’s ability to successfully manage workplace stressors. Social workers’ scores ranged from 56 to 167 (out of a possible 175) with an average of 113. See the distribution below.



The following explains the conditions and summarizes the results for social workers.

***Demands*** include issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.

*Seventy-five per cent of social workers report that they have to work very intensively and neglect some tasks because they have too much to do (60%). Just under half say that they have unrealistic deadlines; 31% feel pressured to work long hours.*

**Control** refers to how much say the person has in the way they do their work.

*Seventy per cent of social workers feel that they have some say over the way they work; 74% have control over their breaks and 60% have flexibility in their work. Just over a third feel like they have a say in their work speed; only 29% report having a choice in deciding what to do at work.*

**Managerial Support** includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organization and line management.

*Forty-one per cent of social workers feel like they can rely on their manager for help with a work problem or talk to them about something upsetting or annoying at work. Around the same amount feel encouraged at work by their manager. Less than 40% feel like they are given supportive feedback on their work or are supported through emotionally demanding work.*

**Supervisory Support** includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the immediate supervisor.

*Fifty-six per cent of social workers feel encouraged at work by their supervisor and that they can rely on their supervisor for help with a work problem. Sixty-one per cent say that they can talk to their supervisor about something upsetting or annoying at work.*

**Peer Support** refers to the encouragement and resources provided by colleagues.

*Whereas social workers report that colleagues are willing to listen to their work-related issues (79%) and that they can get support and help from their colleagues (77%), only half say that their colleagues will help them out when their work gets difficult.*

**Relationships** include promoting positive behaviours that prevents conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour as it arises.

*Thirty per cent of social workers state that relationships are strained or that there is friction or anger between colleagues (26%). Sixteen per cent of social workers are subject to bullying and 16% face personal harassment (unkind words and behaviour).*

**Role** refers to whether people understand their role within the organization and whether the organization ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.

*Social workers are clear about their duties (83%) and know how to go about getting their job done (90%). They understand how their work fits into the overall aim of their organization (76%) and its goals and objectives (71%).*

**Change** refers to how organizational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organization.

*Only 27% of social workers feel that they are consulted about change at work and when changes are made; 24% have clarity about how they will work out in practice. About a third of participants feel that they are given sufficient opportunity to question managers about the changes.*

### Highlights

Social workers are clear about their work and know how to go about getting their job done. Most view their work as intense and demanding, making it impossible to complete all tasks. They feel that they have some control over their work, but not in the choice of the work they must do or the speed that they believe work must be done. Only two in five social workers feel supported and encouraged by their managers. This increases somewhat for their supervisors. Most feel that they can call on their peers to listen, but only half report that their colleagues will help out when work gets difficult. Just under a third report strained relationships, including friction and anger among colleagues. Only a quarter of social workers feel that organizational change is managed and communicated well.

### **How do the working conditions of registered social workers doing child protection in Alberta compare with workers across other, mostly public sector organizations?**

Social worker assessment of workplace stress places their organization's ability to effectively manage workplace stress below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. Five areas fall below the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile.

According to the Management Standards, those areas falling under the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile require urgent action; those falling between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> percentile (below average) indicate the need for improvement; those falling between the 50<sup>th</sup> and 80<sup>th</sup> percentile represents better than average, but still require improvement, and those falling in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile are doing well and need to maintain their performance. Note that the higher percentile indicates better management of stress at work.

Table 1. Overall Assessment of Management of Workplace Stress Indicators				
Factor	< 20 <sup>th</sup> percentile	>= 20 <sup>th</sup> & < 50 <sup>th</sup> percentile	>= 50 <sup>th</sup> & < 80 <sup>th</sup> percentile	>80 <sup>th</sup> percentile
	⇐Higher Risk of Stress		Lower Risk of Stress ⇒	
Demands*	●			
Control		●		
Manager Support	●			
Supervisor Support**		●		
Peer Support		●		
Relationships*	●			
Role	●			
Change	●			

\* The questions in the survey for this factor are originally negatively phrased, but to help compare across the other factors in this table, the scores have been reversed so that a *higher value in the table indicates less risk of stress at work*, as is the case in the other factors.

\*\* The same cutoffs used for Managerial Support were used for Supervisory Support.

### Making the Argument for Improving Workplace Conditions

We compared the perceptions of social workers who rated the organization’s ability to manage workplace stress (HSE) in the top 25% with the perceptions of those social workers who rated the organization’s ability to manage workplace stress in the bottom 25%.

Table 2. Comparing Outcomes for Social Workers (SWs) Rating the Organization’s Ability to Manage Workplace Stressors (HSE) as the Highest and the Lowest				
	Highest Possible Score	Mean Score for SWs giving the Lowest 25% HSE	Mean Score for SWs giving the Highest 25% HSE	Difference between Lowest and Highest 25%
Management of Workplace Stress	175	88	137	↑56%
Well-Being at Work	125	70	105	↑51%
Job satisfaction	100	41	80	↑96%
Spirit at Work	108	61	82	↑35%
Organizational Commitment	63	26	47	↑83%
Work Performance	100	70	81	↑15%
Retention	5	2.31	3.96	↑71%



A remarkable increase in personal and organizational outcomes is evident for those social workers rating the organization’s ability to manage workplace stressors in the top quartile as compared with social workers rating the organization’s ability to manage workplace stressors in the lowest quartile. Those social workers rating the organization in the top 25<sup>th</sup> percentile report 56% better management of workplace stress than those in the bottom 25<sup>th</sup> percentile, resulting in the experience of significantly less stress.

They also report 51% more psychological well-being at work. Moreover, they experience increased spirit at work, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Finally, they perform better at work and plan to stay with the organization. Differences between the top and bottom quartiles indicate the value of an organization’s ability to effectively manage workplace stressors.

**What is different for those who flourish and those who struggle?**

Some social workers seem to flourish at work, while others struggle. What is the difference between these two groups and what can we learn from those who are thriving to assist those who are struggling? In order to answer this question, we compared the results of social workers scoring in the top and bottom 25 percentiles of the Psychological Well-Being at Work Index. As expected, a large variance was found.

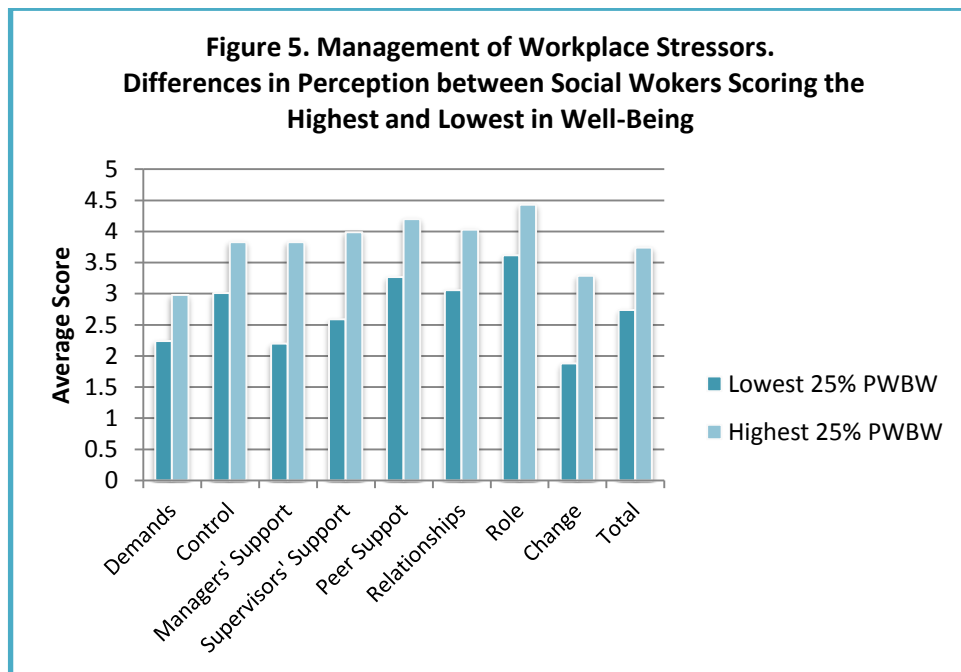
<b>Table 3. Psychological Well-Being at Work Differences among Social Workers Reporting the Highest and Lowest Well-Being</b>				
	<b>Highest Possible Score</b>	<b>Mean Score for Lowest 25% PWBW</b>	<b>Mean Score for Highest 25% PWBW</b>	<b>Difference between Lowest and Highest 25%</b>
Well-Being at Work	125	62	110	↑77%
Job satisfaction	100	42	80	↑90%
Organizational Commitment	63	24	49	↑100%
Spirit at Work	108	57	86	↑52%
Work Performance	100	70	85	↑21%
Retention	5	2.26	3.90	↑73%
Management of Workplace Stress	175	96	131	↑36%

A dramatic increase in personal and organizational outcomes is realized for those social workers scoring in the top quartile of psychological well-being at work as compared to social workers scoring bottom quartile. Social workers scoring in the highest 25<sup>th</sup>

percentile of psychological well-being at work experience 77% more well-being than those in the lowest 25<sup>th</sup> percentile. They report 90% more job satisfaction, 52% more spirit at work, and twice as much organizational commitment. Moreover, their work performance is 21% higher and they are 73% more committed to stay with the organization. Finally, they report 36% better management of workplace stressors, thus experience less risk of stress. These positive results for both social workers and the organization give cause to improving social worker well-being at work.

### Making the Argument for Increasing Social Worker Well-Being at Work

How do social workers reporting the highest well-being at work assess the management of workplace stressors as compared to those social workers reporting the least amount of well-being? Rather than compare the differences between the highest and lowest quartile for perceptions on how the organization managed workplace stress *overall*, we decided to compare the differences for each factor to see if some factors stood out more than others. And they did.



From Figure 5, we can see that those social workers in the top quartile of well-being at work are at less risk of stress than those in the bottom quartile of well-being at work. (Recall that the higher scores indicate less risk of stress.) It is not surprising then that they also report more positive personal and organizational outcomes.

Where do the differences lie? Although social workers in the top quartile of well-being at work consistently score higher than those in the bottom for every factor, the differences are more predominant in some areas and less in others. The least amount of discrepancy (22% – 33%) between the top and bottom quartiles has to do with

demands, control and role. Given the nature of the work – providing services to mostly involuntary clients within the parameters of legislation – one could anticipate a lesser discrepancy in these areas.

The most significant discrepancies occur in perceptions of managers’ support, how change is managed and communicated, and supervisors’ support. Social workers reporting the most well-being at work report 75% more managerial support, 74% better management and communication of change, and 54% more supervisory support.

Due to the nature of child protection work, it may be more challenging to manage the demands of the work and control social workers have over their work. Increasing managerial and supervisory support and improving how change is managed is more easily undertaken, however, and will have an immediate impact on social worker well-being.

Finally, we compared the perceptions of risk of stress between those social workers reporting the highest level of well-being at work and those reporting the lowest level of well-being with workers across other, mostly public sector organizations.

<b>Table 4. Assessment of Workplace Stress Indicators by the Top and Bottom Well-Being Quartiles</b>				
<b>Factor</b>	<b>&lt; 20<sup>th</sup> percentile</b>	<b>&gt;= 20<sup>th</sup> &amp; &lt; 50<sup>th</sup> percentile</b>	<b>&gt;= 50<sup>th</sup> &amp; &lt; 80<sup>th</sup> percentile</b>	<b>&gt;80<sup>th</sup> percentile</b>
	⇐Higher Risk of Stress		Lower Risk of Stress ⇐	
Demands	●	★		
Control	●			★
Managers’ Support	●			★
Supervisors’ Support	●			★
Peer Support	●		★	
Relationships	●		★	
Role	●			★
Change	●			★

- ★ Top Well-Being Quartile
- Bottom Well-Being Quartile

It is evident that social workers who report a strong sense of well-being at work also report better management of workplace stressors and thus are at less risk of stress. In comparison with other workers working in similar work environments, they are doing well. It is also evident that those social workers reporting a lack of well-being at work report poorer management of stress and thus are at increased risk of stress.

## Linking Employee Engagement Factors and Well-Being at Work

Psychological well-being of social workers at work impacts significantly on whether they flourish at work. Not only do workers benefit personally from enhanced well-being; organizations benefit as well.<sup>16</sup> We found very strong correlations between well-being at work (especially “thriving at work”) and spirit at work; strong correlations between well-being and management of workplace stressors (especially managerial support), organizational commitment, and job satisfaction; and moderate correlations between well-being and work performance and intention to stay.

*But, what best predicts social workers’ well-being at work?*

Based on these strong correlations, we used multiple regression analyses to investigate the efficacy of workplace conditions (known to reduce risk of stress at work) and spirit at work in predicting social worker well-being. We also examined how well spirit at work and workplace conditions predicts job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

In addition to the strong correlations, these two variables were selected because spirit at work focuses on the individual level whereas management of workplace conditions and stressors focus on the organizational level. Both have an important, but separate role in achieving positive outcomes. By assessing the predictive capacity of these variables for social workers doing child protection work in Alberta, we are better able to make effective recommendations about how to improve well-being at work and enhance organizational outcomes.

Here is what we found. Twenty-six percent of the difference in psychological well-being at work is explained by spirit at work. Another 20% is explained by the management of workplace conditions known to reduce the risk of stress at work. However, the interaction between the workplace conditions and spirit at work contribute another 20% to the variance of well-being. So, spirit at work and workplace conditions, together, *account for 66% of the variance of social worker well-being at work.*

Similarly, workplace conditions and spirit at work accounted for 60% and 54% of variability in organizational commitment and job satisfaction, respectively.

Such strong findings make it imperative to address *both* the workplace conditions and spirit at work. Whereas both workplace conditions and spirit at work are predictors of well-being and work-related attitudes, for any given situation, one tends to be a stronger predictor than the other. For example, workplace conditions are a stronger predictor of job satisfaction, feelings of competency at work, and interpersonal fit at work. Spirit at work is a stronger predictor of organizational commitment and thriving at work and is the only predictor of desire for involvement at work. Manager’s support is a strong predictor of organizational commitment and crucial to feeling recognized at work.

## Recommendations

### *How the Ministry can support social workers to flourish at work*

Social worker well-being is imperative to employee health, effective client services and the successful operation of the Ministry. To increase the number of social workers who flourish in child protection, a two-pronged approach – one directed at the organization and the other directed towards social workers – is recommended. Together, these two approaches contribute to two-thirds of social worker well-being at work.

Many recommendations could emerge from this study. We have targeted strategies that are most realizable and most likely to have an immediate impact on social worker well-being and therefore, positive outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

#### **1. Make social worker well-being a strategic direction.**

- a. Actively recognize and value social workers doing child protection work.
  - i. Show appreciation towards social workers and the work they do.
  - ii. Ask what social workers need in order for them to feel that they are full and valued members of the organization.
- 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.
  - i. Promote a shared and common purpose among all staff.
  - ii. Emphasize the meaning and deeper purpose of child protection work.
- 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.
  - i. Through interviews and focus groups with employees already thriving in the system, discover the organizational conditions most central to their well-being and implement strategies that can be readily introduced.
- d. Promote a sense of community among social workers where positive connections and trust prevail.
  - i. Cultivate positive relationships.
  - ii. Uncover and resolve underlying trust issues.
  - iii. Foster trust and personal connection among colleagues.
- e. Seek input from social workers on best ways to manage work demands and increase control over their work.
- f. Facilitate opportunities for social workers to practice self-care.

## Conclusion

Child protection work is demanding, inherently challenging and difficult. Yet, the value of this work to children, families, communities and society as a whole is unsurpassed. 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.

Several models predict that workers experiencing high job demands and low resource levels (including lack of control and support and rewards) are likely to experience the greatest amounts of stress. This is the situation for many social workers in this study. Social worker assessment of risk of stress places the Ministry's ability to effectively manage workplace stress below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. Five of the eight areas fall below the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile, indicating the need for urgent action. Yet, for those social workers reporting high well-being at work, all but one area falls above the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile. And 25% of the social workers who participated in the study were in this highest category.

Overall, however, the psychological well-being of social workers doing child protection work is moderate. Not surprising, those social workers who perceive the organization as unable to effectively manage workplace stress report less well-being at work. And those social workers with less well-being at work have less job satisfaction, less spirit at work, and less commitment to their organization. They perform less well at work and their intention to leave the organization is greater.

But not all social workers are struggling. In fact, some are doing quite well, in spite of the nature of the work. By comparing the social workers who have the highest well-being (the top quartile of psychological well-being at work) with those who have the least well-being (the bottom quartile), large differences were seen. More importantly, we were able to see what was different for those who are thriving and those who are struggling. And this information can be used to improve the situation for all social workers.

In comparison with those social workers in the bottom quartile, social workers in the top quartile of well-being:

- perform 21% better at work,
- are at 36% less risk of stress,
- enjoy 52% more spirit at work,
- are 73% more committed to stay with the organization,
- experience 77% more well-being,

- report 90% more job satisfaction, and
- are 100% more committed to their organization.

These significant differences between the top and bottom quartiles demonstrate the value – to both social workers and the organization – of an organization’s ability to effectively manage workplace stressors and enhance employee well-being.

Due to the inherent nature of child protection work, it may be more challenging to manage the demands of the work and increase the control social workers have over their work. Yet, given the low overall assessment of the Ministry’s ability to manage in this particular area, effort should be made to address both issues.

The greatest discrepancy between the top and bottom groups occurred in perceptions of managers’ support, management and communication of change, and supervisors’ support. Social workers reporting the most well-being at work report 75% more managerial support, 74% better management and communication of change, and 54% more supervisory support than those reporting the least well-being. Can adequate support reduce stress caused by extraordinary demands? Increasing managerial and supervisory support and improving how change is managed is realizable and will have a great impact on social worker well-being.

Implementing a workplace intervention that will enhance the Ministry’s ability to respond to and manage workplace stress will assist social workers to better respond to the work demands, feel more in control of their work, and feel more supported by managers, supervisors and their peers, thus improving social worker well-being. It will also contribute to increased spirit at work, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and job performance.

In particular, increased supervisory and managerial support can help increase social worker perception of recognition and appreciation, the lowest rated well-being dimension. Moreover, attention to relationships will go a long way to improving the low levels of trust, lack of sense of community, and perhaps an increased desire for involvement in the organization – issues identified in the study.

But, reducing risk of work-related stress is not enough. To fully address social worker well-being and work-related outcomes, including performance and retention, interventions must be directed towards both social workers and the organization. Positive workplace conditions, alone, only contribute 20% to social worker well-being. Employee spirit at work accounts for another 26%. In combination, positive workplace conditions and spirit at work contributes another 20% for a total of 66% of the variance of well-being for all social workers. Two-thirds of social worker well-being comes from the presence of particular organizational conditions and employee spirit at work!



Overall, spirit at work among social workers in child protection is moderate, and somewhat lower than that of other social workers. A large discrepancy exists between those social workers enjoying well-being at work as compared to those who are not. Those social workers in the bottom quartile of well-being at work have moderately low spirit at work, whereas those in the top quartile enjoy high spirit at work, or 52% more spirit at work than their colleagues with low well-being.

It is important to note that an individual's spirit at work can be increased and as it goes up, so too does employee well-being, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work performance and retention. Increasing spirit at work will support social workers to become fully engaged in and fulfilled by their work. It will also increase social worker awareness of the contribution they are making, feel that they are part of a community, and share a sense of connection and purpose with their colleagues – issues identified in the study.

Although managers and directors worldwide have identified psychological health at work as one of the most worrisome issues, organizations have been reluctant to embrace employee well-being as a strategic direction. This study with social workers doing child protection work shows that employee well-being matters to both employees and the Ministry. It also demonstrates that well-being can be attained in spite of the challenging and demanding work of child protection. Increasing social worker spirit at work and improving workplace conditions will have a positive effect on employee well-being, client services, and organizational outcomes.

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