



# **Social-service workers walk off the job; One-day strike held to highlight staff who say they are among lowest paid public servants, despite caring for province's most vulnerable residents**

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## **Times Colonist (Victoria)**

Workers who care for the disabled, counsel battered women and provide support to sexual-assault victims walked off the job at 13 agencies in Greater Victoria Thursday to push for higher wages.

It was the largest job action since 15,000 community social-service workers across the province began a series of rotating strikes Oct. 16.

The 10 unions that represent the workers say they are among the lowest paid in the public service, despite caring for the province's most vulnerable citizens.

"The services we're talking about support healthy communities," said Bob Wilson of the Hospital Employees' Union. "We have to fund and pay these workers a decent wage."

The starting wage has dropped to \$15.54 an hour from \$16.83 in 2002, he said.

"These are wages that people cannot even live on."

Wilson said the workers want a wage increase of about two per cent a year over two years, a reinstatement of sick-time privileges lost in bargaining concessions in 2004, and portable seniority when moving to different agencies within the same community social-services umbrella.

"This group took huge concessions in 2004 - \$40 million in concessions - and has never achieved any of that back," he said.

Social Development Minister Moira Stilwell said she respects the workers' right to strike, but remains optimistic that a negotiated settlement can be reached under the government's co-operative gains mandate. The mandate requires employers to find savings within existing budgets to pay for modest wage increases. Stilwell said she has visited many agencies and recognizes that they have been asked to do more during the current economic downturn.

"I also met with many, many people who have creative and amazing ideas about how to do their jobs better, and so I hope that that creativity ... will be at the [bargaining] table," Stilwell said.

But Karen Wickham, who works on the crisis line at the Women's Sexual Assault Centre in Victoria, said there is no place to save money in most agencies.

"Every penny that we fundraise, every penny of our contracts [goes] into providing the critical services that we do," she said.

"There is nowhere to cut."

Dianne de Champlain, community education co-ordinator at the Victoria Women's Transition House Society, said agencies are struggling to recruit and retain staff because wages are too low.

"We have a big turnover of staff," said de Champlain, who attended a union rally at Centennial Square.

"We always end up in training mode now. It makes it harder for us to provide continuity of services."

The agencies affected by the job action Thursday included the Victoria Women's Transition House Society, Community Living Victoria, Victoria Women's Sexual Assault Centre and the Garth Homer Society.

Essential-services levels were maintained where required.

The unionized workers in the community social-services sector are represented by B.C. Government Employees' Union, Canadian Union of Public Employees, Hospital Employees' Union, Health Services Association and six other unions, which together make up the Community Social Services Bargaining Association.

[ceharnett@timescolonist.com](mailto:ceharnett@timescolonist.com) [lkines@timescolonist.com](mailto:lkines@timescolonist.com)

Illustration:

Lyle Stafford, Times Colonist / Social-services workers stand next to donated warm clothing in Centennial Square during the largest job action undertaken by the public servants since they began rotating strikes almost two months ago.

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180 East Columbia  
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website  
[www.hsabc.org](http://www.hsabc.org)

Telephone 604-517-0994  
1-800-663-2017