

Union 'Work Overload' Survey Report

Community Corrections (Vocational Branch) Advisory Group

Public Service Association of NSW

Preamble

The Public Service Association (PSA) has been aware that workload stressors have been prevalent within Community Corrections for many years. Previous PSA surveys have been conducted to better understand how the changing work environment and evolution of job roles have impacted upon employees; however, these results were not provided to the membership.

In September 2015, the PSA released a survey to all Union members that was open to all other Community Corrections employees to provide feedback on their current workload and how that workload impacts upon work performance and work/life balance.

The survey was targeted at current Community Corrections Officers and Unit Leaders to better understand how the expanding and evolving roles of these positions have impacted upon work performance and health and wellbeing for employees. Furthermore, feedback options were provided within the survey to better understand the "real" impacts that this is having upon staff and the service delivery offered by Community Corrections.

In order to provide transparency and to show the PSA membership that your efforts have been appreciated, we are choosing to release the results of this survey to you.

Our members are reminded that the PSA are currently working on ways that we can use these results and statistics to better support you within your workplace.

Union Members are encouraged to share these results with your colleagues. Should you wish to contribute to the PSA, please consider becoming a financial member of the Public Service Association. If you are a current member and would like to assist in other ways, please feel free to get in touch with one of your local delegates who will be happy to assist you.

About the results and accuracy of the Sample Group

The PSA would like to advise that we have received a positive response, providing a valid state-wide sample group to analyse results.

Of the participants who chose to respond to the Question “Are you a Union member”, 20% of respondents advised that they were not current Union members. Furthermore, an additional 15.44% of the total number of respondents actively chose not to identify their membership status. Possible reason for this for those who failed to respond may indicate that they are also non-financial members of the PSA.

If you infer that the remaining 15.44% of participants who elected to suppress their Union affiliation are in fact, non-financial members; then conservatively, 35% of respondents to the survey do not actively support the PSA. This supports the validity of the results contained within the survey by outlining that a large proportion of the results are not solely provided by financial members of the PSA, but rather were contributed to by a range of employees across Community Corrections, both members and non-members.

Of the respondents, 62.39% of all Community Corrections Unit Leaders responded to the survey. This is a very positive result which creates a very accurate representation of the current work demands and associated issues experienced by Unit Leaders across the state.

Unit Leader Workload

73.14% of Unit Leaders who responded have been in the job for two years or more.

Of the respondents, 70.15% worked in community-based offices and 29.85% in gaol-based parole units or both.

68.18% of respondents indicated that they supervise five or more staff in their team.

65.67% of respondents carry a case load of offenders in addition to supervising a team of Community Corrections Officers. It is important to note that almost 15% of Unit Leader respondents supervise a case load in excess of 60 hours.

70.15% of Unit Leader respondents indicated that they carry out additional tasks which they considered to be the responsible duties of their Manager. The highest task identified by respondents was "Workload Allocation" being completed by 89.13% of Unit Leaders who responded, followed secondly by "Performance Management" by 56.52 % and "Attendance at Manager's Meetings" by 50% of respondents.

In addition to the staff supervised, carrying a case load and performing additional "Manager" related tasks, Unit Leaders face the additional role of managing team members' caseloads when officers have "unplanned absences". It is worth noting that, from the Unit Leaders who responded, 78.79% indicated that staff members will have an unplanned absence of 4 days per month or higher. It is also worth noting that 18.18% of respondents indicated that they had team members who regularly had unplanned absences of more than 9 days per month.

Of the respondents, 61.54% indicated that they felt unsupported in their job role. When asked why these Unit Leaders felt unsupported in their role, most indicated that they were responsible for supervising too many staff and too many additional tasks, to adequately devote time to the core Unit Leader role.

It was further identified that additional tasks carried out by Unit Leaders are not captured with a workload value which would give a more accurate representation of the actual work undertaken by Unit Leaders.

Community Corrections Work Overload

The PSA defined “Work Overload” as having more work than you can reasonably do in normal working hours. There was an overwhelming response of 89.24% of respondents who stated that they either had feelings of, or were aware of the pressures of work overload within their workplace. In order for the PSA to better understand how work overload affects staff, the question was asked “How have you seen or experienced work overload in your work place?” There was a response received by 76% of survey participants.

Out of the possible responses available, “Inadequate staffing” ranked highest, being selected by 83.57% responders as the biggest factor identified for influencing work overload.

“Inadequate time for work allocation” ranked second, being chosen by 68.60% and “Inadequate resources or technology to perform my job” and “Unreasonable work demands by management” followed up the top four reasons being chosen by 55.07% and 54.11% of participants respectively.

The PSA then asked if work “Work Overload” was something that you as a survey participant have experienced within your current workplace and how this has affected you. We received responses from 74.26% of survey participants indicating that they have directly experienced the effects of workplace overload themselves.

“I feel overwhelmed or exhausted at work”, either Daily, Weekly or Monthly, was the most common experience of work overload which was identified by 165 respondents. When analysing the results, it is clear that 81.68% of respondents have experienced the pressure of work overload at some point over the past month.

71.78% of the respondents identified that they “find it difficult to set aside time for breaks” as the second highest consequence of work overload within their workplace that they experience on either a daily, weekly or monthly basis.

“I feel unreasonably pressured at work” on a daily, weekly or monthly basis ranked third, returning a response rate of 69.30%.

What was of concern and is notable to mention is that 66.83% of those who chose to answer, indicated that they have “difficulty sleeping at night” as a direct result of work overload. This outlines that workplace stressors are not only contained within the workplace, but indicates that these ongoing stressors are having a longer lasting impact upon a person’s health and welfare outside the work environment.

95.57% of respondents advised that they have spoken to “someone” about these workload impacts. Survey respondents advised that Friends and Family, Co-workers, and their Doctor were the most common, with Union Delegate’s, EAPS and Workplace Health and Safety Representative’s being the least common. Interestingly, only 35.47% of survey respondents advised that they have spoken to their Manager regarding their workload impacts. A more thorough investigation of why staff digress from those directly responsible for creating the workload and assisting in the reduction and ensuring the workload remains manageable for staff to address work overload will be required. Without evidence, it wouldn’t be prudent to speculate on these reasons at this time.

Service Delivery in Community Corrections

Although the PSA acknowledges the real effects that work overload has upon the staff workforce, it is important to consider and quantify the correlation between this work overload to staffing numbers and the consequent inability of staff to delivery quality of service expected by Community Corrections management.

It was confirmed by 92% of respondents that work overload is directly adversely affecting service delivery standards in Community Corrections.

When canvassing the possible reasons for this occurrence, most survey respondents identified that time constraints and the increasing demands of the job including increased work tasks and expectations of the job role as the primary reason for lower service delivery standards.

Many staff identified that “short cuts” are being taken to ensure that they meet the requirements of their work loads to ensure that Community Corrections “Key Performance Indicator” demands are being met. This was a recurring theme in the responses, with many respondents indicating that they feel a pressure and focus on meeting “key performance indicators” which do not give an accurate representation of the quality of work being performed, and as such, there is limited time left to devote to the needs of the offenders. Some responses indicated an ongoing inability to meet the demands of the work which resulted in taking work home to complete outside of business hours to ensure they met the requirements of their job role.

Teamwork and the working environment are also seen to be suffering as a result of the workload impacts. It was identified through respondents that there is a difficulty in assisting other team members due to the high workload and stress of CCO’s within the team.

This was further supported with responses that advised that staff are frustrated, present with low moods and are disappointed that they are unable to provide “best practice” case work for the job that they want to perform. One response in particular encapsulated the mood and behaviour of staff within their workplace stating that “staff have lower morale and motivation” which lead to an increase in staff absences and sick leave. This then affected the office harmony and added to the stress of the existing officers who were left to carry this additional workload. This then impacted upon the professional relationships within the office.

Conclusion

It is evident that Community Corrections Officers want to undertake their job roles to the best of their ability, delivering a high level of service to offenders. The results of this Survey show that officers believe that they do not have the required time and resources to fulfil those obligations and are labouring under excessive and unreasonable workloads.

Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that there was “work overload” present for both Unit Leaders and Community Corrections Officers. Nearly all respondents identified that this work overload was adversely affecting them, causing significant psychological and in some cases physical stress, impacting on their individual health and wellbeing, both within the workplace and in their private lives.

It was identified that the increase in job tasks coupled by the lack of staffing and resources available, impacts negatively upon the ability of employees to complete their work in an effective and efficient manner and to the high standard expected by Management, whilst also maintaining a functional and harmonious workplace.

The Survey provided clear indications that the effects of work overload have led to psychological issues for employees including low moods/morale, poor motivation and conflict emerging between members within the workplace. The psychological effects are described as having a flow-on effect, where the ability to carry out work and meet workplace key performance indicators is reduced. This then means that the quality of service delivered to offenders by Community Corrections Officers must inevitably be reduced to a lower standard, increasing the risk of errors and omissions in case management which is also likely to adversely impact on community safety.

There appears to be a “vicious circle”, where an officer’s feelings of not being able to complete work to either their own or management’s expectations, has the effect of diminishing job satisfaction and increasing stress; which further exacerbates problems with the individual officer’s health and welfare both in the workplace and outside, influencing the officer’s ability to meet service delivery standards and to complete “best practice” case work.

For Community Corrections, the bottom line of the impact of work overload is that the core business of maintaining Community Safety and lowering recidivism within our offender population is not achieved to its fullest potential.