



Social service workers reach tentative deal

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Workers who care for some of the province's most vulnerable citizens have reached a tentative two-year deal with the B.C. government.

The agreement calls for community social service workers to receive 1.5 per cent wage increases on April 1 and Jan. 1, 2014.

In response to one of the unions' key demands, entry-level workers will get an additional 1.5 per cent hike on April 1.

Union officials had complained that the starting wage in the sector had declined over the past decade to \$15.54 an hour from \$16.83 in 2002.

"That was one of the issues that we had," said Patsy Harmston, chairwoman of the Community Social Services Bargaining Association.

"Being able to raise them a little bit higher than everybody else was pretty important to us."

The deal also protects health and welfare benefits, she said.

The union bargaining committee is recommending acceptance of the deal, which would run from April 1, 2012, to March 31, 2014.

Voting by 15,000 workers across the province is expected to last through this month and possibly into April.

The deal followed a 13-day bargaining session and came after a series of rotating strikes that began last fall.

"I think [the government] got a strong message that our members were behind the bargaining committee on this and needed to see some movement," Harmston said.

"Of course we would have liked to see higher increases, but I don't think we were going to in this round."

Most of the workers in the sector provide care for adults with developmental disabilities, while others counsel sexual assault victims, help at-risk youth, or run transition houses for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

The agreement was reached under the government's co-operative gains mandate, which requires employers to find savings within existing budgets to pay for modest wage increases.

"We're very happy that we were able to reach a fair and affordable collective agreement that meets the needs of our employers, their employees and most importantly ensures the delivery of quality services to our clients," said Gentil Mateus, chief executive officer of the Community Social Services Employers' Association, in a statement. The association represents more than 200 member agencies.

Social Development Minister Moira Stilwell also issued a statement praising both sides for reaching an agreement.

"I recognize the tremendous work that is done through agencies across the social service sector," she said. "This is an important tentative agreement to the people working in the sector and the clients who depend on

them for help and support."

The workers are represented by the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union, the Hospital Employees' Union, Health Sciences Association, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and six other unions.

Aboriginal service workers are still in negotiations.

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