

Looking to Saskatchewan:

HR Plan for the Saskatchewan Coalition of Mobile Crisis Units



This case study will be of interest to other organizations that have seen similar staffing issues arise from increasing service pressures without simultaneous increases in funding.

Overview and context

The Mobile Crisis Units serve the three major urban centres in Saskatchewan, covering approximately 75% of the province's population. They are open 24 hours a day every day of the year and deal with requests for crisis assistance over the telephone, in their offices, or in the community, as appropriate. The crises to which the Units respond may involve families in distress, the prevention of child abuse and neglect, marriage and individual problems, and mental health crises, including suicide intervention and addictions. Half of all calls to the Units involve children under the age of 16 years. The Units also answer the toll-free problem-gambling helpline for the entire province.

The three Crisis Units respond to approximately 50,000 crisis calls per year and work face to face with people—in their offices or out in the community, including in people's homes—in 20% to 25% of cases. They work closely with other emergency services including police, fire, ambulance and hospital emergency departments.

The Mobile Crisis Units together employ a total of 40 full-time, 5 part-time, and 33 casual staff.

In 2005, the three Mobile Crisis Units operating in the province of Saskatchewan faced a number of challenges that had been emerging over the course of several years. These included:

- an increase in the volume of crisis intervention calls
- demands to broaden the units' service parameters
- increased direct and indirect referrals to the Units as other agencies in the community reduce the number of clients they serve, refer them elsewhere, or list the local Mobile Crisis Unit on their after-hours message manager
- an absence of funding increases to meet these service requirements
- an increasing inability to compete with similar service agencies in key areas of staff recruitment and retention
- funding and staffing issues arising from years of inadequate funding

Together, these challenges created a crisis for the Mobile Crisis Units.

Faced with this situation, the Mobile Crisis Units came together to document and quantify the extent of their human resources challenges so that they could present a case to funders. This case study will be of interest to other organizations that have seen similar staffing issues arise from increasing service pressures without simultaneous increases in funding. It will also be of interest to governments and other funders who want to ensure adequate staffing levels in human services.

The story

In response to the challenges the Mobile Crisis Units faced, the Units re-established a Provincial Crisis Coalition to collaborate on solutions and to allow them to speak with one voice as they addressed their common challenges. Coalition members included board, management, and staff representatives. In May 2006, the coalition submitted a Human Resources (HR) Plan to the crisis units' core funder, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Social Services' Division for Community Resources. This document outlined the three units' common human resources issues. The Ministry, although

open to the document's conclusions, requested a second, professional perspective. Charlotte Rochon of Rochon Associated Human Resources Management Consulting Inc. was engaged as a consultant to work with the Coalition to complete an addendum to the HR Plan that would include an analysis of, and recommendations to address, critical recruitment, retention, and succession planning issues common to the three crisis units. This work included an objective assessment of the Crisis Worker and Team Leader positions, which the coalition viewed as unique and under-valued. A human resources operational review and a review of service agreements between the province and the crisis units were later added to the consultant's work in response to circumstances.

The initial steps taken by the coalition included the following:

- A compensation survey was designed and distributed to organizations that the coalition identified as having positions similar to those of its Crisis Workers and Team Leaders. This survey gathered information about financial and non-financial compensation and about the roles and responsibilities of human services positions that the coalition deemed comparable to that of Crisis Worker.
- A human resources (HR) operational review was undertaken by the consultant. This review provided concrete information with respect to the roles and responsibilities of the Crisis Worker position and provided the opportunity to explore recruitment and retention issues related to the position.
- The three units' service agreements with its key provincial funder were reviewed to assess whether and/or to what extent funding inequities might exist.
- Significant findings emerged during this initiative:
- The Crisis Worker position—the core position within the Units representing by far the largest number of employees—was compared to the positions of the human services professionals (for example, child protection workers and mental health workers) with whom crisis workers routinely interact and was demonstrated to be professional in nature, based on job evaluation factors such as scope of responsibilities, education and experience, complexity, planning, etc.

- Wages and pensions for Crisis Workers had not kept pace with the wages and pensions of similar professionals in the human services sector.
- The Mobile Crisis Units, which provide service 24 hours a day, seven days a week, were under-resourced. This led to an uncommonly high use of casuals and exacerbated recruitment and retention problems. These problems were expected to increase over time as long-serving employees retired.
- Not only were there wage inequities in comparison to comparable jobs within the human services sector, but there were also inequities among the three Mobile Crisis Units for identical jobs. This was rooted in their independent evolution over the years.
- The specifics of the service agreements between each of the three Units and their key funder varied sufficiently to result in funding inequities, despite the acknowledgment that all Units deserved equal treatment. For example, some budget lines in one agreement were not included in the other agreements, and levels of funding for some comparable budget items were uneven.

The coalition based its discussions with the provincial funder on the consultant's final report outlining these findings and related recommendations. As a result of the negotiations, the largest provincial funder agreed to provide significant one-time and on-going funding to allow the three Mobile Crisis Units to implement the report's recommendations.

Lessons learned

The Mobile Crisis Units learned invaluable lessons in addressing the challenges they had identified:

- Coalitions need leaders who will coordinate and create urgency around the work, and who can act as effective spokespersons. In this case, individual members of the Coalition volunteered to lead various aspects of the initiative, from acting as the key contact for the consultant to coordinating specific activities. Rita Field of Saskatoon played a particularly key role in this manner.

- The coalition drew on successful examples of similar initiatives. Specifically, the Saskatchewan Association of Rehabilitation Centers paved the way with its 2004 Human Resources Plan. It demonstrated that working openly and cooperatively with funders and providing them with third-party, professional analysis and recommendations builds the relationship needed to allow community-based organizations and funders to find mutually beneficial solutions to issues.
- Hiring a human resources professional provided the coalition with the specialized knowledge it needed to proceed with its work and ensured that findings were perceived by the funder as objective and credible.
- Building support in the broader community, in the form of support letters and active intervention from key community and service organization representatives at strategic events, was essential in convincing funders of the Mobile Crisis Units' value in the community.
- The use of competency matrices to map out the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills required by Crisis Workers proved an effective approach to making the case that these positions were comparable to other professional human services positions.

Emerging themes and insights

- The decision by the three Mobile Crisis Units to re-establish the Provincial Crisis Coalition and work collaboratively to address their common issues and present a common front for the funder was a key factor in their success. In particular, this approach supported a broad range of perspectives and stories that enriched all involved in the initiative.
- Community-based organizations (grow) develop deep roots in their local communities and are inevitably shaped by them. As such, they are individually unique and well positioned to serve those communities. The coalition structure allowed sufficient flexibility for each unit to retain its individuality while working to address common issues.
- Membership in the United Way provided the funder with an indicator of the Coalition's credibility, thanks to the United Way's well-perceived approval and accountability processes, and local United Way

representatives provided support and strategic counsel for Steering Committee members at important phases in the initiative.

- Initiatives such as this one require considerable effort and resources. It is important to maintain and build on the positive results achieved including improved relations with funders.

Impact on the Community

The funding that the three Mobile Crisis Units received as a result of this initiative had both immediate and longer term impact on their ability to recruit new staff and retain already existing staff. It also helped the Units to provide improved pension coverage for all staff, wages reflective of the professional nature of their employees' responsibilities and effective training. This resulted in improved continuity and accessibility of services to the communities where the crisis units are located.

The Ministry of Social Services as well as the police and health and mental health, social services and other human services professionals gained a better appreciation of the breadth, depth, and professionalism of crisis unit services and staff. This supported improved working relations and increased effectiveness in the many cases where these various people work together.

This increased appreciation by their human services colleagues raised the self-esteem of all crisis unit workers and boosted their confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully to the sector as a whole.

Conclusion

The Provincial Crisis Coalition continues its work and funding remains at a sustainable level. This ensures that rather than having to deal with issues stemming from being chronically under-resourced, the three Mobile Crisis Units can focus on providing the full range of crisis intervention services their communities count on.

About the Author

This case study was written by Charlotte Rochon, who was selected by the Saskatchewan Coalition of Mobile Crisis Units to work with them on the initiative described because of her broad experience in the nonprofit sector as well as her credentials as a human resources professional. Charlotte received input from the executive directors of the three Mobile Crisis Units prior to writing and during the editing stage of this case study. Two of the executive directors, Rita Field in Saskatoon and Al Reis in Prince Albert, were active participants throughout the initiative and provided feedback from that perspective. The third, Glenda Jenkins in Regina, provided the perspective of a Unit leader working with the results of the initiative. The combination of their views ensured a balanced account of this successful venture.

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