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Poll: B.C. care aides struggle to support seniors – half say they're likely to quit

- *48.5 per cent say their work experience over the last three years has made it likely they will leave their job within the next two years*
- *More than half say they don't have time to meet residents' care needs*
- *82 per cent report having been victims of violence or aggression*

A new poll commissioned by B.C.'s largest health care union finds care aides in B.C. are subjected to high rates of on-the-job violence, leave their shifts feeling stressed, and don't have the time they require to meet the needs of those in their care.

Nearly half (48.5 per cent) are considering leaving health care altogether.

The telephone survey of more than 800 care aides – members of the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU) – paints an alarming picture of the pressures facing those on the front lines today, and of the challenges in retaining and recruiting these essential health care workers in the future.

Care aides (also known as health care assistants) provide the bulk of personal care to nursing home residents, home care clients and, increasingly, to hospital patients.

HEU secretary-business manager Meena Brisard says care aides and community health workers are working short-staffed and struggling to deliver quality care to care home residents with more complex care needs, including dementia and other mental health conditions.

"This poll underscores what we have known for years – many of our care home residents do not receive the attention they need and that our members want to provide," says Brisard.

"The situation also takes a huge toll on care staff. When workers are rushed off their feet trying to meet residents' needs, they put their own health at risk. The experiences of care aides working through the COVID-19 pandemic have made this situation even worse."

Forty-five per cent report that they have been off work because of an injury suffered at work and 82 per cent say they've been struck, scratched, spit on or subjected to other acts of violence or aggression from a care home resident, a patient or a home care client.

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More than half of those polled (50.8 per cent) say they do not have enough time to adequately meet the needs of their residents, patients or clients.

More than two-thirds (68 per cent) of the care aides surveyed say their residents, patients or clients are rushed through basic care routines. A similar number (66.7 per cent) say that those they care for do not receive adequate attention to comfort, reassurance or calm them when they are confused, agitated or fearful.

Almost half (43 per cent) say their workload in the past two years has gotten worse. And 62.3 per cent report that they always or usually end their shift feeling mentally or physically exhausted.

Brisard says the provincial government has taken important steps to improve working and caring conditions in seniors' care with initiatives like the Health Career Access Program, which has brought thousands of new care aides into the system, and by taking steps during the pandemic to top up the substandard wages paid by most care home operators.

“We have inherited from the previous government a fragmented long-term care sector with a wide range of working and caring conditions. And as B.C.’s seniors’ advocate, legislative committees and others have pointed out, there is a lack of accountability for public funding that is intended for front-line care.”

HEU has been pushing the government to implement its 2020 election commitment to restore the standard wages, benefits and working conditions that the previous BC Liberal government had dismantled.

The random phone survey of 807 care aides includes a small number of community health workers who provide similar care in home settings. The survey took place September 18 to 29, and is accurate to within +/- 3.3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. It was carried out by Viewpoints Research under commission by the HEU.

October 18 is Health Care Assistant Day, designated by the provincial government to recognize the contribution of care aides and community health workers to quality care

HEU represents more than 60,000 health care workers across B.C., including about 28,000 working directly with seniors in long-term care and other care settings.