

CUPE 8911 – EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS
PROFESSIONALS OF BC

WORKLOAD IMPACTS SURVEY: A SUMMARY

(DATA GATHERED BY CUPE RESEARCH IN AUGUST 2021 AND JANUARY 2022)



INTRODUCTION

Two surveys were distributed to CUPE Local 8911 members in August, 2021 and January 2022. The first survey drew 372 respondents and the second 237 respondents, constituting approximately 93 per cent and 59 per cent of the local's membership respectively.

These surveys capture the scale of operational challenges at E-Comm BC as represented by workload impacts on CUPE Local 8911 members working in both Operations and Business and Technology areas.



IMPACTS OF UNDERSTAFFING

“IT IS ALMOST UNBEARABLE, THE WORKING CONDITIONS.”

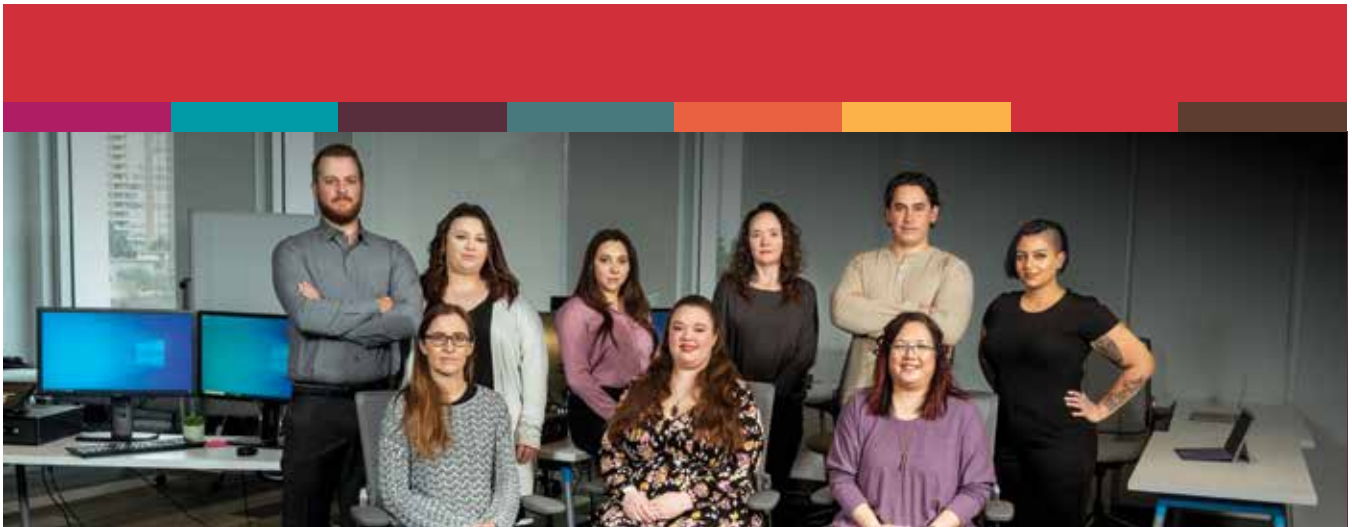
The vast majority of respondents (92 per cent) indicated that they had been negatively impacted by understaffing in the summer months of 2021.

The survey found that expected stress due to the nature of the job at E-Comm is made significantly worse by understaffing. Respondents described shifts taking numerous distressing calls where they listen to people in pain and then do not have time between callers to catch their breath before jumping into another emergency.

Respondents described how hard it is to be motivated to go to work, knowing the many difficult situations that await. One talked about having nightmares about the sound the board makes when red lighting, the signal indicating how many calls have been waiting and for how long. The pressure to keep call wait times down sometimes results in poorer quality of information sent to dispatch. Members talked about leaving work feeling defeated after a shift with constant red lighting. The high turnover also provides significant challenges. Newer staff require more time and support, but insufficient allowances are made for training.

“WHEN I WAS VERY PREGNANT, I WAS STUCK ON DISPATCH WITH NO BREAKS AND VERY LITTLE BATHROOM BREAKS BECAUSE THERE WAS NO OTHER DISPATCHER TO RELIEVE ME.”

Comments about the impacts of understaffing spoke to mental health impacts including extreme stress, loss of sleep and panic attacks. Respondents talked about not being able to take bathroom breaks. This is not only unhealthy, but it is also demoralizing – one commenter even talked about getting a urinary tract infection after being unable to visit the bathroom when necessary.



The comment on the previous page by a pregnant dispatcher who was unable to take needed breaks indicates that understaffing is also an equity issue. Respondents talked about the unspoken expectation by management that staff self-manage their fluid intake to reduce the likelihood that they will need to relieve themselves. One staff person reported being told the need to visit the washroom was “their fault for not timing their water intake appropriately.”

Data suggests that even when not at work, the fear of being called in makes respondents feel dread and guilt. Respondents described feeling like they were letting down their colleagues when not able to work overtime and feeling pressured to work more overtime than they were comfortable with. Respondents articulated their worry about taking time off when sick, as they knew it would result in a heavier workload for their colleagues.

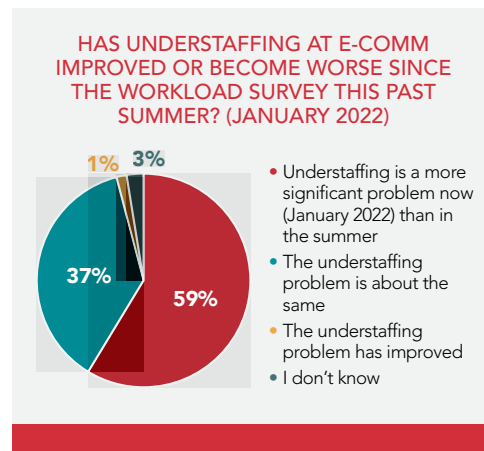
“WHEN YOU ARE ATTEMPTING TO DOWNSTREAM A CALLER WHO IS EXPERIENCING AN EMERGENCY AND GET A BUSY SIGNAL FOR 10 MINUTES STRAIGHT, THAT HAS A DEFINITE NEGATIVE IMPACT ON YOUR MENTAL HEALTH.”

British Columbia’s heatwave in the summer of 2021 was of course a tragic public health crisis. At the same time, it also took a heavy toll on the mental health of E-Comm staff. Long wait times with people who were dying took a toll on members’ mental health, and no support or follow up was provided by management. Respondents, already answering as many calls as they could, said that they saw hundreds more calls sitting in various queues, knowing nobody would be able to answer.

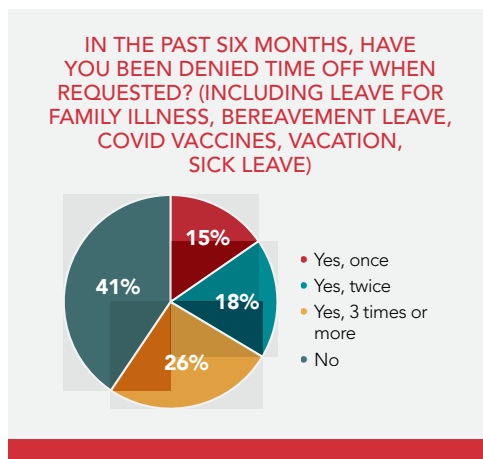
One respondent reported seeing more sudden death calls on the board at one time than they had ever seen in their nearly 20 years working as a dispatcher. The 9-1-1 wait times were, in some cases, longer than 10 minutes.

A BAD SITUATION IS GETTING WORSE

Concerningly, in January 2022, well over half of respondents (59 per cent) indicated that understaffing had become even worse than in August 2021, the date of the first workload survey.



The 2022 survey saw more staff feeling like they cannot follow COVID-19 protocols while also doing their job most effectively. Comments also indicated a growth in stress over staff turnover and the strain among existing employees who are being asked to train new staff as part of their ongoing workload. Respondents described taking early retirement or going off on leave to cope with stress. The stress of work has also caused a loss of sleep and increased depression in some respondents. There is also a general sense of low morale due to the ongoing operational issues at E-Comm.

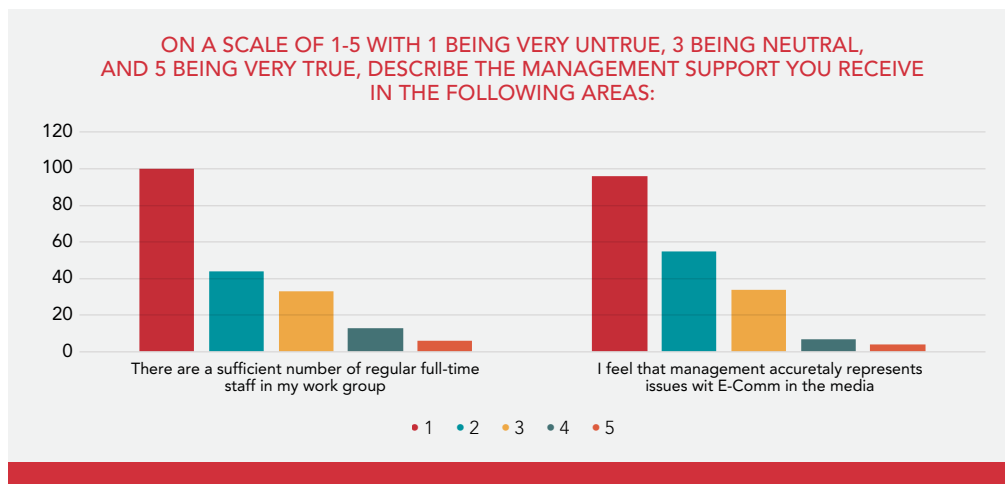


“IT’S MORE AND MORE DIFFICULT TO RATIONALIZE STAYING IN THIS JOB WORKING SHIFTS WHEN I WOULD BE PAID MORE AS A NANNY WITH BETTER HOURS, SIGNIFICANTLY LESS STRESS, AND THINGS LIKE... TIME OFF.”

In the past six months, 59 per cent of respondents have been denied time off when requested; 44 per cent were denied time off twice or more during that period. Others expressed their frustrations about anticipated staff shortages, and about not feeling like it was useful to bank time that they cannot use.

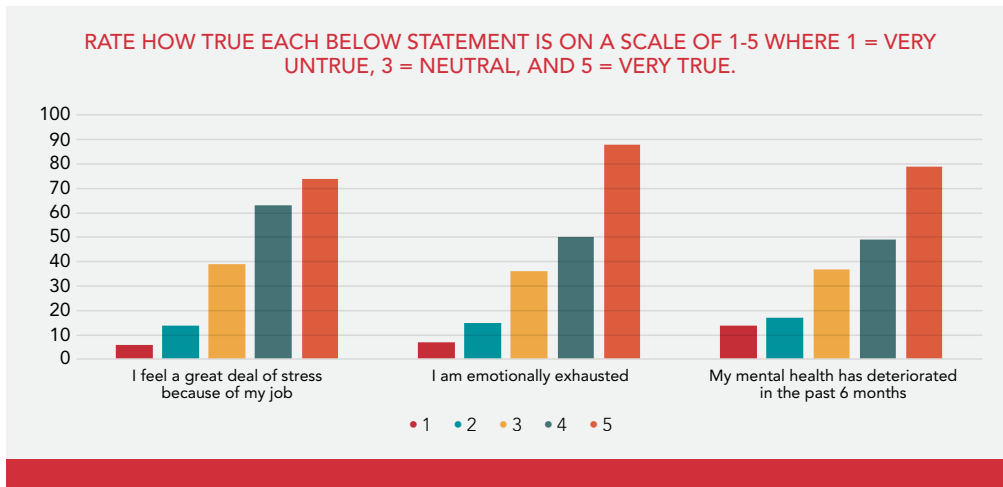
“DURING THE HEAT WAVE WHEN EVERYONE WAS DYING, WE HAD FIRE FIGHTERS ON SCENE HOPELESSLY ASKING FOR ETAS, TELLING US PEOPLE ARE DYING WHILE WAITING FOR EHS, AND WE HAD HOUSE FIRES AND TERRIBLE MEDICAL CALLS... [IN THE MIDDLE OF ALL THAT] A SUPERVISOR CAME IN ASKING WHY WE WERE RED LIGHTING.”

Respondents were asked about management support on a Likert scale where 1 = very untrue, 3 = neutral and 5 = very true. When asked whether there are sufficient regular full-time staff in their work group, 90 per cent of respondents indicated “very untrue”, “untrue” or “neutral” (an average of 1.8 on a 5-point Likert scale where the lowest rating was “very untrue”). Respondents also were not confident in management’s ability to accurately represent E-Comm’s issues in the media (94% responded “very untrue”, “untrue”, or neutral”; or an average of 1.6 on the 5-point Likert scale).





Respondents also indicated that they feel high stress in their jobs (an average of 3.9 on the scale) and are emotionally exhausted (average of 4 (i.e., “true”) on the scale). Most respondents seem to indicate that their mental health has deteriorated in the past 6 months (average of 4 (i.e., “true”) on the scale)



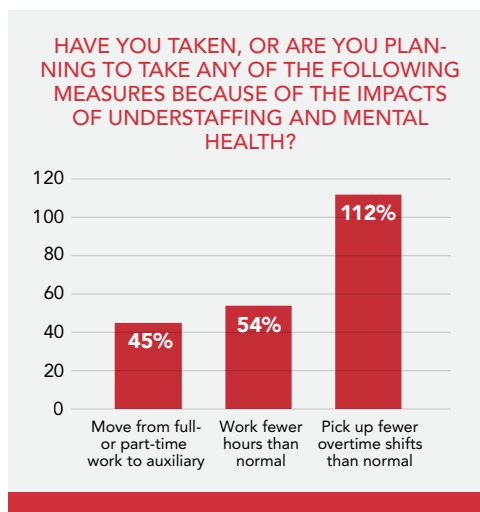
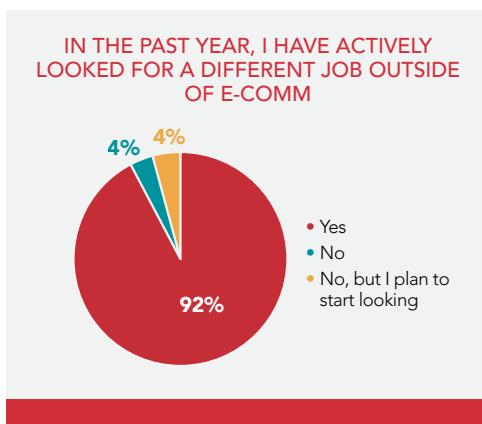
SEEKING WORK ELSEWHERE

“MORALE IS AT A POINT WHERE NO ONE EXPECTS IT WILL GET BETTER SINCE IT’S BEEN LIKE THIS FOR SO LONG. PEOPLE ARE DROPPING LIKE FLIES.”

Members were asked if they have actively looked for a different job outside of E-Comm in the past year. Fifty-seven per cent indicated that they had while an additional 8 per cent planned to start looking for a new job. The impact of staff turnover remains a significant threat to the future of E-Comm. When those members who said that they were looking or planned to begin looking for another job were asked if improving workload issues would make them more likely to stay with E-Comm, 42 per cent said it would, 42 per cent said it might, and 8 per cent said it would not.

“WE ARE WOEFULLY UNDERSTAFFED AND A LOT OF PEOPLE LEAVE FOR OTHER JOBS THAT ARE LESS STRESSFUL OR OFFER BETTER WORK/LIFE BALANCE. SOME PEOPLE EVEN LEAVE FOR LOWER PAYING JOBS BECAUSE OF THE HIGH STRESS LEVEL THAT COMES WITH BEING CONSTANTLY UNDERSTAFFED.”

Respondents were asked if they were planning to take measures because of the impacts of understaffing and mental health. Fifty-seven per cent indicated that they plan to pick up fewer shifts than normal, 28 per cent said that they plan to work fewer hours than normal, and 23 per cent said that they plan to move from full-time or part-time work to auxiliary. Twenty-one per cent said that they plan to take an extended leave, and 17 per cent indicated that they plan to take an unpaid leave. Twenty-two per cent said that they don't plan to take any of these steps. Nine per cent indicated that they plan to take other action, including looking for other employment, early retirement, taking more sick time, cutting back on going above minimum expectations, upgrading education to find a new job, considering taking another part-time job to avoid the stress of turning down work from E-Comm, seeking mental health supports, and reshuffling time off to make the year more manageable.

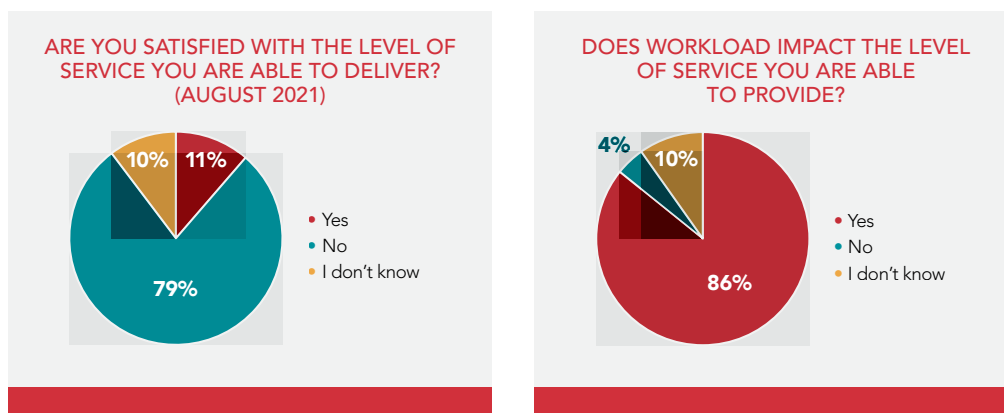


Two important points can be drawn from this data. First, that the working conditions at E-Comm are an example of a positive feedback loop – meaning that the actions in process (stress, overwork, and low morale), are amplifying themselves. The solutions staff are implementing to protect themselves from these conditions will, in themselves, create a greater shortage of staff and exacerbate the problem.

The second issue is one of recruitment. More than half of respondents (58 per cent) are unlikely or very unlikely to recommend working at E-Comm to friends or family. A poor review by existing and former staff, plus information in the public sphere about the ongoing challenges at E-Comm, are likely to limit E-Comm's pool of future job candidates – including for new positions created to help correct staffing shortages.

IMPACTS TO SAFETY AND SERVICE QUALITY

In January 2022, more than three-quarters (79 per cent) of respondents, nearly four out of every five staff people, were not satisfied with the level of service they were able to deliver. This is up significantly from a still concerning 57 per cent in August 2021. A mere 11 per cent were satisfied with the level of service they are providing (23 per cent in August 2021). A shocking 91 per cent of respondents said in January 2022 that workload impacts the level of service they are able to provide. Only 5 per cent indicated in January 2022 that they were satisfied with the level of service they are able to provide.



As of January 2022, 10 per cent of staff never feel safe on the job while working at E-Comm, accounting for physical, emotional, and mental health. Nearly half of staff (47 per cent) feel safe on the job less than half the time, rarely, or never. Only about one quarter (24 per cent) of staff always or almost always feel safe on the job, quite significantly lower than 39 per cent in the previous survey. COVID concerns are included in this result. These numbers were concerning this past summer but have become even worse.

“I AM TRAPPED HERE... I WOULD QUIT IN A SECOND IF I COULD. I CANNOT EVEN TAKE A SICK DAY [AS I AM NOT OFFERED SICK TIME]. SO I CANNOT [TAKE THE TIME TO] IMPROVE MY MENTAL HEALTH AS I HAVE A FAMILY TO SUPPORT AND IF I DO NOT WORK, THEY DO NOT GET FED.”



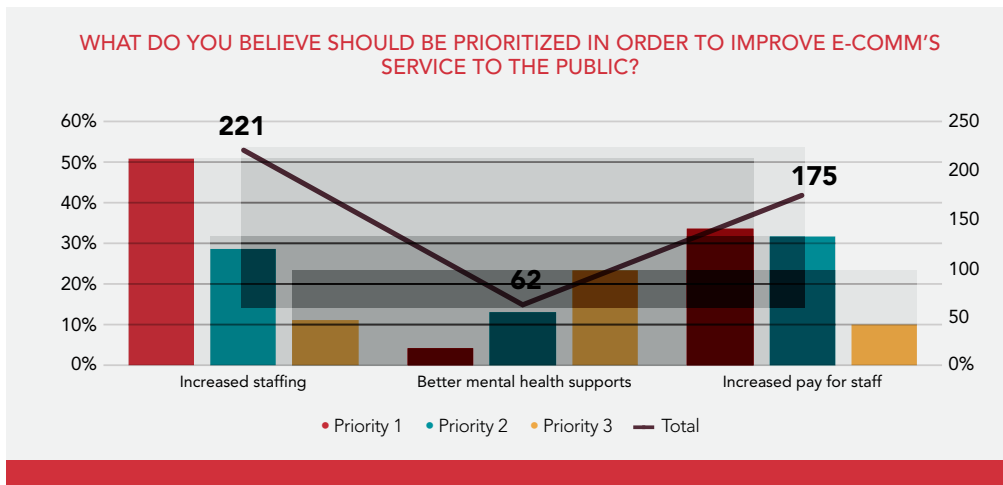
PRIORITIES AHEAD

“THE IRREPARABLE DAMAGE HAS ALREADY BEEN DONE. THEY NEED TO HIRE THREE TIMES THE STAFF THEY HAVE NOW, MAYBE FOUR TIMES... FLEXIBILITY AND BALANCE BETWEEN WORK AND HOME IS KEY TO MENTAL HEALTH.”

The chart below shows how respondents ranked key priorities to improve E-Comm’s service to the public. The bars show the percentage of respondents that ranked each item as a first, second, or third priority. The line with labels shows totals based on one point for third, two points for second, and three points for ranking an item as number one. The top three priorities are increased staffing, increased pay for staff, and more frontline support (operational). Comments under the other category include additional training for management (including cultural safety and anti-racism training



for both management and staff), more mental health support (including increased mental health benefit coverage), more flexibility for shifts, more targeted recruitment of people who can succeed within E-Comm, better training for staff, on-site childcare, more public information about when to call 9-1-1, greater recognition and support for all groups (including fire), improving fairness between auxiliaries and other workers (shift selection), and stricter COVID measures to protect staff.





CONCLUSION

The data clearly indicates that the situation at E-Comm became worse in just a few months. Despite what should have been slight relief because of lower call volumes in winter season, the threat of staff turnover is more significant than ever. E-Comm must address these critical problems:

UNDERSTAFFING CONTINUES TO HAVE SERIOUS IMPACTS

E-Comm must invest in frontline supports for staff, including hiring more staff, providing better training and support, and addressing mental health, in order to retain staff and recruit new staff that will fit well within the organization. This will improve the service while preventing the kind of system overload experienced during extreme weather events.

DIFFICULTIES WITH RECRUITMENT AND COMPETITIVENESS

Though not addressed in the workload survey, other data strongly suggests that wages must also be addressed in response to the workload concerns of E-Comm staff, and that other organizations providing equivalent services are offering more competitive compensation. Put simply, this survey illustrates that the high workload of E-Comm staff, when coupled with lower than market wages, creates a very poor environment for staff retention.

LACK OF MAJOR INVESTMENT COMPROMISES QUALITY OF SERVICE

Respondents feel that management does not have a good sense of the realities on the ground. Nor do they feel that management accurately represents the issues with E-Comm effectively to the public. Members suggest that failure to hire more staff, increase pay and provide more frontline operational support for staff will only lead to more staff attrition and decline in quality of service.

