OSSTF/FEESO

MEDIA RELEASE

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University support staff pushed to the limit: Ontario must address underfunding and governance failures

TORONTO, ON — Today, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) released a landmark study, "Pushed to the Limit: A Study on the Psychosocial Hazards and Working Conditions of University Support Staff". The study documents the connection between chronic underfunding of Ontario's universities and excessive support staff workloads. This government's underfunding of post-secondary education has had a direct impact on recognition, leadership, transparency, and fairness for support staff in Ontario's post-secondary education system.

The study draws on 603 survey responses from OSSTF/FEESO members that are support staff at six Ontario universities - Algoma University, Brock University, University of Guelph, University of Ottawa, Saint Paul University, and Wilfrid Laurier University - and supplemented by six focus groups.

More than one in five university support staff surveyed report working six or more unpaid hours every week, while 80 per cent report staff shortages at their worksites and 67 per cent report hiring freezes. Meanwhile, only 20 per cent report being informed of important decisions, changes, or future plans to a large or very large extent.

"University support staff help students navigate their education, support research, and keep campuses running every day," said OSSTF/FEESO President Martha Hradowy. "When positions go unfilled and responsibilities keep growing, these workers are expected to make up the difference. That comes at a cost to their own health and well-being and to the services that students depend on."

The report finds a clear connection between provincial underfunding and staffing shortages, intensified and inequitable workloads, and worsening working and learning conditions. Hiring freezes and unfilled positions leave remaining staff absorbing additional duties, often without compensation or recognition. Furthermore, women and people with disabilities face a disproportionate burden of overwork and unpaid hours.

These pressures are compounded by governance failures. Staff described a widespread lack of transparency, limited participation in important decisions, and inconsistent or arbitrary application of policies. Only 45 per cent of survey respondents report that they trust information from management, and 26 per cent actively distrust it.

The findings in the report make it clear that institutional governance structures are failing support staff and call for formal mechanisms to increase transparency and collaboration.

At the provincial level, the report's policy analysis identifies Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) as establishing "heightened levels of provincial control and oversight." It describes a funding model that places universities in competition for scarce public resources and diverts staff time toward complex reporting requirements that are unrelated to the institutions' core missions such as quality of education, research, or community service.

"Support staff cannot keep making up for funding shortfalls with their own time and well-being," said Hradowy. "Universities need stable funding, transparent leadership, and decisions informed by the people who do the work. Increasing provincial control while leaving institutions without adequate resources does not address the problems this study identifies. Staff need a meaningful voice, and students need properly supported public universities."

Addressing this crisis requires action from both the Ontario government and university leaders. OSSTF/FEESO is calling for:

- **Adequate, sustainable provincial funding:** Reverse chronic underfunding and reduce universities' reliance on unstable revenue sources so they can maintain staffing, support students, and fulfil their public education and research missions.
- **Proper staffing and sustainable workloads:** Fill vacancies, prevent the continual downloading of additional duties, and stop relying on unpaid work to keep university services running.
- **Transparent, accountable university governance:** Give staff timely information and meaningful input into decisions affecting their work, strengthen collaboration between staff and management, and ensure policies and procedures are applied fairly and consistently.

As people gather at Queen's Park today for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association's rally, these findings reinforce the importance of transparency, accountability, and meaningful participation across public education.

OSSTF/FEESO, founded in 1919, has over 60,000 members across Ontario. They include public high school teachers, occasional teachers, educational assistants, continuing education teachers and instructors, early childhood educators, psychologists, secretaries, speech-language pathologists, social workers, plant support personnel, university support staff, and many others in education.

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