



# STATE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE 2023

*Cuts and privatization catching up with Manitoba's public services*

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## INTRODUCTION: DEDICATED TO PUBLIC SERVICE

Manitoba has a history of prudent and stable government, with strong public sector leadership and a well-trained and professional public service. MGEU's 11,000 Civil Service members provide invaluable public services ensuring our province remains a place where we place the highest value in caring for our fellow community members and building Manitoba together.

When disaster strikes — a flood, forest fire, winter storm or global pandemic — public employees are there to work with Manitobans to get things back on track. During times of emergency, adversity, or just everyday life, Manitobans depend on the public services provided by government.

Currently, Manitoba's core government operations span twenty-one departments that enact laws and regulations, administer programs, and deliver public services. Departmental portfolios cover healthcare, education, family services, justice, infrastructure, environment, labour, immigration, Indigenous reconciliation, and economic development. Public servants plan, organize, staff, direct, budget, report, and coordinate the functions of government.

Thousands of MGEU members work in all areas of the provincial Civil Service. The following word cloud shows the diversity of workers with some of the many job classifications represented in the bargaining unit:



These Manitobans have chosen a career in the public service and have stepped up when we needed them most. Manitoba's Civil Servants work in all corners of the Province, providing public services in towns, cities, campgrounds, roadways, on lakes, and in forests.

After years of willful neglect, this immeasurable asset is in a state of crisis. This report accounts the recent history of the political and administrative decisions that have directly led to distressing results for the dedicated people who provide public services and Manitobans who depend on them.

## YEARS OF TURBULENCE – STRAINED SERVICES

The past seven years have been marked by a constant state of turbulence for Manitoba's Civil Service. Frequent cabinet shuffles, departmental restructuring, aggressive budgetary and staffing cuts, threats to retirement security, wage freeze legislation, and an ideologically driven agenda of privatization have eroded the trust of public servants and shaken public confidence in government.

Following seventeen years of a New Democratic Party (NDP) Government in Manitoba, the new government took a different approach following the 2016 general election. In the years and months leading up to his electoral victory, Brian Pallister had taken considerable effort to alleviate concern that public services would be put at risk if his party took power. This included frequent assurances that they would take a careful and cautious approach.

In March of 2014, two years before the Provincial election, his party issued a *Security Pledge to Public Servants* where they made the case that,

*"We believe the Civil Service is most effective when it is empowered to service the needs of Manitobans. To this end we are pledging no front-line civil servants will lose their jobs under a Progressive Conservative Government."*

Feeling vulnerable to a public suspicious of the Filmon government's history of cuts and conflict with public sector employees, the party issued a press release on April 15, 2016, just days before the election, reassuring Manitobans:

*"A Progressive Conservative government will recognize that front-line service providers work hard in challenging environments delivering critical services for Manitobans. Manitobans rely on the services provided by these dedicated individuals. A new PC government will provide the certainty and support they require to do their jobs."*<sup>ii</sup>

MGEU leadership took note of these reassurances and extended an invitation to discuss how to keep lines of communication open and work through any issues that may arise in the coming years. Following an initial meeting with the Premier, the government provided very few opportunities to keep the lines of communication open with unions in the years that followed.

One-hundred days after the election, the government's firm commitment to protect public services started to soften, as reported in the Winnipeg Free Press:

*"...(Pallister was) softening his vows to protect front-line workers in public services, using phrases such as "I hope," "I'll do my best" and "as much as possible." That's a different tone than the one he delivered in his 2014 "alternative throne speech," in which he said, "We will guarantee no front-line civil servants will lose their jobs.""*<sup>iii</sup>

In the years that followed, the 'softening' of tone took on an attitude of contempt for public service employees who were pushed, provoked, ignored, and taken for granted. The Winnipeg Free Press editorial board summarized it well:

*"...it's unlikely there are many places in which career public servants have been held in lower esteem than in Manitoba during the past half-decade, as the Progressive Conservative government of former premier Brian Pallister sought to curtail their numbers, cap their compensation and close the door on virtually all dealings with the unions and professional organizations that represent their interests."*<sup>iv</sup>

## **An Assault on Collective Bargaining**

Any gestures of good faith were quickly eroded in March of 2017 with the introduction of Bill 28, *The Public Services Sustainability Act*<sup>v</sup>, which mandated wages across the broader public sector. This meant public sector workers would face two more years of wage freezes and two years of wage caps well below the cost of living (Year 1: 0%; Year 2: 0%, Year 3: 0.75%; Year 4: 1%).

These freezes and caps were legislated to begin after the current or most recent collective agreement expired. Finance Minister Cameron Friesen said:

*"(everything else), including unpaid days off, wage rollbacks and pensions changes, can be up for discussion when contracts expire and new collective agreements are hammered out."*<sup>vi</sup>

The legislation was a direct assault on the rights of workers to bargain with their employer collectively and in good faith and sent a strong message to public sector workers that they were in the government's crosshairs.

Soon, public sector unions began joining forces under the leadership of the Manitoba Federation of Labour. Together, they formed the *Partnership to Defend Public Services* and launched a court challenge on the constitutionality of the legislation.

As the court process unfolded, MGEU's Civil Service Bargaining Committee headed to negotiations with the Province. However, talks were quickly derailed by the Province's reluctance to discuss wages and benefits. Provincial negotiating representatives refused to say whether or not they planned to enforce the wage mandate outlined in the Public Service Sustainability Act (Bill 28), which was passed in 2017 but had yet to be enacted.

The MGEU Bargaining Committee recognized that for productive negotiations to continue, the Province needed to be upfront about its intentions concerning Bill 28. Without transparency, they knew continued dishonesty and disrespect toward Civil Service members would make meaningful discussions impossible.

As a result, the Bargaining Committee decided to file for interest arbitration (as permitted under the Civil Service Act) to achieve a fair outcome. However, Minister Scott Fielding, who was in charge of the Civil Service, refused to appoint an arbitration panel (as mandated by the Civil Service Act).

In April 2020, the Court of Queen's Bench ruled that the MGEU was entirely justified in seeking arbitration on behalf of Civil Service members. In her ruling, Judge Keyser sided firmly with the union and directed Finance Minister Scott Fielding to appoint an arbitration panel as clearly outlined in the Civil Service Act<sup>vii</sup>.

After three long years battling in court, Manitoba Court of Queen's Bench Justice McKelvey ruled that the government's *Public Services Sustainability Act* (Bill 28) violated the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, calling the legislation "draconian." The judge firmly rejected the government's legal arguments and warned them to cease their interference with collective bargaining in the public sector.

In response, the government quickly appealed the decision and on October 14, 2021, the Manitoba Court of Appeal overturned the Court of Queen's Bench decision, forcing the PDPS to seek leave from the Supreme Court to hear the case. This final effort was denied leave at the Supreme Court in 2022, which ended the formal legal proceedings on the legislation.

In the end, this saga cemented the government's attitude toward their very own employees. Those in the Civil Service had watched their employer wage an ardent fight to curtail their rights and disrespect their dedication to serving fellow Manitobans.

## KPMG – An Attack on Public Services

If there were any doubts about the new government's future plans, they soon sent another strong signal that the Civil Service was under attack. KPMG's "*Manitoba Fiscal Performance Review*" was released on October 3, 2017,<sup>viii</sup> and while the report's specific recommendations were redacted from the document, the broad direction and message sent was a significant departure from the tone set in the lead up to the election. KPMG recommended:

*"The Government may wish to consider a more aggressive, multi-year strategy to reduce the size of the civil service, and to help ensure the sustainability of government spend going forward. This could likely be achieved primarily through attrition, minimizing potential criticism from stakeholders."*

The report further outlined a roadmap for cuts and privatization, including recommendations to:

- Reduce the Civil Service by 8 percent;
- Implement an overtime reduction strategy;
- Eliminate distinct offices/secretariats within departments, and merge responsibilities;
- Centralize and consolidate finance, IT, policy, and procurement;
- Sell off Real Estate and Assets;
- Explore privatization of Infrastructure Maintenance, VEMA, Housing assets, Government Air Services,
- Review adult disability programs and Employment and Income Assistance to find financial savings;
- Flatten management.

By 2018, large-scale reorganization and subsequent departmental and program reviews were underway. The "iron-clad" promise to protect public services had already been broken on paper via the KPMG report, but aggressive vacancy management and targeted layoffs were now in motion. Several months before the Civil Service collective agreement, which included an employment security or "no-layoff" clause, was set to expire, Global News reported:

*"The government already has served notice about a small number of potential layoffs for when the collective agreement expires – up to 11 workers in real estate services, up to eight employees in government translation services and some others."*<sup>ix</sup>

In the years that followed, the attack on jobs and services continued. Three hundred and sixty jobs would be lost jobs in Portage la Prairie by 2024, twenty-one Agriculture Services offices shuttered (forcing producers to travel long distances for service), and the Dauphin and Agassiz Correctional Centres shut down. Services provided by Environmental Officers who monitor drinking water quality, nurses in the Medical Examiners Office, Public health inspectors, Distance Learning supports for students, road maintenance crews, and French language interpreters were all impacted by direct service cuts, understaffing, or contracting out.

In summary, the government:

- Cut over 2,300 Civil Servants;
- Closed 21 Agricultural Offices;
- Contracted Out Road Maintenance;
- Privatized Government Air Services;
- Contracted out Park Pass and Fishing license sales;
- Contracted Out French Language Interpretation;
- Cut the Real Estate Division of the Crown Lands Property Agency;

- Shut down the Dauphin and Agassiz Correctional Centres;
- Cut the Distance Learning Centre;
- Cut the Learning Resource Centre;
- Launched plans to privatize MB Parks;
- Contracted out IT work.

## Pensions Under Threat

An unanticipated issue also cropped up in 2018, when Finance Minister Cameron Friesen announced a review of pension legislation.<sup>x</sup> Similar to the commitment to protect public services during the 2016 election, the PC Party had pledged to Manitobans that, if elected, they would make no changes to public pensions.<sup>xi</sup>

The proposed changes suggested a contrasting narrative. In their announcement, the government outlined the possibility of implementing new pension plan designs, such as shared-risk or targeted pension plans, which would shift the burden of funding plans from employers to employees. This shift would significantly affect the funding, management, and provision of secure pensions in Manitoba.

In response, the MGEU organized a telephone town hall with a large group of concerned members and began an aggressive campaign against any amendments to pension legislation.

Shortly after, the Finance Minister released a video, backpedaling from their announcement, stating,

*"Let's be clear, our government has made no changes to public service pension plans, nor do we have any plans to change public service pension plans."*

While the Minister and his government quickly walked back any plans to make wholesale changes to the Public Service pension plan, the level of concern amongst Civil Servants and the importance of a secure retirement was another unwarranted provocation against workers.

## COVID-19 — Exploiting a Crisis

The global pandemic had a dramatic impact on all Manitobans. For Civil Service workers, it meant going above and beyond their normal duties. With experience providing planning, logistical, and on the ground resources and rapid response to emergencies like floods, snowstorms, and public health crises, including the SARS outbreak in 2002-2004, MGEU members stepped up to the plate.

However, the government's preoccupation with cutting jobs led to a shortage of staff, reduced planning capacity, and a loss of institutional knowledge. The former Director of the Emergency Measures Organization (EMO), who had guided Manitoba through emergencies in the past, wrote:

*"The taxpaying public has the right to expect a robust response when emergencies occur. When governments hack and slash resources away, there is nobody and nothing left when the crisis hits."*<sup>xii</sup>

Against the backdrop of the global pandemic, a time when Manitobans most needed a strong and resilient public system ready to mobilize and adapt, the Pallister government took the opportunity to call for budgetary and staffing cutbacks across the public sector.

They issued a directive to all post-secondary institutions and Crown Corporations, demanding they cut budgets by 30 percent. Beyond that, the ranks of the Civil Service would be slashed by 2.2 percent, totalling workforce spending reductions of \$193.5 million in core government alone.



Under questioning in the Legislature, the Premier stated:

*“We have a bunch of offices closed. Three per cent of our people aren't needed right now. We have offices that don't need receptionists. We have vehicles [that] don't need to be evaluated 'cause they haven't been in an accident. We have tons of administration that doesn't need to be done.”<sup>xiii</sup>*

Once confronted by public sector unions and a chorus of public displeasure, the government proposed other options, ranging from, “workers not on the front lines go down to a two-day work week and collect EI for the remaining three days” to taking unpaid days off.

In the end, the government was forced to back off their original directive. The MGEU secured a hard-fought deal whereby non-essential members would take five unpaid days in exchange for lay-off protection for the 2020/21 fiscal year.<sup>xiv</sup>

Once again, those working to serve and support their fellow Manitobans, this time under some of the most of the most challenging circumstances in recent memory were forced to take another hit.

Not surprisingly, Manitoba’s pandemic response was increasingly criticized for being disorganized and under-resourced. As the pandemic wore on, the expertise and resources of the public sector were largely sidelined in favour of services contracted with for-profit businesses. Laboratory testing was expanded through a private firm rather than staffing up Cadham Lab. Contact tracing was outsourced, appointment scheduling was contracted out, and some enforcement of public health restrictions was outsourced to a private security firm.

Health care workers, desperately waiting for their vaccinations against COVID-19, were sent the wrong booking information for their appointments. Manitobans expecting test results often waited for more than a week, while contact tracing lagged, exposing more people to the virus.

In Manitoba, the COVID-19 pandemic years will be defined by public servants rising to the challenge — stepping into redeployments, quickly adapting virtual services, going above and beyond the usual duties to procure and distribute medical supplies or enforce health restrictions — *despite* the blind-sided attacks and distractions of their employer.

## **The Stefanson Government – Too Little, Too late**

After years of unpopular decisions, challenges navigating the pandemic, and an ill-fated education system overhaul, the Premier’s approval ratings plummeted and on August 29, 2021, Brian Pallister announced his resignation.

Heather Stefanson, long-time MLA for Tuxedo and former Minister of Justice, Families, and Health in the Pallister government, squeaked out a controversial leadership victory within her party and was sworn in as Premier on November 2, 2021. Premier Stefanson took a more conciliatory tone in the days after taking office than her predecessor and appointed a cabinet to put her own stamp on government. Signaling a departure from the acrimonious tenure of the former Premier, she repealed Bill 28 and abandoned major education reforms prescribed under Bill 64, both of which had caused significant public pushback.

MGEU leadership met with the new Premier, key cabinet ministers, and other government officials to forge common ground and discuss a path forward, including an emphasis on restoring the ranks of the Civil Service.



Premier Stefanson's first Speech from the Throne gave MGEU members a reason to hope:

*"Our government and Manitobans are well served by civil servants and public sector workers. Too often, their contributions are taken for granted. We know they are critical if we are to succeed in fulfilling our priorities, implementing our programs, and achieving our vision for the benefit of all Manitobans. We will recruit and retain the best possible talent to continue to serve Manitoba."*

For a group of alienated public employees growing increasingly accustomed to being tossed and turned at the whims of government, even the acknowledgement that there were recruitment and retention issues was validating. In a letter to the MGEU, Minister Reg Helwer wrote that the government was charting a new course:

*"With the repeal of The Public Services Sustainability Act, government has signaled its intention to undertake a different approach, as we work to address shared concerns and support our province's economic and social recovery.*

*As indicated, the province made a number of commitments that support building a strong public service for Manitobans, particularly in key positions and areas. The most recent Speech from the Throne outlined some of these commitments, including strategies to target nursing shortages and ensuring recruitment and retention of skilled staff within the civil service."<sup>xv</sup>*

However, these words were never reinforced by significant action. After more than two years, the Stefanson government has done little to repair the damage inflicted by the government on public services.

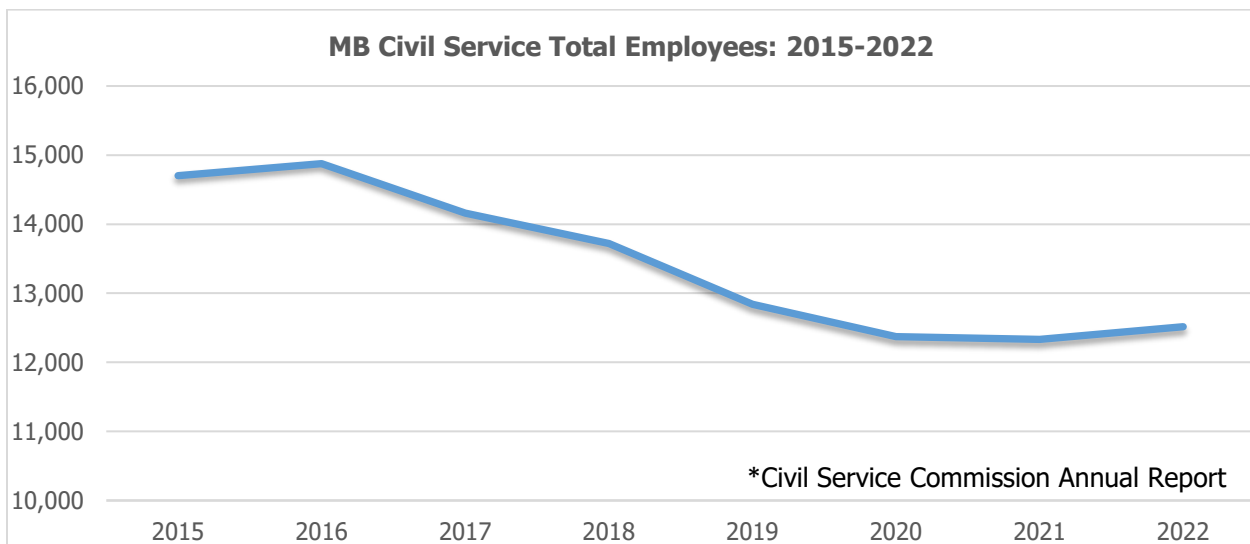
## **STAFFING CRISIS**

The turbulent years under Premier Pallister left Manitoba's Civil Service under-resourced and in a state of disarray. The constant reshuffling and threats of privatization alienated the workforce, who were never consulted or included in fundamental changes to the services they provide.

Under Premier Pallister, the sustained attacks on Civil Service workers cratered morale. Civil servants were now keeping their heads down for fear of being targeted, leading to an exodus of employees and severe challenges recruiting new ones.

While it is difficult to undo years of austerity and replace years of experience, the blueprint that was drawn up under Premier Pallister has not been altered or acknowledged as the root of the staffing issues and service levels in the Civil Service, nor has a focus been placed on improving working conditions or the relationship with employees.

The loss of institutional knowledge as employees choose to retire or find other employment has set back the efficiency and effectiveness of Manitoba's Civil Service. It's a crisis that could take several years to repair.



### Vacancies – Doing More With Less

Aggressive vacancy management, under-resourcing across all departments, and a failure to do enough to attract new talent has depleted the ranks in the provincial Civil Service. The recommended 8 percent reduction in positions laid out in the KPMG report have been surpassed. The latest figures show an 18 percent decline since 2016.

It is no surprise that the indiscriminate, short-sighted mandate to cut positions combined with wage restraint and challenging working conditions have resulted in significant recruitment and retention issues.

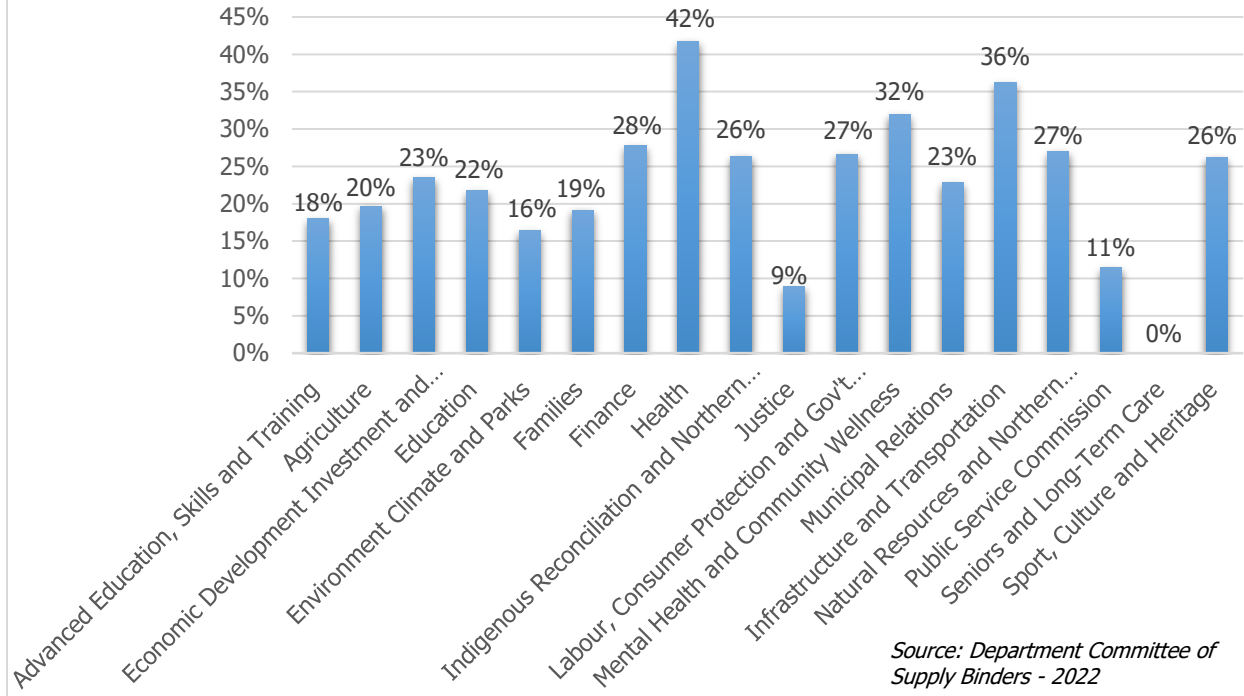
*"There has been a reduction of 2,644 positions since the Progressive Conservatives formed government in 2016, with Premier Brian Pallister vowing to balance the budget and reduce the ranks of Manitoba's civil service. The number of such employees had fallen to 12,232 by the end of March, from 14,876 positions in March 2016 — a cut of nearly 18 per cent." – Winnipeg Free Press <sup>xvi</sup>*

Government documents released in 2022 reveal a vacancy rate of 26 percent across the Civil Service.

The Department of Health, for example, has a vacancy rate of over 40 percent and many other departments have vacancy rates between 20-30 percent.

The government's shortsighted preoccupation with cutting jobs has led to a shortage of staff, reduced planning capacity, and a loss of institutional knowledge.

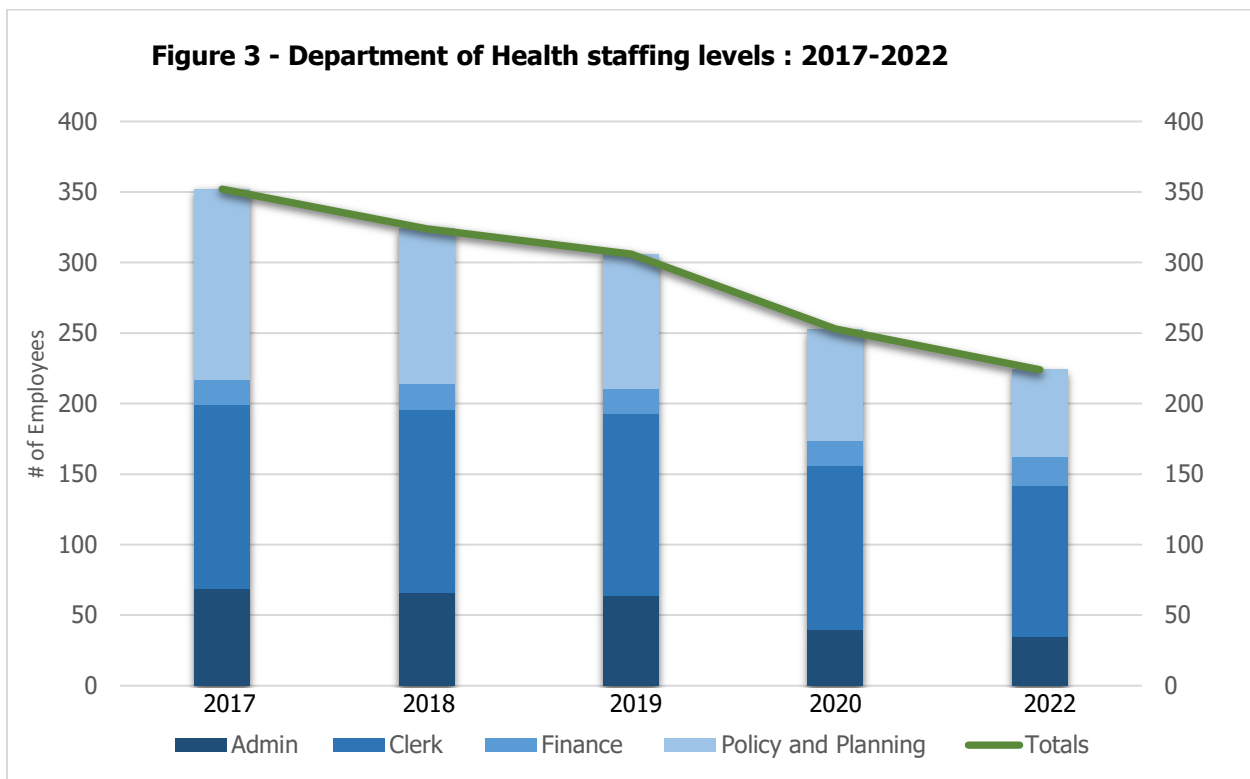
**Figure 2 - Civil Service vacancy rate by department**



The Department of Health, with its frequent transformations, high profile incidents, and day-to-day management challenges, serves as a microcosm of some of the wider issues within the Civil Service. Essentially, organizational fatigue is forcing long-time career civil servants to either transfer to another department, exit the Civil Service, or retire.

Not surprisingly, this situation has created severe challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified individuals, further exacerbated by the Public Service Commission's inability to promptly fill vacant positions. The process of advertising and filling these positions routinely takes up to eight months, with delays of up to one year not uncommon. When it comes to competitiveness of the salaries, there is a discrepancy in remuneration for numerous professional roles compared to similar organizations. This disparity, coupled with the fact that most government health personnel are compelled to work excessive overtime without proper compensation, has resulted in burnout and a rapid increase in attrition rates. Consequently, experienced staff members, burdened with overwhelming workloads, are unable to effectively train and mentor new hires.

A detailed analysis of the number of staff working in the Department of Health illustrates the remarkable decline in staffing levels from 2017-2022. Administrative staff, clerks, finance personnel, and policy and planning staff are vital to the workings of the Department. Over the past six years, this employee group has been cut by 36 percent overall.



Administrative Officer (AO) and Administrative Secretary (AY) classifications are integral to the functioning of government operations. Duties include managing offices, authorizing supplies and expenses, maintaining files and records, handling correspondence, record keeping, analyzing various reports and making recommendations to senior personnel, and preparing material for publication.

Since 2017, there has been a nearly 50 percent reduction in administrative staff in the Department.

Clerks (CL) in the Civil Service are responsible for controlling incoming and outgoing mail, compiling statistical data, processing documents, sorting, arranging and filing correspondence, and answering enquiries. The number of Clerks working in the Department has decreased by nearly 18 percent since 2017.

Program and Policy Analysts (PM) carry out research and analysis to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of different policies, programs, and services, provide recommendations, and monitor implementation of various initiatives. They contribute to the strategic planning and formulation of alternative programs and policies and write position papers, submissions, reports, and other comprehensive materials for senior government officials to consider for decision-making.

In 2017, there were 135 Program and Policy Analysts in the Department. In 2022 there were 62 percent – a drop of over 54 percent.

Financial Officers (FI) provide guidance on the financial consequences and effects of management proposals and actions, accounting control, revenue and expenditure reporting. They ensure compliance with policies and standards, provide financial planning and analysis to support decision-making, develop, interpret, implement, and maintain financial policies and systems, and safeguard the integrity of internal financial controls. The ranks of the Financial Officer series have been steady over the period, adding two staff in 2022.

Similar concerning trends are occurring across the Civil Service. The following service areas and job classifications are currently under-resourced and the negative impact of this on public services is becoming increasingly clear:

- A recent Auditor General's report called out the government for its lack of accounting oversight on expenditures resulting from vacancies in the accounting classifications across government. The report concluded: "...in 2021-22, control and accounting deficiencies were found throughout the departments. These deficiencies included poor compliance with controls over purchases and expenses, inadequate accounting processes, and other control environment weaknesses. Without the proper accounting controls in place, there is a greater risk of errors in financial reporting." <sup>xvii</sup>
- In June 2021, CBC reported on Conservation Officer recruitment and retention issues: "A projected exodus of conservation officers in the next few years is poised to deplete Manitoba's ranks, putting more pressure on officers who work longer hours but are paid significantly less than their counterparts in other Canadian provinces." <sup>xviii</sup>
- According to Barrier-Free MB: "The Disability Issues Office is inadequately staffed and resourced to meet current responsibilities, which will expand as implementation proceeds." <sup>xix</sup>
- Public Health Inspectors play a critical role in ensuring the safety of Manitobans by conducting inspections of food establishments, swimming pools, and other public facilities. However, a lack of qualified inspectors in the labour market has resulted in significant staffing shortages, making it challenging to carry out these critical functions effectively. As a result, Manitobans' safety has been put at risk. <sup>xx</sup>
- Over the past few years, Manitobans have resorted to contacting the media about delays at Vital Statistics. Due to staffing shortages, the recording and documenting of births, deaths, marriages, and adoptions in Manitoba has been delayed, causing significant stress and hardship for families trying to access these records. <sup>xxi</sup>
- Provincial campground offices will once again be vacant when campers arrive to enjoy Manitoba's forests, lakes, and natural areas. They will be met with a locked door and a bulletin board instead of the usual friendly face greeting them, answering questions, and directing them to their campsite.
- Environmental Officers inspect our water systems to ensure drinking water is safe. In 2014, the Auditor General reported there were approximately 650 water systems in Manitoba overseen by 13 water safety officers, for an average of about 50 per officer. By 2019, that ratio had declined to 1,000 water systems being overseen by 12 officers, for an average caseload of about 83 per officer. <sup>xxii</sup>

With budgets so constrained, employees throughout the Civil Service report doing more with less, often working the jobs of two or three people, for years on end. Services are not being delivered as well as Manitobans deserve because of a lack of resources. Over time, morale has plummeted, compounding the retention issues facing many key service areas and classifications that are additionally difficult to recruit for.

## Employee Morale – The Hidden Impact

In 2018, the Clerk of the Executive Council released *Transforming the Manitoba Public Service: A Strategy for Action*, and invited Civil Servants to be part of the change in reshaping government:

*"Transformation requires you and your ideas – for modernization, for innovation, and for system disruption. Only together, by challenging the status quo and redesigning our structures, policies, programs, and processes for the next generation of public servants, can we build the culture we all desire."*

The uplifting themes of this report were a far cry from the reality of what civil servants were experiencing in their day-to-day work. A barrage of reports drafted by private sector consulting firms dictated what was best for the employees and the services they provide, while there was next to no consultation with these employees themselves. These firms went on to determine which services were contracted out, essentially sidelining employees and recommending the elimination of their jobs.

A 2018 Civil Service Commission Employee Engagement survey identified the report's chilling effect on employees. Less than 40 percent of Manitoba civil servants felt they were valued as employees. Fifty-three percent of respondents agreed they were proud to tell people that they work for the Manitoba government, down from 62.7 percent in 2015. Less than half agreed they would recommend the government as a great place to work.

In the Department of Justice, survey results for Correctional Officers, Sheriff's Officers, Court Clerks, and Probation Officers were markedly worse in every category than the Civil Service average. One respondent stated that improving morale would include: *"management who are there for you and treat you as a person, not just a number."*

CBC reported:

*"Only 31 per cent of Justice Department survey respondents agreed that they had received meaningful recognition for their work, compared to 42 per cent among all Manitoba departments. A full 50 per cent of justice employees disagreed that they had received such recognition.*

*Meanwhile, 41 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement "I have confidence in the senior leadership of my department" — but another 40 per cent disagreed with that statement." <sup>xxiii</sup>*

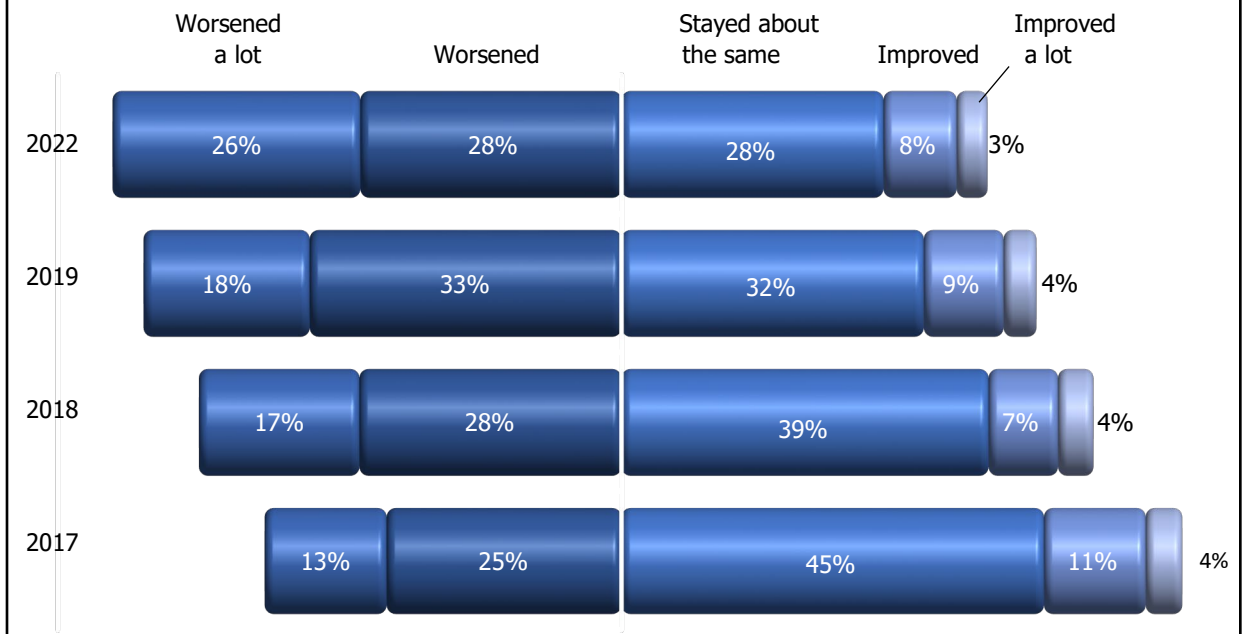
Charlene Paquin, Civil Service Commissioner at the time, admitted: "the results show workers want improved communication from senior officials and clearer processes for bringing new ideas forward."<sup>xxiv</sup>

The government's Employee Engagement Survey mirrored the findings of MGEU membership surveys around the same time. An internal survey of Sheriffs conducted by MGEU found that 50 percent of Officers described morale in the workplace as "poor" or "very poor," while only 24 percent thought morale was "good" or "very good".

In a 2019 MGEU member survey, 51 percent of civil servants said issues at work had impacted their mental health and 37 percent had missed work because of a mental health issue.

This worrying trend is illustrated in Figure 4. When asked, "Compared to two years ago, would you say the morale in your workplace has improved, worsened or stayed about the same," the percentage of respondents who thought morale had "stayed about the same" had dropped from 45 percent in 2017 to 28 percent in 2022. This corresponds with a sharp increase in respondents who indicated that morale has "worsened" or "worsened a lot" from 38 percent in 2017 to 54 percent in 2022.

**Figure 4 - A decline in Civil Service morale**



Correctional Officers have been acutely impacted by challenging working conditions and a lack of support for psychological health and safety initiatives. Workers Compensation Board statistics show the number of accepted psychological injury claims for Correctional Officers has more than doubled from 39 in 2018 to 83 in both 2020 and 2021. One Correctional Officer interviewed by CBC revealed that,

*“You don't just forget that when you leave work and go home and carry on with your day. It keeps you up at night and you know, it never goes away”.*

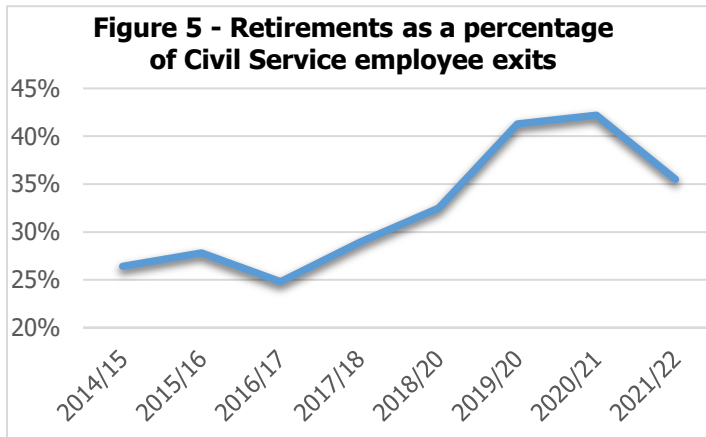
Claims specifically for post-traumatic stress disorder more than doubled from 2018, when there were 11, to 2021, when there were 24, highlighting the rising number of serious incidents Officers deal with day-to-day.

When asked about the state of public sector employees in his government, Premier Pallister stubbornly responded: “This is part of getting to a better place.”

A Free Press editorial characterized the Premier’s approach by saying,

*“Simply put: Mr. Pallister made very clear his disdain for civil servants and unions, and apparently made it his mission to marginalize and minimize them as he focused his efforts on budgetary restraint and deficit elimination.” xxv*





Unsurprisingly, the retirement rate in the Civil Service (as seen in Figure 5) has steadily increased from a low of 25 percent of employee exits in 2016/17 to a high of 42 percent in 2020/21. While it was encouraging to see the rate decrease to 35 percent in 2021/22, this may well be attributed to the relative decrease in the number of employees of retirement age.

## **PRIVATIZATION – SERVICES AT RISK**

### **Consultant Government**

In 2023, authors Mariana Mazzucato and Rosie Collington published *The Big Con: How The Consulting Industry Weakens Our Businesses, Infantilizes Our Governments, And Warps Our Economies*, which sheds light on the influence and impact of major consulting firms on governments and public institutions. The book chronicles what happens when large consulting firms like McKinsey, Bain, Boston Consulting Group, KPMG, EY, PwC, and Deloitte, take over the priorities, planning, and implementation of government operations.

It is telling that all but one of these firms have been hired several times directly by the Province of Manitoba or Crown Corporations.

In the years that followed the release of KPMG's *Fiscal Performance Review*, the government turned to consulting firms for a wide variety of reports and reviews that all recommended predictable "solutions" to everything that ails government – cutting staffing levels, privatizing, contracting out, downloading responsibility onto other orders of government or individual Manitobans, and recommending more consultants.

These reports served to provide the ideologically-driven recommendations pursued by the PC government, including the contracting out of public services.

But along with the "expertise" of high-priced consultants, the government also looked to a well-worn playbook for moving its privatization agenda forward.

As areas like IT, policy development, maintenance, and security are contracted out, public services are starved of resources until services begin to suffer and Manitobans demand improvement. The government then puts forward privatization as the answer and leaves Manitobans bearing the brunt of the Big Con for years to come.

## Government Air Services

In April of 2017, the CBC reported that a leaked confidential document outlining that the Manitoba government was considering privatizing the Manitoba Government Air Service (MGAS).<sup>xxvi</sup> Shortly after, the KPMG report recommended: "Manitoba may consider tendering the sale of its planes (water bombers), with the benefit of revenues in the year of sale, and contracting out services as needed under service agreements."<sup>xxvii</sup>

In 2018, the MGEU released *Air Services for All Manitobans*, which featured the benefits of maintaining MGAS as a public service and highlighted the risks of privatization<sup>xxviii</sup>. The report concluded that:

- A highly-experienced staff with top-caliber training who have contributed both nationally and internationally to technological innovations and training;
- A stellar safety record with no serious injuries or fatalities;
- A dedicated fleet of modern, superior water bombers and Lifeflight jets committed to protecting Manitobans.
- "Commercial private delivery has some significant disadvantages to what is currently being delivered. Given the current high operational standards and effectiveness, privatization seems like an unnecessary risk," said Jesse Hajer, an economist and one of the report's authors.

The report also suggested that the structure of MGAS and the broader industry characteristics make it difficult for private carriers, particularly when providing emergency services, to outperform public delivery.

Other pieces of the report noted:

- MGAS is licensed to land its much faster Lifeflight jet in many small communities with shorter runways where private carriers would be required to use a much slower aircraft to transport critically ill patients;
- The MGAS jet supports successful organ transplants by making it possible to fly an organ across the country without a fuel stop, whereas private charters often need to stop to refuel, putting the patient at risk and potentially compromising the integrity of the organ; and
- Manitoba Conservation currently receives 165 days of fire suppression coverage from MGAS, longer than typical private contracts, ensuring that spring and fall fires are covered at a fixed cost.

Despite opposition against MGAS privatization from pilots, mechanics, flight coordinators, nurses, doctors, and communities served, the government trudged ahead and privatized the service.



*Despite an impeccable service record and opposition from pilots, mechanics, flight coordinators, nurses, doctors, and communities, the government privatized Manitoba Government Air Services.*

Prior to the contract for Lifeflight being awarded, the highly specialized doctors who had cared for patients incident free for 33 years penned a letter to Infrastructure Minister Ron Schuler outlining their concerns with privatization:

*"When our service provider switches from a publicly owned entity to private industry, there will invariably be pressure on crews to take risks for the sake of maintaining profit margins. Our program was built on the understanding that we would be supported by a publicly owned platform, where crew and patient safety was always the utmost priority," the group wrote.*

*"Our main concern first and foremost is for the safety of care providers and patients who will be flying on these aircraft. Privatization removes an invaluable safeguard from our program and leaves us all with serious concerns that have not been addressed." <sup>xxix</sup>*

The opposition to the privatization of Lifeflight included former director of emergency health and ambulance services for the Province of Manitoba and one of the founders of the program Ken Knaggs, who wrote in the Winnipeg Free Press:

*"The decision by the Manitoba Progressive Conservatives to cease operating the proven current Lifeflight air ambulance and allow it to go to private tender is incomprehensible on every level, including financial.*

*The Lifeflight program started in 1981 as a result of international research under the auspices of the Manitoba Medical Foundation, Department of Anesthesia. The design of the study was to mitigate safety and care issues for critically sick and injured rural and remote Manitobans, as well as critical care transport for high-risk neonates, organ transplants and more.*

*In 38 years, Lifeflight has transported almost the equivalent populations of Thompson, Flin Flon and The Pas combined. Holding emergency services hostage using selected input from unknown, and possibly unqualified, sources is not based on medical or care logic, but an ideology that puts the bottom line before people, and Winnipeg before rural and remote Manitoba when it comes to tertiary care." <sup>xxx</sup>*

During the height of the pandemic when inter-provincial medevacs were the only way for patients to get care because of the overflowing healthcare system, a fatal incident led to the tragic death of a young Manitoban, Krystal Mousseau. <sup>xxxi</sup> Her family has launched a lawsuit against the Manitoba government for neglecting to provide adequate care. They claim a lack of trained staff, poor planning, and the absence of necessary medical equipment led to the fatal outcome. <sup>xxxii</sup>

In March of 2023, CBC reported that Shared Health, "The organization that oversees health-care delivery in Manitoba is investigating a possible critical incident after a patient died aboard an out-of-province critical care flight on Monday." <sup>xxxiii</sup>

A Brandon senior being transported to Winnipeg after a medical emergency also described her experience on a private air ambulance carrier by saying,

*"I thought I was going to die on this trip. I didn't expect to make it to Winnipeg. I just had the feeling that nobody cared, but the important thing that it doesn't happen to somebody else because if they are older, and if they are weak and they depend on other people, they will never make that trip, absolutely not." <sup>xxxiv</sup>*

The General Transport services were contracted out to the Exchange Income Corporation (EIC), whose Board is chaired by former Premier Gary Filmon, in February of 2019. <sup>xxxv</sup>

General Transport flights, which provide transportation for government officials and Justice personnel, have been criticized and under scrutiny because of deteriorating service levels. A CBC news story noted that the MGEU's 2018 report...

*"...cautioned that private carriers that could take over these services are often the hit hardest by pilot shortages since their pilots are typically newer, have less experience and move on to bigger, preferred employers when they accumulate enough hours."*

The Chief Judge and defense lawyers have called out the lack of timely flights that have disrupted the legal process. Chief Judge Margaret Wiebe commented on the issue stating,

*"We have accused people who are in custody who are not having their matters heard in a timely way and we have complainants who are ready to testify who don't have that opportunity because we can't get into the community."*

Manitoba's fleet of water bombers were contracted out to the Canadian subsidiary of multi-national giant, Babcock International, which subcontracted a portion of the service to Air Spray, a fire suppression contractor headquartered in Alberta. <sup>xxxvi</sup> The value of the contract quickly came under scrutiny as the Opposition NDP questioned why the contract costs were more than was previously spent on provincial fire suppression. <sup>xxxvii</sup>

In 2021, the Province "committed \$2.6 million for avionics and communications upgrades to its water bomber fleet, to allow these aircraft to be deployed to the U.S. if assistance is requested and if the aircraft are not needed in Manitoba." <sup>xxxviii</sup>

In 2022, the government announced an additional investment of \$1.6 million dollars to upgrade the water bomber fleet, implemented by Babcock Canada Inc. <sup>xxxix</sup> When the contract was first awarded, the Minister suggested that the agreement would result in \$1 million in savings annually. However, since the privatization of the service the government has spent an additional \$4.1 million for Babcock to provide maintenance above and beyond the original price tag. Are Manitobans actually getting value for their money?

Before the threat of privatization was made public, the Government Air Services branch had a full-time equivalent staff of 43 pilots, 33 mechanics and engineers and 15 administrative personnel. A former Air Services employee said, "this isn't a stepping stone in a career — this is our life's work." <sup>xl</sup> After privatization, these dedicated public employees have been forced to retire or have transferred to private contractors.

## **Infrastructure Maintenance**

On November 22, 2018, the government issued a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for a consultant to lead a largescale "Service Delivery Modernization Review" of the Infrastructure Department. The RFQ outlined various themes, including "Right Sizing Public Ownership" and the pursuit of "Alternative Service Delivery" – in other words, privatization. PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC), a global private sector consulting firm, was selected to lead the initiative, which embedded the firm in the Department of Infrastructure.

In early 2019, CBC broke news that a Special Operations crew of nearly 50 seasonal workers would not be recalled the following summer. The Minister stated, "Contractors in the industry are ready and willing to do this work, and we look forward to working with the industry to ensure this work is done in an efficient and cost-effective way." A former worker on the crew voiced his concerns about the contracting out and pointed to the government's vacancy management agenda to "leave positions unfilled," which was now being used to justify the privatization. <sup>xli</sup>

By December of 2019, MGEU received a letter that the government planned to increase the contracting out of chip seal, pavement marking, asphalt cold mixing, rout and seal work effective April 10, 2019.

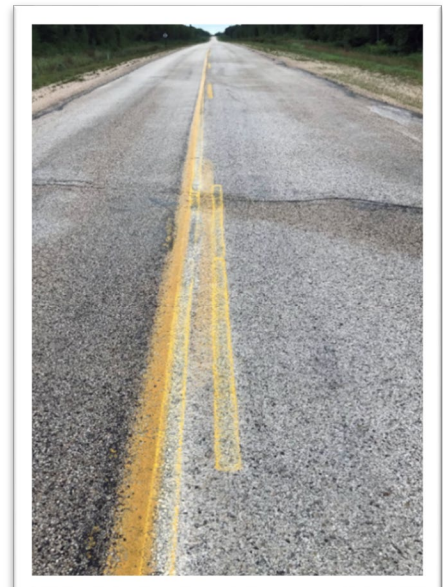
In response, MGEU commissioned a report called *Hard Infrastructure, Hard Times*<sup>xlii</sup>, which surveyed MGEU members in Manitoba Infrastructure (MI) and the Vehicle and Equipment Management Agency (VEMA). It found a 33 percent reduction in MI staff since 2016, and a 20 percent reduction to the VEMA workforce and revealed a concerning trend of severe understaffing, inadequate training, and declining morale among workers.

Workers reported that management refused to fill vacancies, resulting in critical staff shortages that put public safety at risk. The infrastructure department experienced a significant loss of personnel and the sale of assets, leaving remaining workers without the necessary equipment to perform their duties effectively. Furthermore, training programs for employees were reduced or eliminated, leading workers to feel set up for failure.

A majority of workers expressed concerns about the impact of proposed changes on service quality, asset quality, and public safety. Many workers believed that the changes would lead to a decrease in the quality of the service provided and compromise the safety of Manitobans. Worker safety was also a concern, with a significant portion of the workforce surveyed feeling that it was at risk.

The drop in service quality reported by workers in the study indicated that snow clearing on provincial highways is happening later after snowfalls with a higher build up of ice and snow remaining afterwards. The rationale is that private contractors are more hesitant to put the blade right against the roadway because it wears out the equipment more quickly, costing them more to replace worn plow blades.

Pavement marking was another area contracted out to for-profit corporations. In the report, MI employees noted that the quality of the work they witnessed by private contractors was often so poor (*see photo at right*) that it required constant supervision by government staff and often necessitated the work to be redone.



*The results of a Manitoba roadway painted by a private contractor during a rainstorm.*

Despite the supposed cost savings associated with contracting out, these experiences in private highway maintenance suggest that in the interests of public safety and better value for taxpayers, leaving these services publicly delivered is preferred.

## **Pineland Forest Nursery**

The Pineland Forest Nursery began operating in Hadashville, Manitoba in 1953. In recent years, it employed about 30 people in the region, while producing high quality seedlings for governments and reforestation businesses in Canada and the northern United States. It also featured a seed bank for seeds of every type of tree grown in Manitoba.

However, on May 3, 2018, the Pallister government announced that it was closing the Nursery, while touting “new options” for the land and infrastructure with a search for a buyer underway. <sup>xliii</sup>

Botanist Organic Growers purchased the assets for \$1.43 million with plans to use the facility to grow hemp while leasing the Crown-owned land for \$240,000 a year. <sup>xliiv</sup>



However, by October 2021, the deal was terminated. The company, which had made no progress toward producing anything at the site, also owed the province \$500,000. Manitobans were left with a valuable asset now wasting away.

At the time, Minister Ralph Eichler, stated, "While the province entered into the agreement with Botanist Organic Growers Corp. (BOGC) in good faith and, in the interests of all Manitobans, it has become clear that BOGC is unable to fulfill its obligations." <sup>xlv</sup>



*The Pineland Forest Nursery produced high quality seedlings for reforestation for decades and employed about 30 people in Southeastern Manitoba. Now it sits empty, wasting away because of a failed privatization attempt by the Pallister government.*

Local politicians questioned Ministers at the Association of Manitoba Municipalities Association about the loss of jobs and the impact on the local economy, but received no concrete answers. To this day, there is no public information available about the future of the former Pineland site. It remains a cautionary tale of a government taking a well-run, important public asset and abandoning it because of a relentless ideological preference to the private sector.

## **Provincial Parks – A Public Good**

On March 3, 2020, Premier Brian Pallister issued a mandate letter to the Minister of Conservation and Climate, which referenced, "Renewing the provincial parks strategy to enhance visitor experience, modernize funding mechanisms for park services, and identify opportunities to attract private and philanthropic investments to upgrade facilities."

A Request for Proposals (RFP) for the provincial review was issued in October 2020 and outlined the scope of the study, which would explore raising cottage fees, business fees, park passes, campground fees, and service fees, while also decommissioning parks, contracting out services (like campground management, park maintenance, security, and enforcement), and selling or leasing campgrounds.<sup>xlvi</sup>

In December of that same year, the contract was awarded to a group of firms led by MNP <sup>xlvii</sup>. However, it took two full years for the final report, *Evaluating the Tourism Potential of Manitoba's Provincial Parks*, to finally be released on December 22, 2022. At the time, Eric Reder of the Wilderness Committee stated, "This is a lobbying report for private businesses to take advantage of our parks." <sup>xlviii</sup>

However, it was clear a plan to gradually privatize parks was already underway prior to the MNP report with a departmental briefing that referred to a new 21-year lease of St. Ambrose Beach and Campground to a private for-profit provider as a "template for future potential partnerships in parks." <sup>xlix</sup> The Canadian Wilderness and Parks Society (CPAWS) reported that site reservations increased significantly after the private operator took over.<sup>l</sup>

On June 10, 2021, a private company was also awarded a contract to build cabins in Turtle Mountain Provincial Park. The CPAWS Director panned the plan stating, "A privately owned cabin rental operation conflicts with Turtle Mountain's park management plan, which makes it clear these types of accommodations should be located outside the park. What we need are affordable, low-impact facilities within our parks that uphold the health of the environment and are accessible to all."<sup>li</sup>

Provincial parks are a public good. Rather than increase public investments in these spaces where families, hikers, and nature enthusiasts can enjoy our beautiful province and explore nature, this government has chosen to offload responsibility and started down the long and treacherous path of privatization.

## Manitoba Housing

Another plank of the KPMG *Fiscal Performance Review* focused on providing options to “contain costs” at Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation, which was previously an arms length agency of government.

In response to the report, the government transitioned Manitoba Housing employees into the Civil Service in 2021 and 2022, while the Department of Families released *Shared Priorities, Sustainable Progress – A 12-Month Action Plan for Manitoba Families*, which laid out a plan for Housing to, “transition from its current role as a housing provider to emphasize its responsibilities as a funder and regulator... and changing the design of how housing is currently managed and delivered. Manitoba Housing will continue devolving housing management to the non-profit and municipal sectors, and upgrading and selling assets where it makes good sense.”<sup>lii</sup>

Approximately 800 social housing units have undergone a management transfer and more are expected. As of November 2018, nearly 950 units had been sold to for-profit providers. <sup>liii</sup> The concern with this devolution is how key services and supports are lost when units are transferred to the private and non-profit sectors. For example, Tenant Services Coordinators assist tenants in accessing services beyond basic housing needs to support them in a holistic manner that improves their quality of life. These public housing supports are too important to be left to the whims of the private sector.

Reports estimated over 7,000 Manitoba households were on waiting lists for affordable housing by the end of 2019 and End Homelessness Winnipeg estimates the city is in need of 470 to 1,353 more social housing units by 2025<sup>liv</sup>. Rather than investing in affordable housing, the government has chosen to follow the direction of KPMG by selling social housing units and transferring management to non-profit agencies and the private sector.

## RESTORING OUR PUBLIC SERVICES – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE

Restoring the province’s Civil Service is crucial for the well-being of Manitobans and the services they depend on. Strong, reliable public services are essential to support families, keep our communities safe, and keep Manitoba’s economy moving forward. Several recommendations must be considered to revitalize and improve the Civil Service:

### 1. Invest in people

Public services are only as strong and reliable as the people who deliver them. After years of rising inflation, wages must keep up with the cost of living to reduce turnover rates. The Manitoba government needs to prioritize investments in competitive wages, training and professional development programs. Offering better wages in the civil service will make working in the public sector more appealing for employees and improve recruitment and retention. Investing in people not only improves the delivery of public services but also boosts morale and job satisfaction for civil servants. Additionally, further efforts should be made to diversify the civil service workforce, ensuring representation from various backgrounds and demographics.

### 2. Improve employee engagement

Engaging employees in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of public services is crucial to ensuring their effectiveness. Government must actively seek feedback from employees on any workplace changes and consult on how to improve working conditions and the services they provide.



### **3. Stop the privatization agenda**

Stopping the push to further privatization will improve morale among civil servants, retain more institutional knowledge, increase transparency and accountability, and provide better control over service quality. By valuing and investing in the public sector, governments can create a positive work environment for civil servants and deliver high-quality and more cost-effective public services.

### **4. Provide stability and adequate funding**

After years of turbulence and uncertainty, public sector employees need stability and measured approaches to changes in the workplace. Adequate and sustainable funding that meets the demand for services is necessary to ensure the provision of quality public services into the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

Manitobans are hard-working people who know the value of quality public services. The rapid expansion of for-profit delivery of public services is a concerning trend that has already had serious impacts on service quality, transparency, and accountability in the province. Whether its contracts shrouded in secrecy for critical air ambulance services, the failure of the Pineland Forest Nursery sale, or service deficiencies in infrastructure maintenance, Manitobans are not getting the value they deserve from services because of privatization schemes.

Despite these attacks intended to reduce the size and overall impact of Manitoba's public sector, MGEU members have answered the call, rising above organizational turmoil, short staffing, and challenging working conditions to do more with less and continue delivering important public services.

The people who provide these services deserve to be treated fairly and respected by the government for the work they do to keep our province growing. The cuts and privatization schemes pursued by the Pallister and Stefanson governments in recent years are out of touch with the needs and desires of everyday Manitobans, who want quality services that support them. We call on the Stefanson government to reverse course on their cuts and privatization agenda by reinvesting in the provincial workforce and ensuring these workers have the resources they need to do their jobs. If not, public services in Manitoba will continue to suffer.

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