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Toronto government workers again take more sick days than in past

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Toronto's city workers took more sick days last year than they did during the era of the controversial "sick bank" program, figures obtained via freedom of information show.

Employees of the municipal government took an average of 7.9 sick days in 2007; 8 sick days in 2008, and 7.8 sick days in 2009. The number jumped to 10.4 sick days in 2010, when the city began to replace the sick bank with a new program, and stayed at 10.4 days in 2011.

The 10.4-day average was lower than the national public sector average of 10.9 days. To the chagrin of Mayor Rob Ford's administration, which has emphasized the need for efficiency in government, it was also higher than the national private sector average of 6.7 days.

Deputy Mayor Doug Holyday said the administration targeted chronic absenteeism during the latest round of labour negotiations. The new collective agreement with Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 79, the biggest city local, denies one day's pay to workers taking their fourth sick period or subsequent sick period in a given year.

The collective agreement with Local 416 — which Holyday said has done a better job combating absenteeism — includes "a requirement for the parties to review and improve attendance by Jan. 1, 2014," said city spokesperson Wynna Brown. If attendance does not improve by some to-be-determined "sufficient" amount, the city and union must "negotiate changes to the plans."

For the second consecutive year, the 311 call centre was the worst department for absenteeism, at 16.7 sick days on average. Brown said the numbers plummeted in the first six months of 2012 as a result of new initiatives by management, to a mere 5.8 days for full-time employees and 3.2 for part-timers.

Holyday said he believes the city's overall average can be brought down to private sector levels.

"The worst part of this is that there are an awful lot of very good employees who take very few days. That average throws a bad light on everybody that works there, but that really shouldn't be the case, because a lot of workers take very few days off," Holyday said. "So the workers that are really abusing it are really abusing it for a lot more than 10 days, and they're the ones we want to bring down for, and then we'll have our numbers in order."

The figures cover 26,000 union and non-union city employees who are not part-time recreation workers. Brown said the average for non-union employees was 6.75 days per year. The disparity between union and non-union employees mirrors the persistent Canada-wide disparity: the national average for union workers was 11.3 sick days, versus 5.9 days for non-union workers.

The average for all city employees was eight days or lower each year from 2006 to 2009, when union employees had a monetary incentive to stay on the job: they could either use up to 18 sick days per year or trade unused days for cash.

The city and CUPE agreed to phase out the sick bank in the 2009 collective agreements. That decision produced savings of more than \$100 million. But the switch to a new illness policy appears to have come at a cost: a rise in absenteeism.

Beginning in 2010, thousands of employees could no longer bank unused days — but they could take up to 130 paid sick days per year if they proved they needed them. Local 416 president Mark Ferguson said last year that the policy allowed employees who would once have come in to work sick or injured to take the extended recuperation time they required, driving up the absenteeism average.

CUPE did not respond to requests for comment on Friday.

In addition to 311, the city has achieved improvements in some of the departments with the highest absenteeism. In Court Services, the average dropped from 14.5 days in 2010 to 13 days in 2011; in Revenue Services, the average dropped from 13.8 days to 12.7 days.

Behind 311, the second-worst department was strategic communications, where city spokespersons work, at 15.7 days. Brown said this is a small 21-employee department in which the average was driven up by the "prolonged, documented illnesses" of a "number of staff."

Third-worst, at 15.1 days, was employment and social services, which has about 1,800 caseworkers and support staff dealing with welfare and other programs. Many of them meet with hundreds of residents.

In 2010, the Local 416 employees in Transportation Services, many of whom do manual jobs such as repairing potholes, averaged 20.3 sick days, a number Ferguson deemed "high" and surprising last year. The average fell in 2011, but at 19 days it remained the highest for any major Local

416 work area.

All city employees have to provide a doctor's note when off sick for more than three consecutive days.

Sick days in 2011

Departments with the most sick days last year:

1. 311 Call Centre (includes call-takers): **16.7**
2. Strategic Communications (includes city spokespeople): **15.7**
3. Employment and Social Services (includes welfare caseworkers): **15.1**
4. Transportation Services (includes road repairmen): **14.5**
5. Shelter, Support and Housing (includes shelter workers): **13.4**
6. Court Services (includes staff at provincial offences courts): **13.3**
7. Revenue Services (includes tax and utility collectors): **12.7**
8. Purchasing and Materials Management: **12.4**
9. Accounting Services: **12.4**
10. Equity, Diversity and Human Rights: **12.3**