

Message from the President

On behalf of OPSEU/SEFPO's entire Executive Board, I want to thank you for your ongoing dedication to the vulnerable clients you support, and to this union and province.

Essential, front line workers like you have kept this province running during the darkest days of the pandemic. You are all heroes in my book, and your sacrifices have not gone unnoticed.

While it has been a challenging year for so many, workers in Ontario's community agencies have been working directly in the line of fire – exposed and at higher risk of contracting COVID-19. At OPSEU/SEFPO, our top priority has been ensuring your health and safety.

From day one, we got to work demanding better PPE for front-line workers. We established regional triage teams so that we could receive and respond to member issues with the utmost urgency. And we achieved much of what we asked for – not everything, but most of it. We wanted to make sure that our members could continue to work, but do so safely.

But after more than a year of COVID waves and lockdowns, the cracks in our public sector are showing. We know that the pandemic didn't cause those cracks, it just exposed them. It has placed immense pressure on an already-overstretched and severely underfunded Community Agencies sector, as the demand for services has increased dramatically.

So, as we focus on moving forward and rebuilding our province post-pandemic, we know that community agencies must be central in Ontario's recovery plan. We will continue to demand it – at the bargaining table and in the corridors of power at Queen's Park.

We will continue to support you, always.

In Solidarity,



Warren (Smokey) Thomas
OPSEU/SEFPO President



Message from the chair:

Welcome to the Community Agencies Sector

We represent more than 3000 workers who work in child care, legal aid clinics and Legal Aid Ontario, shelters and community agencies who provide services to racialized and marginalized communities.

The Community Agencies sector is led by a four-person executive that is elected from amongst the highest ranking members every two years at the OPSEU/SEFPO Broader Public Sector Conference (BPS). The Community Agencies executive is your voice in OPSEU/SEFPO. We are here to support you in bargaining, to build member engagement and address policy issues of precarious work, workplace violence, and government funding.

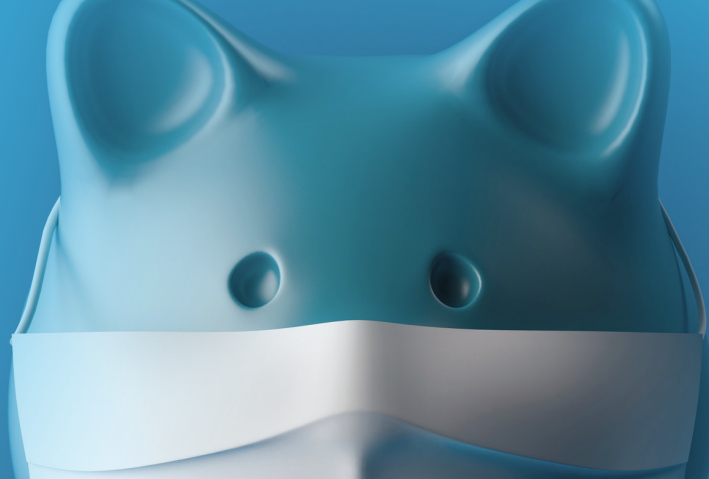
The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an interruption of communication from the division

over the past year. We are launching this newsletter to reconnect with members across the sector. We know that this has been an incredibly challenging year for all of us. Many have made sacrifices, have faced health challenges, burnout and economic stressors.

We are committed to advocating for improvements in workplaces in our sector. The pandemic has exposed the need for a stronger safety net when our society is in crisis. Our work is essential in addressing systemic inequalities. We have an opportunity to pressure governments to make significant improvements to build a more just society. Let's make our voices heard.

Kareen Marshall,
Chair, Community Agencies





Paid sick days and pandemic pay ✓

The provincial government provided temporary pandemic pay, beginning in May 2020, to essential workers performing work in congregate settings. It was extended to June 30th, 2021 and may be reassessed monthly thereafter. OPSEU/SEFPO advocated for a greater scope of workers to be included and was successful, but still, not all classifications were covered.

To learn more: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/eligible-workplaces-and-workers-pandemic-pay>

The desperate need for pandemic pay to boost retention illustrates that workforce issues that existed prior to the pandemic must urgently be addressed. In many settings, low wages and the prevalence of part-time work are systemic workforce challenges that have historically contributed to poor retention in largely feminized sectors.

Essential workers continue to work a lot of overtime. In some instances, vacation is being denied, and many have had to take sick time due to illness and burnout. Under mounting pressure, the government finally introduced three days paid sick days on April 29, 2021, fully one year after Covid-19 closures and lockdowns first started.

This temporary benefit falls short of the 10 days that many health providers and unions were asking for, and ends on September 25, 2021. The fight to continue to demand paid sick days in Ontario will continue.

Employers are now required to provide eligible employees with up to three days of paid infectious disease emergency leave because of reasons related to COVID-19, including time off for vaccination and Covid-19 testing, with no sick notes required under the Employment Standards Act (ESA). How does this impact you under your Collective Agreement?

If your Collective Agreement provides a greater right or benefit than the sick leave standard of three days, then the terms of the contract apply instead of the standard. For example if a part-time employee, casual or relief employee does not have access to sick leave under their CA, then they would be entitled to the three days as per the ESA.

To learn more: <https://www.ontario.ca/document/your-guide-employment-standards-act-0/sick-leave>



Enforcing health and safety during the pandemic ✓

The majority of workers in the community agencies sector were deemed essential under the Emergency Measures legislation. This meant that many workers had to adjust to new protocols and advocate for proper and adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs). In some sectors there were outbreaks, and some workers contracted the virus. OPSEU/SEFPO supported all Locals/units by setting up regional triage teams to quickly respond to issues that Staff Representatives were flagging to support the leadership to address Local/unit specific issues.

The pandemic response in the workplace has required all parties to collaborate to protect the health and safety of both workers and service users. It is critical at this time to ensure that all health and safety concerns are communicated effectively with the union leadership. This is key to enforcing, monitoring and pro-actively bargaining new health and safety language. Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) representatives, highest ranking, and members of the LEC and negotiation team should all be communicating on a regular basis - to share

information, and where possible, advocate for change and bargain health and safety language into Collective Agreements.

The pandemic has opened up new areas to consider when bargaining health and safety language. Listed below are a few examples of language that can be tabled in bargaining:

Training and upkeep will be done by the employer with regards to protective clothing, equipment or devices.

- The employer will maintain adequate stocks of PPE in preparation for a pandemic.
- Organizational risk assessments should include measures to mitigate the transmission of infections.
- Staff who are required by Public Health or the Employer to not go to work due to a positive test of an infectious disease, or exposure to a positive individual, shall have paid leave for this time.

Child care

The child care sector has been badly hit by Covid-19: centres have closed, enrolment has dropped, and the child care workforce is exhausted and stressed. The government was slow to prioritize child care workers to be vaccinated, eventually making vaccines available on April 29, 2021, while keeping child care centres open during lockdowns.

OPSEU/SEFPO belongs to the *Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care* (OCBCC), an advocacy organization that has called for a national, publicly-funded child care system that provides affordable fees for families and decent work and pay for educators. In January, the OCBCC called on the provincial government to increase funding to ensure the safety and well-being of educators, children and families and prevent the further loss of early years and child care programs. The Ford government has not moved on any of the recommendations that were made.

In April 2021, the federal government made a historic child care announcement. The spring budget contained a commitment of \$30 billion to early learning and child care. The government is proposing a Canada-wide, \$10 a day child care system to be implemented over the next five years. This will require cooperation with provincial, territorial, and Indigenous partners. Child care advocates will have to demand that the Ontario government accept federal leadership on child care and not obstruct the implementation of a public system that ensures standards and decent wages.





Community legal clinics and Legal Aid Ontario

The pandemic saw a massive surge in demand for legal aid services as Ontarians faced evictions, job loss, domestic violence and other issues. Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) transitioned to offering more resources to clients via telephone and online, as did the Community Legal clinics.

In 2019, Legal Aid Ontario suffered a 30 per cent budget cut (\$133 million). The pandemic has placed further pressure on the system. These funding shortfalls threaten the right to access legal representation and support from the justice system. The Alliance for Sustainable Legal Aid (ASLA), and others, asked the Attorney General of Ontario, Doug Downey, for additional funding for LAO in 2020. No new funding has been announced.

In July 2020, the Legislature passed the Legal Aid Services Act, which will govern legal aid in Ontario. Currently LAO is in the process of drafting rules to support the implementation of the new Act. OPSEU/SEFPO made submissions to LAO on behalf of the 11 legal clinics we represent in the GTA, along with the Human Rights Legal Support Centre. A separate submission was also made on behalf of staff at LAO.

Shelters

Workers across the homeless shelter system have been exposed to some of the worst outbreaks of COVID-19 due to a slow response in implementing social distancing and modifying sleeping arrangements. The initial roll-out of PPEs was inadequate in many settings. In response, the Ontario government provided municipalities an additional \$150 million to improve homeless shelters and create opportunities for longer-term housing. The government must ensure that accountability and oversight are built into any improvements made in the sector.

Violence against women rates have gone up during the pandemic. Women's shelters have been struggling to meet the greater need. Ontario announced an emergency fund of \$2.7 million to support domestic violence victims during the pandemic that will reach more than 50 community agencies across Ontario, including Indigenous organizations and groups based in rural areas. This is a good start but nowhere near what is needed to stabilize and expand a fragile system.

The Ontario government invested more than \$47 million to provide supportive housing for individuals with severe mental health and addictions challenges who are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The government must ensure that services be both publicly-funded and delivered in the expansion of supportive housing.



Community agencies

Many community agencies belong to the non-profit sector, which was particularly hit hard by the pandemic. Many organizations lost revenue and have had to lay off staff or reduce their paid hours. The Ontario Non-Profit Network asked the Ontario government to allocate a stabilization fund of \$680 million to ensure that non-profits and charities can help rebuild the economy and communities post-pandemic. The government fell short, announcing instead a \$42 million investment to the Ontario Trillium Foundation's Resilient Communities Fund in April 2021. This fund provides grants of up to \$150,000 to eligible non-profit organizations to cover a range of needs to deal with the impact of the pandemic.



Want to get more connected to your sector and the wider union?

Contact us: ✓

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Authorized for distribution by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Warren Thomas'.

Warren (Smokey) Thomas,
OPSEU/SEFPO President

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