



Public Service: The looming fight over sick leave

Kathryn May, Ottawa Citizen, May 22, 2014



Treasury Board president Tony Clement has been working on a new sick leave plan for public servants for a while. A document was recently circulated to employees and lays out the government's model for a new 'Workplace Wellness and Productivity Strategy.' Adrian Wyld / The Canadian Press

The Conservative government's plan to replace the existing sick-leave regime is likely to provoke a showdown with unions over the number of sick days public servants will get and what to do with the \$5.2 billion in leave they have already banked.

A Treasury Board Secretariat document recently circulated to employees lays out the government's model for a new "Workplace Wellness and Productivity Strategy." The government has clearly decided on a plan, leaving just the details to sort out at the bargaining table.

Q. What is the existing plan?

A. Public servants get 15 days of fully paid sick leave a year. They can carry over any unused days from year to year, which they do, at a cost of \$325 million a year. If they fall ill, they have to wait 13 weeks (65 days) before they can go on disability.

Q. What's wrong with the plan?

A. Many problems are embedded in its design, which hasn't changed in 40 years. The unions, however, argue that the existing system is workable and can be fixed, and doesn't need a wholesale overhaul.

Managers don't monitor and track the use of sick leave as they should, a weakness that, when combined with a generous sick-leave benefit, has invited abuse. Whatever is unused can't be cashed out when employees leave, which critics say tempts some to take more time off as they approach retirement.

The plan was designed when the nature of injury and illness taking employees off the job was very different. Cancer patients rarely returned to work and mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, weren't even talked about.

Q. What else?

A. Employees also don't have equal access to benefits. Those who don't have enough sick leave banked to bridge the 13-week waiting period don't get paid and have to rely on employment insurance. The government estimates that half of all employees don't have enough banked sick leave to cover the waiting period. Older workers typically have more sick leave banked than do younger employees, who are most vulnerable to lost income if they fall ill.

As well, the requirement that all banked sick leave be exhausted before going on disability delays getting the support, treatment and case management necessary to help get employees back to work. Studies show the longer employees are off work, the less likely they are to return.

Q. What's the consequence?

A. Absenteeism has been rising and public servants take an average of 11.5 days of paid sick leave a year.

Q. What's the government's proposed "Wellness" strategy?

A. Accumulated sick leave would be replaced by a short-term disability plan with more focus on prevention, case management and rehabilitation so the sick and injured get earlier care and are back to work faster. The new plan would be a combination of sick leave, short-term, and long-term disability.

- *Sick Leave:* Employees will get a number of sick leave days every year that they can use at their discretion.
- *Short-term Disability Plan:* Employees off work for five days will start getting support, including case management, to help recovery. Short-term disability typically covers employees for 26 weeks, offering graduated incomes that begin at 100 per cent of salary and drop off the longer employees are off work.
- *Long-term Disability Plan:* This plan kicks in after the term for short-term disability is up for employees who are still ill. Employees typically collect 70 per cent of their salaries until they return to work or up to age 65 if they can no longer work.