

Army of nannies powers oilsands industry, study finds ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

By 7 a.m. in Fort McMurray, oilsands workers crowd onto Highway 63 heading to massive oilsands plants. But before they can leave for work, another quieter army of workers is already on the job.

Hundreds of nannies start work first on the home front, freeing the parents and playing a key role in keeping the oilsands economy running.

Residents of Fort McMurray work the longest hours in Canada, but nannies working for employers who work in the oilsands work even longer.

Like their employers, nannies also work day and night shifts and weekends to accommodate the intense 24-7 work regime in the oilsands economy.

A new study by University of Alberta sociologist Sara Dorow and graduate student Marcella Cassiano reveals northeastern Alberta's heavy dependence on this low-key workforce that makes it possible for others to take well-paying oilsands jobs, keep up with demands of family and community life - and keep the oil flowing.

"In other words, the oilsands industry is dependent on the sort of flexibility and

consistency provided to its workers by live-in caregivers," says Dorow, co-author of *Live-in Caregivers in Fort McMurray, a Socioeconomic Footprint*.

"It's no coincidence" that 80 per cent of the families with nannies have at least one spouse working at an oilsands plant, she says. The oilsands jobs are not nine-to-five gigs.

Nannies employed by people working at an oilsands plant work 53 hours a week "while their counterparts whose employers work in town work 47.3 hours on a weekly basis," the study notes.

Given the high cost of daycare, the nannies save these families thousands of dollars each year on child care expenses, says the study.

Dorow estimates there are 600 to 1,000 nannies in Fort McMurray, but exact figures are not available.

Parents with two preschool children save an average of \$6,970 a year by hiring a nanny. And the savings are greater with more children. Licensed daycare, if you can find it, costs \$1,300 to \$2,000 a month for a space, says Dorow.

The survey also found that about 20 per cent of the nannies surveyed said they were not paid or only occasionally paid for overtime - which added up to about 10 hours a week.

Clarizze Truscott, who works supporting temporary foreign workers, says the problem of unpaid overtime can happen to nannies anywhere, but especially with employers working in the oilpatch where hours are long.

"We've seen that problem in Fort Saskatchewan, too," says Truscott of the city where she lives. The problem is a lack of monitoring.

Given nannies' contributions "at the heart of Alberta's resource economy," it's disappointing the federal government last fall cancelled the provision that nannies automatically earn permanent resident status after two years, the U of A study says.

People working as caregivers deserve better, "given what they contribute," the study notes.

Jana McDermott, who owns Vancouver-based ABC Nannies, says that loss of automatic permanent resident status has not yet slowed recruitment of nannies.

And they are important to the oilsands economy, she added.

"Daycare just doesn't work for most oilsands workers who can work seven days and evenings - hours when daycare is not available."

The best way to avoid excessive hours is for the employer to provide a detailed contract setting out hours of work that both parties sign, said McDermott. Her company does a followup evaluation with the nannies and families after several months. McDermott said excessive hours should be reported to the federal government.

Related link: Live-in caregivers in Fort McMurray: A socioeconomic footprint^[3]

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