



The Brief

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Group home workers may see pay increase, pay equity advocates demand more



Romana Sehic, a Fredericton-based group home worker, spoke about the need for pay equity for group home workers at Bread & Roses with the Alex Bailey Swing Band: an International Women's Day Event, Workers Appreciation Night and Fundraiser for Pay Equity on March 13 at Connexion Arc in Fredericton. Photo by John (Albert) Martin.

By TRACY GLYNN

Fredericton - The government of New Brunswick quietly released results of a long-awaited pay equity study for workers in group homes (also known as community residences) on March 19. Adult caregivers in group homes who make an average \$11.95/hour will have their pay adjusted to \$14.80/hour within four years.

Danielle Scott, a Saint John-based group home worker, and pay equity advocates were among those gathered at the Women's Equality Branch in downtown Fredericton to hear the New Brunswick government's pay equity adjustments for group home workers.

Scott says, "I'm disappointed that the wage increases for group home workers are as low as they are. We are not really that much further ahead when you consider inflation and the cost of living. We could very well be making near the minimum wage in five years."

The NB Coalition for Pay Equity, which has active committees in Fredericton, Moncton and Edmundston and volunteers across the province, is working towards adequate legislation for pay equity, which would guarantee equal pay for work that may be different but of the same value. "Right now, too many predominantly female jobs are underpaid," says Johanne Perron, executive director of the NB Coalition for Pay Equity.

The pay adjustment amount, if any, a group home worker will receive depends on their current wage level, which may be higher or lower than the average hourly rate and/or "fair" hourly rate.

Norma Dubé, Assistant Deputy Minister of the Women's Equality Branch, told those gathered at her office to hear the results that group home employers will be contacted immediately to get the salaries and hours worked for each of their workers. Pay equity adjustments will be spread out over four years in lump sum payments. The adjustments are retroactive to April 1, 2013. When workers will see the first pay equity instalment on their pay cheques or what portion of the adjustment will be given to them in the first year is not known.

Romana Sehic works at a group home in Fredericton that specializes in caring for men with traumatic brain injuries. She is also the President of the Council of Group Home Unions that represents a number of CUPE locals

organized at group homes.

"We work with our hearts. Group home workers don't make a great living. We work for just above the minimum wage. It is hard to demand fair wages because we are overworked and don't have the time. We work a shift and then must go to another job. It's a rude awakening when we find that we work for \$10.50/hour and our client who we take care of makes \$12/hour. How do you pay rent? How do you drive a car with our income?" said Sehic in an interview with CHSR's From the Margins on March 4. Sehic received training in human services at a community college to get her job.

Workers in four publicly-funded private sectors were evaluated for pay equity adjustments. Group home workers were the last group of workers to receive their results. Home support workers, transition home workers and child care workers got their results in June 2012 and pay equity adjustments were retroactive to April 1, 2012.

"We had been told that the same methodology would be used for the group home sector as had been used for home support, child care and transition houses, so our expectations were not high," says Wendy Johnston CUPE's Equality Representative.

Female-dominated jobs are compared with male-dominated jobs in terms of skill, effort, responsibilities and working conditions in order to determine pay equity for workers. Several flaws in the government's methodology to determine fair wages for workers in these job sectors concern Johnston.

"Alarm bells went off when the government released the results for transition house, home support and child care workers in June 2012. The 'fair' wage rates calculated for the eight female-dominated jobs ranged from just \$12.52 to \$14.17 per hour. Anyone earning more than \$14.17 an hour was considered to be already paid fairly! Clearly something was wrong with the process. Pay equity advocates got down to work to find out what had happened," says Johnston.

"We are pleased to see that the government took into account some of the pay equity coalition's comments and determined the 2013 group home workers wages based on 2012 wages for male comparators. That gave visibly better results than what was determined for child care, home support and transition house workers whose 2012 wages were based on 2010 male jobs wages," says Perron.

Group home workers' wages were compared to male comparators' wages set in 2012; \$13.24 for non-unionized maintenance workers and \$16.55 for foremen. Child care, home support and transition house workers "fair wage" was based on lower 2010 hourly wages; \$11.86 for maintenance workers and \$14.83 for foremen.

New Brunswick's home support workers in 2011 were making an average wage of \$11/hour. The "fair wage," according to the New Brunswick government after they conducted a pay equity study of this workforce, is \$13.15/hour. In 2011, crisis interveners at transition homes were making an average wage of \$13.37/hour. The government of New Brunswick claims that they deserve a 3 cents/hour wage increase to \$13.40/hour. Support workers in child care were making an average wage of \$10/hour in 2011 and after the pay equity exercise were deemed eligible for an increase to \$12.52/hour.

"There are other issues with the methodology that must be resolved so that the province can progress towards pay equity for workers who work in other government-mandated services, such as special care homes and ADAPT centres, and revisit the programs done with the four groups. Every worker in predominantly female job deserves pay equity and nothing less," says Perron.

Workers in these care sectors traditionally dominated by women and more women in New Brunswick are working more than one job to make ends meet. In 2013, 6.5% of women and 4.4% of men in New Brunswick had two or more jobs, according to Statistics Canada figures. (continued on page 2)

In honour of Loretta Saunders

By DARRYL LEROUX

Trigger warning: this article deals with the death of Loretta Saunders, an Inuk woman who was found murdered on February 26 in Salisbury, New Brunswick.

I woke up early this morning, unable to fall back asleep. As you may imagine, the past 10 days or so have been extremely difficult, for a number of reasons that I never could have predicted.

After hearing about Loretta's murder, I walked home, the loneliest walk of my life, braving onlookers who were no doubt puzzled at the tears streaming from my eyes and the sounds emanating from my body. I came home, lay in bed, and ignored all attempts to communicate with others for several hours. I couldn't move. I ended up speaking with a few friends and family members before falling asleep from exhaustion, my heart heavy with sorrow and my head aching.

I'm still in shock at the news, and especially of her final resting place. That image hurts beyond anything I could say in words.

And I refuse for that to be the last image I have of Loretta, given her remarkable spirit.

Even as I write this, as the tears wrack my body and the letters on my keyboard blur, none of this seems real. I was always so worried about Loretta. She presented all of the vulnerabilities to which Indigenous women are prone, through no fault of her own. I reread her thesis proposal last night and was reminded of how deeply she was aware of being a product of a Canadian society intent on destroying and eliminating Indigenous peoples. That last word, "eliminating," may seem extreme to some, but it is now so charged, so raw, so very real.

Lying in a ditch along the Trans-Canada Highway. I simply cannot get this image out of my mind.

So many friends want to discuss the details of the case with me, they want to dissect it like they were the lead characters in a crime drama, the same ones that actually promote the incarceration and elimination of Indigenous peoples and peoples of colour from society. What in the world makes somebody think that I want to listen to them piece together Loretta's murder. "Darryl, do you think they did it? C'mon, you must know." This is not a crime drama, she is dead. Murdered. What is wrong with those people? What were they thinking? If it's not friends acting like sleuths, it's the media acting like buzzards, circling and waiting for somebody to surrender like fallen prey. No more than five minutes goes by between the police announcement of Loretta's murder and my inbox and voicemail being filled with requests.

If you're reading this, take it as my statement. I refuse to speculate about Loretta's death. What I do know is that our society has discarded Indigenous women and girls in much the same manner for generations. These people were playing out a script that we all know intimately, but never acknowledge.

It's our doing, which Loretta articulated so clearly in her writing-theft of land base, legalized segregation and racism, residential schools for several generations, continued dispossession = social chaos.

It is a recipe for disaster for Indigenous peoples, and especially Indigenous women. Who suffers most when access to land, to the ecological order at the basis of most Indigenous societies, is limited, controlled, or outright eliminated? Is that not what's at the basis of a settler society like our own, eliminating Indigenous peoples' relationship to the land (and/or their actual bodies), so that we can... (continued on page 2)



Loretta Saunders is the latest victim in a pattern of violence against Indigenous women in Canada. She was studying missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada as a graduate student at St. Mary's University in Halifax when she was found murdered on February 26.