

'It's shameful': CUPE 1883 president takes issue with regional staff reductions ^[1]

Noelle Fletcher says close to 100 jobs affected as region looks to adjust service levels, achieve financial savings

Author: Schulz, Luke

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EXCERPTS

The Region of Waterloo continues to provide critical services to its more than 630,000 residents, targeted layoffs have been implemented in order to “continue providing value for money and quality services”. Expecting to layoff approximately 75 positions in 2021, staff from the Region have said savings are estimated to be \$3.7M in 2021, with annualized estimated savings of nearly \$6.9M, though due to cost saving arrangements, not all of those savings will end up at the Region’s bottom line.

Of those reductions expected for this year, 48 are expected to be in childcare – following the Region’s decision to close four of its five operated childcare centres by early September, with the fifth to follow at an undetermined date. 11 positions are also expected to be laid off in Employment and Income Support due to “changes in service delivery models”, while the remaining positions are said to be in back office, supervisor and other positions.

Speaking to those reductions is Noelle Fletcher, President of CUPE Local 1883 – the union representing our local public service workers. When asked about the expected 75 positions to be laid off, Fletcher said that number is closer to around 100 – as she said 14 workers in the Community Services department have been laid off, along with staff in engineering and one worker at the airport.

“The members in the community service department were in the family support program and eligibility review program, which have been shut down, apparently, for cost saving measures,” said Fletcher. “However, they are laying off these permanent people, but they still continue to hire contract people so ... I’m not even sure how that’s going to save them a significant amount of money.”

In closing those region-operated childcare centres, the Region of Waterloo is expected to redistribute funding to support the entire system in a more equitable manner. A service review from accounting firm KPMG stated that the amount of funding the region had been putting towards operating 200 of its own childcare spaces could have supported anywhere from 350 to 791 licensed child care spaces operated by the community.

When that decision did come down from Regional council, Fletcher said the outcry from the community was “really great”, as she said the centres being closed have become known to provide service that goes “above and beyond” standard levels of care.

“They have an excellent reputation, and they also serve families and children with special needs – so not only are we losing good jobs in the community, we’re losing really great childcare spaces.” said Fletcher. “I don’t know if you listened to any of the parents that spoke [at council]; the stories were amazing. People were really ... disappointed is not a strong enough word.”

Based on the volume of positions affected by these reductions, Fletcher said she and her membership have not seen these types of layoffs in years. With many of these positions representing good paying jobs, Fletcher said those affected have college educations along with extra training and courses in childcare.

“If they choose to stay in their line of work, they will be forced to work at centres that pay minimum wage.”

The Region had previously stated it would provide affected staff members with information about their severance and retirement options, and that they would be supported through the reduction process. Fletcher said that process has begun, with some information sessions being hosted and supports being provided as to how those affected can apply for other jobs in the region. There are still questions left unanswered, however, as Fletcher said the union will be meeting again with the region soon.

When asked about the options available for these staff members, Fletcher said people have been offered voluntary exit options – packages should they choose to exit employment with the region. Those union members also do have access to bumping rights through their collective agreements as well as layoff rights, though Fletcher said many of those affected are in a “unique niche” of highly qualified childcare and could have difficulty looking for another job at the region.

“I’m not saying that these women are not capable of doing other jobs, but in order to bump into a new job you have to be able to do it

without training.” said Fletcher. “A lot of people don’t have the ability to do that – to just go to a job with no training, especially when dealing with technology.”

While some of the affected childcare workers have been encouraged to start looking for those other jobs in the region, Fletcher said the Region of Waterloo isn’t currently hiring any permanent positions, instead looking to fill contract roles.

“The union believes that is shameful.” said Fletcher. “The people that were laid off in the Community Services department, most of them have well over twenty years seniority – but they’re still hiring contract people in the same department. It raises a lot of questions.”

Fletcher said that individuals hired for contract positions under the union’s collective agreements are not privy to the same benefits available to permanent people – as she said she can “only assume” that’s why these positions are still made available.

“It’s also a good way to save money if you decide you don’t need people – because you can just end a contract and they’re owed nothing.” said Fletcher. “It doesn’t sit right with out union, with our local, that they’re laying off permanent people and are hiring contracts.”

570 NEWS has reached out to the Region of Waterloo, who have since said that they are “not replacing senior workers with temporary employees”.

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