

Executive Summary

Purpose

Health and social (H&S) workers in remote areas are well placed to engage in creative and proactive practice. They can promote effective community capacity building as well as help individuals in need. If they are to achieve these potentials they need opportunities created through training and professional development alongside proper recognition by employers.

The purpose of this study is to conduct a situational analysis (SA) to assess Yukon First Nation (YFN) H&S workplace realities with respect to job satisfaction, mental health, cultural competence and core competencies and how these factors relate to the needs and expectations of YFN H&S staff and the departments. The purpose of this report is to provide H&S departments with observations on current best practices and challenges and a practical toolkit.

The SA report is intended to help build on what is already occurring in the H&S departments in developing practical solutions to maximizing opportunities and minimizing risks.

The Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN) in partnership with the 14 YFN, and through the Aboriginal Health Human Resources Initiative (AHHRI), contracted the services of Metamorphosis Change Management to conduct a community-based SA of the work environment of the H&S department, and the needs and expectations of the staff for support and professional development.

“It’s my duty to motivate people to seek treatment or help, to work towards changes. I want to promote positive thinking, make clients feel important again”
–SA interview participant–

“First of all you have to deal with clients and what their needs are. I write cheques and look after their bills. I help [them] fill out forms, but I help them become responsible and more independent” –SA interview participant–

Method

Over the course of 6 months, data were collected in four stages. This included a literature review, survey and interview questionnaires conducted during 2 to 3 day community visits to 13 YFN, and followed by a one-day focus group.

Findings

Data collected were used to answer five questions used as the objectives of and framework for the study:

1. Who are the YFN H&S workers?
2. What is the YFN H&S department work environment?
3. What are the major roles and responsibilities of YFN H&S workers?
4. What current best practices and initiatives have YFN H&S workers developed?
5. What are the training and support needs of YFN H&S workers?

Data findings demonstrated that YFN H&S workers are individuals with convictions about

their work, community and social responsibility. H&S workers are predominantly FN women between 46–55 years of age, working for their own FN. They believe in the potential of their community and feel frustration with the apparent lack of support and understanding from various levels of government.

The great majority of survey participants stay in their jobs because they enjoy their work with people and learning from Elders and they find it gratifying to support their FN people in their healing process.

Many H&S staff members feel that their department is disconnected from other departments and not a priority for their FN governments. Many departments have problems with internal turnover as a result of burnout and stress. Not enough staff members receive job orientations and reviews but most find them useful.

The job functions of directors are predominantly administrative with emphasis on proposal writing, program and policy development and staff supervision. In the health sector the primary roles include home and community care and dealing with clients on a daily basis. In the social sector the job functions are more varied and they include offering support and guidance to the community through client referrals, client intake and financial services, and motivating people to seek help and treatment.

Persistence and creativity are perhaps the greatest attributes of H&S workers in the successful delivery of programs and services.

Every community seeks to develop practices that will enhance the department and its programs and

services offered to the community. There is an effort being made to change the perception of the H&S department

and promote positivity through planned and impromptu events that include more traditional activities. Furthermore, many of the staff members have found ways in dealing with the constant pressures and stresses associated with the specific challenges of working in small and remote communities.

The majority of participants are looking for training opportunities in H&S topics, communications, computers, management, human resources and finance to facilitate their work. Most feel that they should be consulted with respect to the type of training that is most useful to their work, while some of the training needs to be offered away from the community, some also needs to be done on site and even at their work stations.

Culturally relevant, hands-on and facilitated training is the most useful way of providing professional development.

“Working with the school kids ski program has been very rewarding and frustrating. At first we barely had any kids show up but I guess being stubborn paid off and now we have a full bus” –SA interview participant–

Conclusion

FN governments recognize that many of the jobs in the H&S departments involve coping with stress and dealing with people in stressful situations. Most H&S job descriptions list various examples of stress that can be expected as part of the working conditions. However, recognizing these stresses is not enough. They must be addressed and

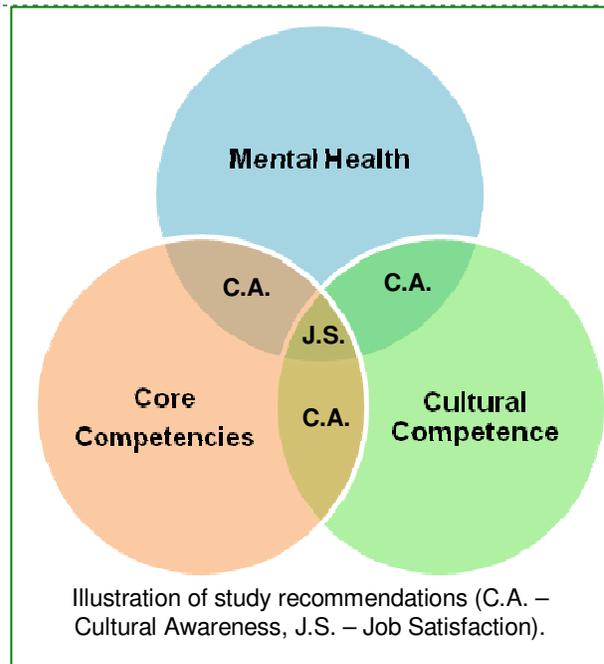
managed so that the mental health of H&S staff is protected. There must be an organizational approach to address issues such as vicarious trauma and dual / multiple relationships, which are inevitable when working in helping or caring professions in remote communities.

YFN also recognize the need for training and professional development for their staff. However, staff is not always consulted about what courses are most relevant or needed for their work and follow-up is not provided after the initial training has been completed. There are no training plans that specifically address on-going, individual assessments, training needs, systems of learning and long-term professional development.

There also needs to be a systematic approach to the development of any mental health and self-care programs for staff.

Recommendations

Metamorphosis has developed 4 broad recommendations for consideration, that require further, formal organizational support for change and in addressing the issues of retention and recruitment, with respect to job satisfaction for H&S departments. This study has shown that many communities are well on their way to reaching this goal. These



recommendations (to bridge the gap) are meant as a tool to help in that process.

These recommendations focus on core competencies, mental health and cultural competence. Cultural awareness is the ‘glue’ that binds them, all of which directly impact job satisfaction. The first step in considering any options however is the consideration to change the department name.

1. Name Change:

Consider replacing the term ‘Health and Social’ with ‘Community Wellness’ in YFN. The change would more accurately reflect the services currently offered by the H&S department in the public and primary health care fields. The change would also convey a more positive and holistic view of the department and its staff.

2. Core Competencies:

Consider adopting core competencies as a system of operations that will help further develop and maintain employee

essential skills as a foundation for learning other skills related to the work in the department.

Core competencies would help develop a highly skilled YFN H&S workforce that delivers both health promotion and injury and disease prevention to the communities.

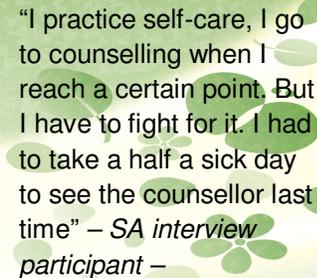
Training must be facilitated, hands-on and on-going through accredited learning programs. Collaboration for leveraging resources is needed with learning institutions (e.g. Yukon College, universities and on-line agencies) and H&S resource agencies (e.g. Health Canada and Yukon Government).

3. **Mental Health:**

Consider creating an organizational environment that fosters self-care and the systematic management of stress to minimize the incidence of burnout. Provide H&S staff with opportunities for debriefing and counselling to counter and minimize the effects of vicarious trauma (also known as compassion fatigue) and the stresses related to dual / multiple relationships associated with helping / caring professions in remote, northern communities.

4. **Cultural Competence:**

Consider adopting cultural competence as a system of operations that will enable staff to better meet community needs for



"I practice self-care, I go to counselling when I reach a certain point. But I have to fight for it. I had to take a half a sick day to see the counsellor last time" – SA interview participant –

culturally sensitive programs and services.

This could begin with the development of cultural orientation protocols that are implemented as the standard approach to cultural awareness for the department, FN government and outside agencies.

By optimizing and building upon these recommendations, opportunities to increase job satisfaction among H&S workers will be captured and risks of recruitment and retention issues will be countered and minimized.

Happy workers who feel:

- a sense of accomplishment in their work,
- recognized for their effort, and
- well equipped to do the job they are doing,

stay longer, work more productively and help in recruitment by making the organization a desirable place to work.

Funding for this publication was provided by Health Canada. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily of Health Canada. This initiative is a product of the 2009-2010 Aboriginal Health Human Resources Initiative administered by the Council of Yukon First Nations.