ASSOCIATION OF PSYCHOLOGISTS OF NOVA SCOTIA: PUBLIC SECTOR SURVEY RESULTS

Background

This survey was initiated by the APNS Advocacy committee in order to assess reported general discontentment among psychologists working in the public sector in Nova Scotia as well as reported recruitment and retention issues in the public sector. Based on our membership statistics, there also appeared to be a significant number of public sector psychologists moving into private practice. This being the case, we wanted to understand why this was happening. In addition to identifying potential issues, we hoped to be able to identify how APNS might be able to support its members in the public sector through advocacy and professional development initiatives.

We developed a detailed survey to collect information on how Psychologists in the public sector feel about their employment situation, posing questions in a number of areas. We sent the survey to the full APNS membership inviting participation not only from current public sector psychologists but also those who once worked in the public sector. This included school psychologists, psychologists in hospitals and institutions, those in government and universities. We also encouraged APNS members to forward the survey link to their Psychologist colleagues who are not APNS members.

APNS membership profile

A review of APNS full members, based on a membership of 420, indicated that approximately 70% were involved in the public sector either full or part time. Of those, 42% were also involved in private practice. Based on the member profiles, we estimated that about 58% of APNS' public sector members were full-time public-sector employees.

Participation in the survey

The survey invitation was sent to 420 APNS members. 85 surveys were completed in full, which is about 20% of APNS' full membership. Based on the above estimates of public sector psychologists within the APNS membership, about 30% of our public sector psychologists participated which we considered to be a valid representation.
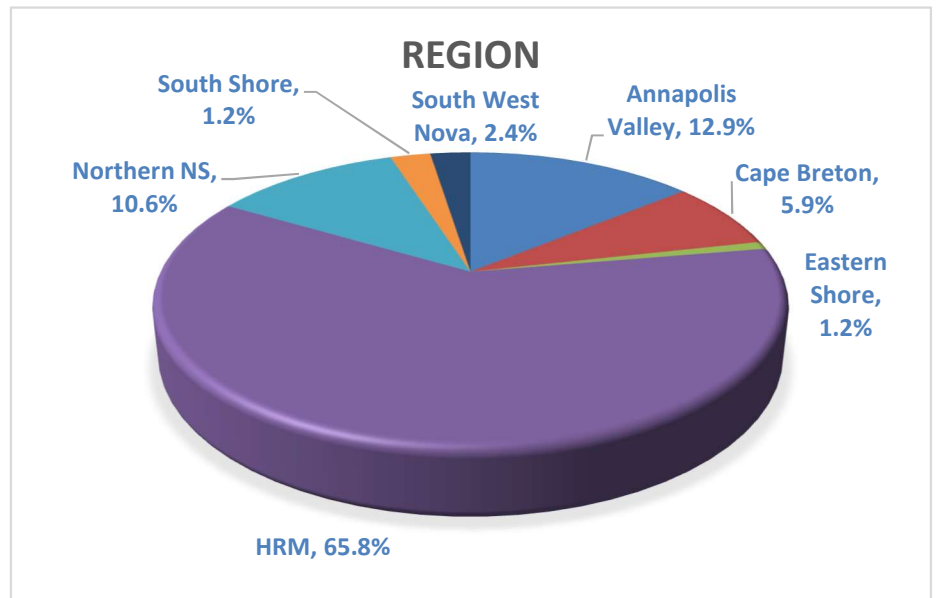
Demographics

The 85 individuals who fully completed the survey identified as in the following sub-sectors:

- Schools - 22%
- Hospitals - 71% (further divided into NS Health Authority, 26% and IWK 45%)
- University, government, other institutions - 7%

There was some overlap, in that most of those at universities were also employed in the hospitals. In these cases participants stated whether they were answering the survey as hospital or university-based.

Additional demographic information

- 90% were in direct client service
- 53% were in the first 10 years of their career
- 11.8% identified as having left the public sector
- 65.8% in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM)
- 12.9% in the Annapolis Valley
- 10.6% in Northern Nova Scotia
- 5.9% in Cape Breton
- 4.8% in South Shore/South West Nova/Eastern Shore

REGION

South Shore, 1.2%

South West Nova, 2.4%

Annapolis Valley, 12.9%

Cape Breton, 5.9%

Northern NS, 10.6%

Eastern Shore, 1.2%

HRM, 65.8%

Responses of those who had left the public sector (Section 3a)

Of those who responded to the survey, 11.8% had left the public sector and completed the survey questions specific to that status.

- 70% of the 11.8% were from HRM and of those, 80% worked in the hospital sector
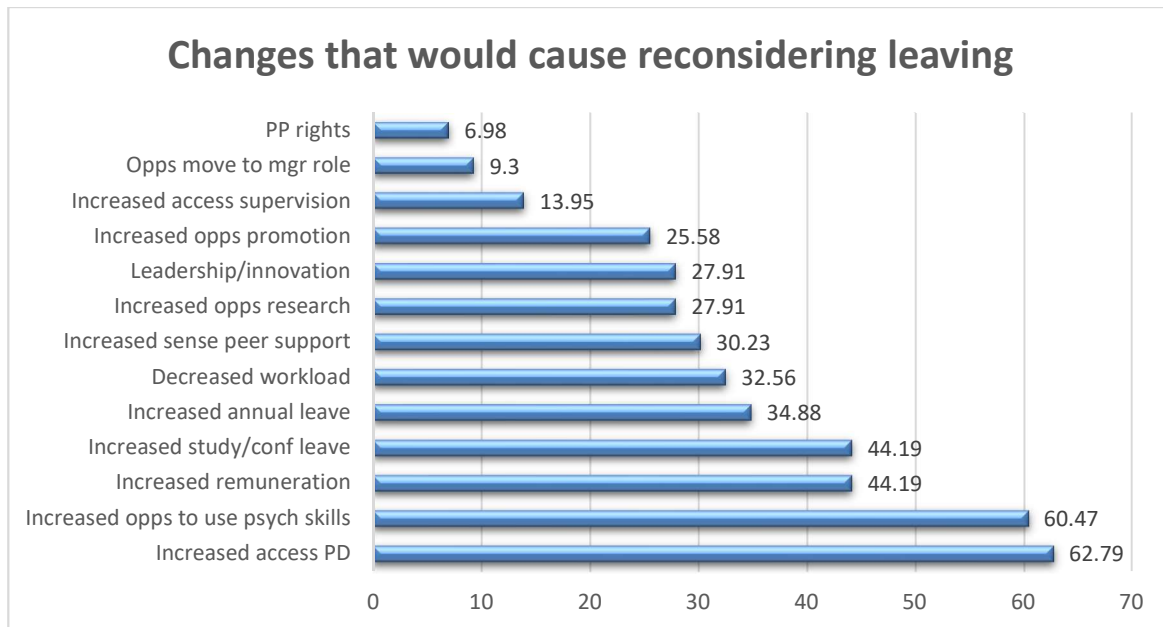- 30% of the 11.8% were from outside HRM and of those, 100% worked in the hospital sector

CURRENTLY WORKING VS. HAVE LEFT

Have left public sector, 11.8%

Work in public sector, 88.2

In answer to question 3.6a: *What change might have **led you to remain in the public sector**?* (multiple answers were allowed)

- The highest responses were: "Increased opportunity to use psychology skills"; "decreased workload"; "leadership opportunities."
- Other comments included: "more flexibility"; "more autonomy"; and "more managerial support."

Responses from those <u>considering</u> leaving the public sector (Section 3)

In answer to question 3.4: *If you are considering leaving or reducing time worked what might **lead you to change that**?* (multiple responses were allowed).

- 41 out of 75 (60%) responded to this question.
- 73.2% of respondents were from hospitals; 19.8% from schools; 7.0% from government/ university.
- 62.8%: "increased access to Professional Development"; 60.5%: "increased opportunity to use psychology skills".
- Other comments that seemed to indicate a similar lack of satisfaction to those who have left include: "allowed to work to practice standards," "autonomy,"; "opportunity to be involved in systemic change"; " increased funding for services that are underfunded."

Changes that would cause reconsidering leaving

Category	Value
PP rights	6.98
Opps move to mgr role	9.3
Increased access supervision	13.95
Increased opps promotion	25.58
Leadership/innovation	27.91
Increased opps research	27.91
Increased sense peer support	30.23
Decreased workload	32.56
Increased annual leave	34.88
Increased study/conf leave	44.19
Increased remuneration	44.19
Increased opps to use psych skills	60.47
Increased access PD	62.79

## Responses to specific questions relating to actual work conditions (Section 3)

In answer to question 3.10: *How satisfied are you about the **number of staff** within your services area?*

- Of the 70 who responded, 55.7% indicated that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

NUMBER OF STAFF
- Very satisfied, 1.4%
- N/A, 2.9%
- Very dissatisfied, 20.0%
- Satisfied, 21.4%
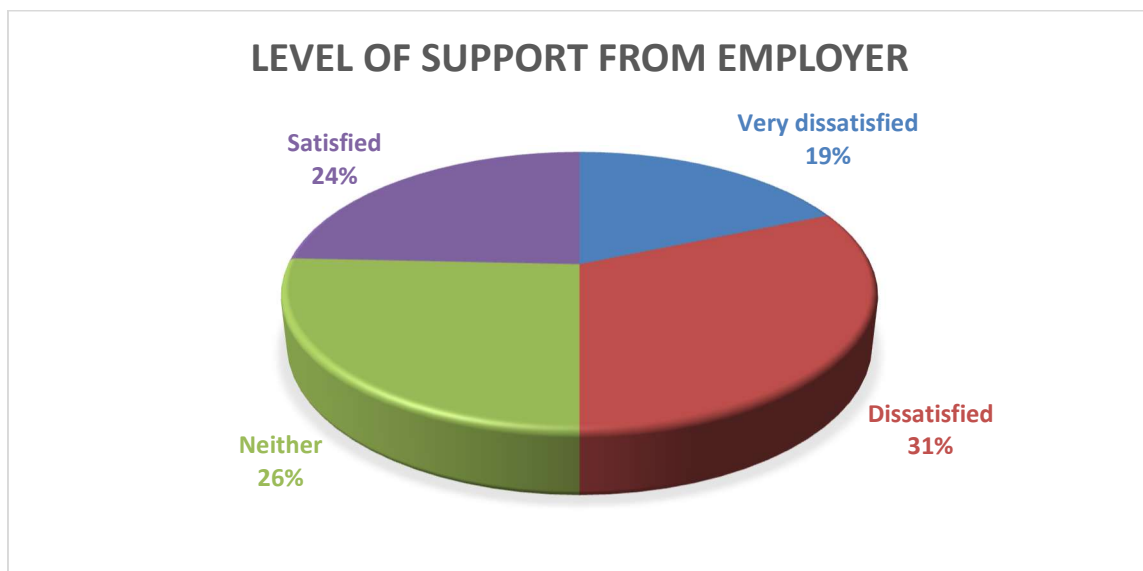- Dissatisfied, 35.7%
- Neither , 18.6%
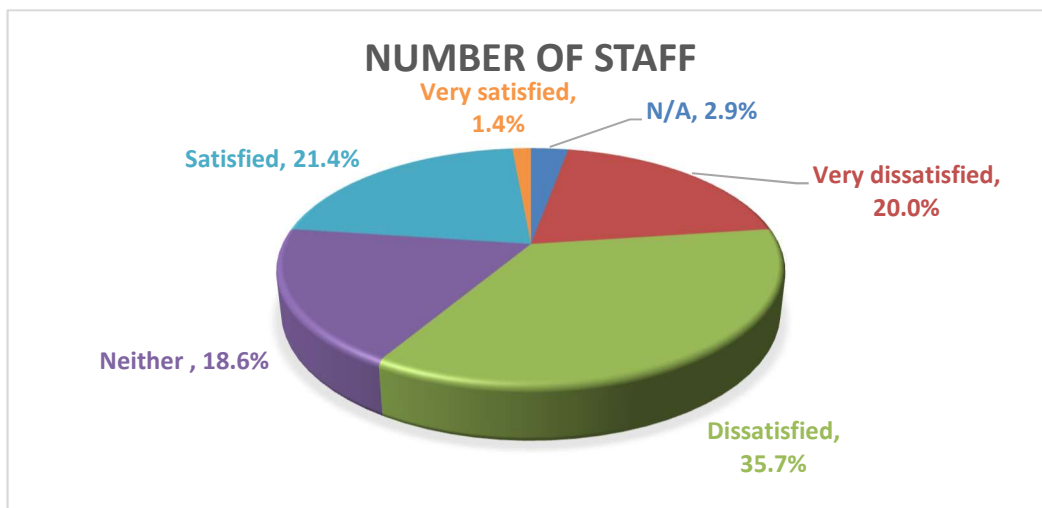
In answer to question 3.11: *How satisfied are you about the **standard of care** given to clients?*

- Of the 70 who responded, 40% indicated they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Although we cannot say for sure, there may be a correlation in the answers of these two questions, suggesting that lack of staff would make it difficult to maintain a standard of care.

STANDARD OF CARE

Very satisfied, 10.0%
N/A, 2.9%
Very dissatisfied, 14.3%
Dissatisfied, 25.7%
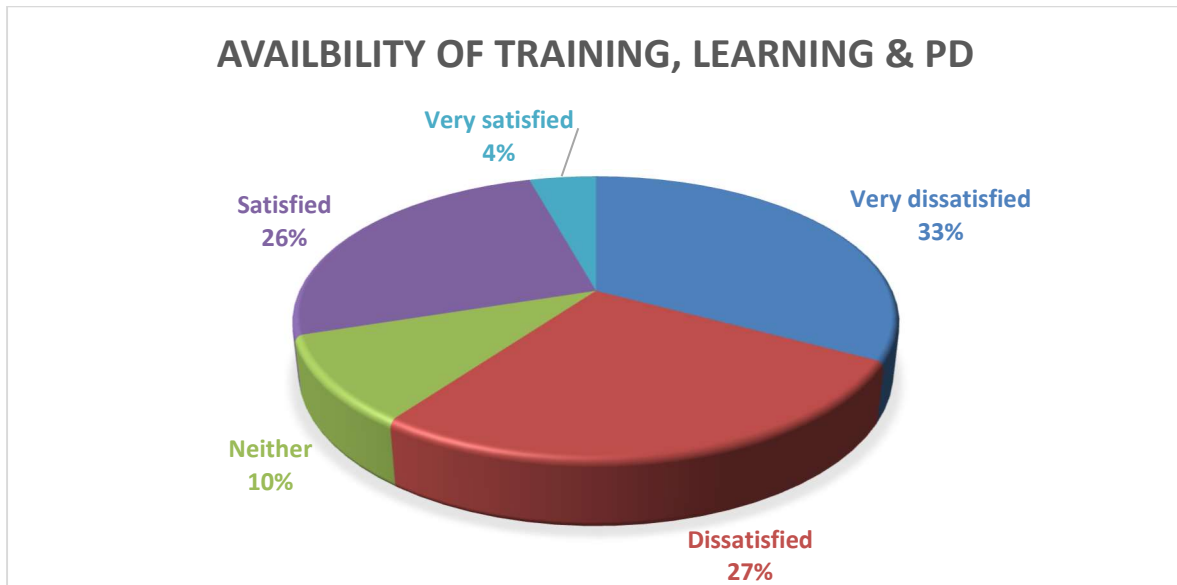Satisfied, 32.9%
Neither, 14.3%
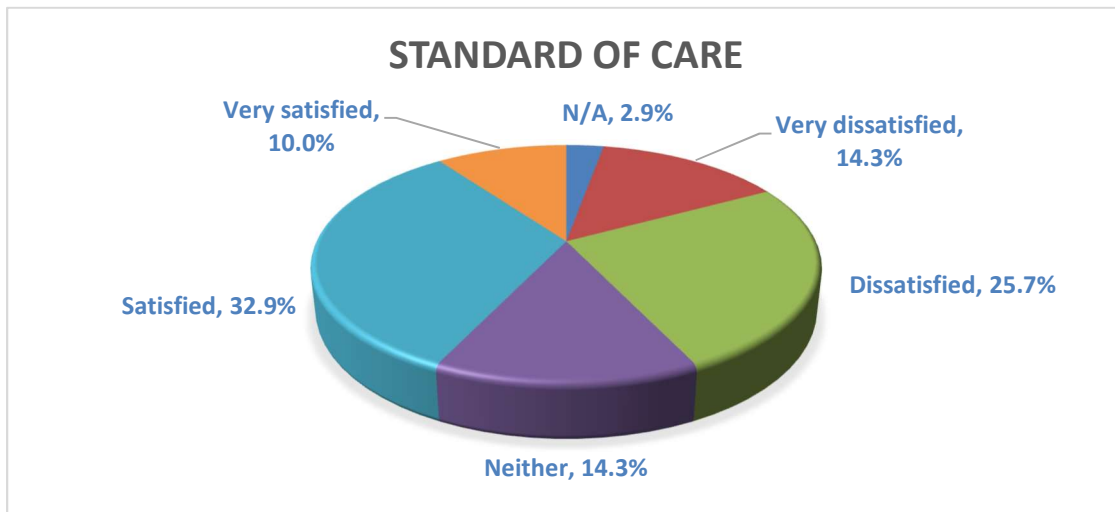
In answer to question 3.12: *How satisfied are you about the **level of support** provided by your employer?*

- Of the 70 who responded, 50% reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Only 25% indicated they were satisfied and none were very satisfied. It is interesting to note that 24% were not willing to commit to either side.

LEVEL OF SUPPORT FROM EMPLOYER

Satisfied 24%
Very dissatisfied 19%
Dissatisfied 31%
Neither 26%

In answer to question 3.17: *How satisfied are you about the **availability of training, learning opportunities and professional development**?*

- Of the 70 who responded, 60% reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

AVAILBILITY OF TRAINING, LEARNING & PD

- Very satisfied 4%
- Very dissatisfied 33%
- Satisfied 26%
- Dissatisfied 27%
- Neither 10%

As a counterpoint, it is worth noting that the respondents were not unconditionally negative as is seen in the response to question 3.15: *How satisfied are you about **your job security**?*
In that case 88.6% said they were satisfied or very satisfied.

In addition, in answer to question 3.2: *Do you feel that your initial reasons for working in the public sector **continue to be your reasons for staying**?*

In that case, 85.5% responded Yes, indicating a strong belief in the role of the public sector, which was consistent across hospital, school and universities. Supporting comments included:

- "While some systemic service issues may lead me to question staying, I still believe all children should have access to qualified professionals in school. The benefits usually cover my needs and the job security is still a large reason I stay."
- "… people need to be able to access good quality assessment and treatment in the public system. Although it has some disadvantages, there are readily available opportunities for peer support and good job security".

A sampling of general comments

As indicated above, while several of the answers indicated that psychologists were dissatisfied with some aspects of their work in the public sector, including number of staff, standard of care, and level of support, at the same time, they supported the public sector ideals and liked the security and benefits and were fairly content with their role. In fact, amid other responses indicating lack of

satisfaction, these were the things that kept them there. The comments also indicated that although they felt respected by their co-workers and peers for their skills and work that they did, there was sometimes reports of tension with other members of the team and dissatisfaction with those in a supervisory role.

- "Although psychologists are respected by their peers, often other disciplines seem to resent psychologists for their skills in innovation and program development and do not recognize it as a unique contribution made by psychologists"
- "…Wait lists trump clinical care".
- "There is a lot of tension between different disciplines in this resource-poor economy."
- "Psychologists are being replaced with other (less expensive to hire) disciplines and the lines that discriminate disciplines are becoming blurred."
- "…the benefits of working here do not always outweigh the costs"
- "…feeling burnout"
- "Human resources are spread too thin and too often quantity takes precedence over quality of service."
- "I am fortunate to be as valued as I am, yet am still undervalued and underused."
- "…public sector Psychologists would benefit from learning to better advocate for themselves and not leaving the responsibility for advocacy with our professional organization."

Advocacy Efforts

In answer to question 4.1: *How should **APNS focus its advocacy efforts**?* More than 50% chose the following responses.

- Providing continuing professional development relevant to public sector psychologists.
- Providing guidance around issues arising from tensions between organizations' expectations and professional ethical standards.
- Advocating for improved access to and equity of mental health services across socio-economic groups.
- Making known the worth of public sector psychology.
- Advocating to assist public sector organizations to better understand the scope of practice of psychologists.

In answer to question 4.3: *What type of Continuing Education **would you like to see initiated by APNS**?* Between 59% and 63% chose the following responses.

- Preventing professional burnout as a public sector psychologist.
- Skills for working with multi-disciplinary teams and complex organizational systems.

Between 41% and 45% chose the following responses.

- Delivering evidence-based practice with a medical environment.
- Cultural competence relevant for working with diverse groups.

It would appear that the high percentage of these "wants" indicate a lack of such in their workplace.

Key Conclusions

Our survey showed clearly that many Psychologists who remain in the public sector are content with their jobs. However, we have identified four main areas that cause dissatisfaction, stress and burnout and may cause them to leave the public sector. These concerns are:

- Shortage of resources affecting the standard of care
- Limited autonomy and ability to practice psychology-specific skills
- Limited respect and support from supervisors and management
- A deficiency in professional development, appropriate to their needs.

1. Based on the responses and the additional comments, it is clear that Psychologists are very concerned that the standard of care is in danger of being eroded with reductions in staff and resources, as indicated in **Responses to specific questions relating to actual work conditions**. Management's continued emphasis on reducing wait times, results in a focus on checking patients off the list, rather than providing appropriate evidence-based care. This often means that Psychologists are not able to book timely follow-up appointments, and not see patients for the appropriate required length of time to ensure effective treatment. In schools this can mean that a child may be rarely seen by a Psychologist, who are only able to take a certain number of cases, or are spread among several schools. Psychologists have the skills to provide the best possible care, but do not have the resources and support required to allow them to use those skills. This can lead to frustration and burn-out.

2. Psychologists working in the public sector believe in the importance of provision of government-funded health care. Nonetheless, they are dissatisfied with the amount of autonomy they are provided as professionals. Furthermore, they do not believe that they can work to their full scope of practice and use their psychology-specific skills. These issues may stem from a lack of understanding from management of the scope of practice of psychologists.

3. Although Psychologists report that they generally receive respect from their peers, this is not always the case with their supervisors and management, shown in **Responses to specific questions relating to actual work conditions**. There seems to be limited awareness and respect for the scope of practice and ethical requirements of Psychologists. In addition, an emphasis on being seen as the "same as others" rather than being encouraged to take the lead in evidence-based practice, often leads to resentment.

4. A lack of appropriate professional development means that Psychologists are unable to keep their evidence-based skills current. As is demonstrated in their responses about **Advocacy Efforts** they are not getting the professional development that they require.