

## **ASK WELLNESS SOCIETY: THE UNION QUESTION**

**MELANIE REED**

**KYLE SENFT**

**ANKITA SHERKANE**

**SWATI SINHA**

Thompson Rivers University

Bob Hughes leaned back in his well-worn office chair and let out a big sigh. The temperature for the rest of the week was going to be above 38° Celsius (100° Fahrenheit) and the usually energetic CEO of the ASK Wellness Society (ASK) knew the potential for casualties that this record setting heat wave could cause. Hughes had already met with his senior management team and the group had developed a game plan to address the shelter and health needs of the community's most vulnerable people. On top of that, Hughes knew ASK needed more staff to meet the increasing demand for services.

The agency struggled to fill vacant positions as it was difficult to compete on wages with large government employers for professional roles such as nurses, and with unionized social services agencies for other employees. Hughes wondered if unionization might be the solution. The agency's funders had the final say on salary budgets, but if the agency were unionized, the corresponding wage premium could be what was needed to compete in the war for talent. Hughes wasn't a stranger to trying new approaches or taking risks, but he also worried that the rigidity of a union would erode the agency's ability to respond quickly. Unionization would also affect its unique organizational culture. On top of that, he felt there might be ramifications if he were the one who encouraged his employees to seek union representation.

## Community Social Services in British Columbia

The ASK Wellness Society provided programs and services that ranged from street outreach to addiction counselling to the operation of a social enterprise (see Exhibit 1 for a description of services), but as an organization it was best described as a Community Social Services Agency. According to B.C.'s Community Social Services Workers website, work in this industry was rooted in caring:

*"Community social service workers are caring professionals. They help and support the most vulnerable members of our communities, including youth at risk, women, people with disabilities, immigrants, First Nations, and many others."<sup>1</sup>*

According to the Community Social Services Employer Association (CSSEA), the community social service industry accounted for over 21,000 employees (just over 13,000 FTE) across both unionized and non-unionized public and private sector workplaces in 2019.<sup>2</sup> During the same time period, 73% (15,847) of employees were represented by a union, with only 17% (3,683) remaining non-unionized. The other 10% (2,065) of employees held Management roles or exempt positions (see Exhibit 2 for a chart). By comparison, the rate of unionization in Canada was 28.6% in 2019 and 27.8% in the province of British Columbia (B.C.) where ASK operated.<sup>3</sup>

In December, 2021, the province of B.C. experienced low unemployment (4.9%) across all employment categories, which put pressure on employers to compete for a limited pool of available workers. An even tougher challenge was in the community social service sector, where the unemployment rate was 0.6%<sup>4</sup> and average hourly wage rates for most positions were Can\$ 6.98 per hour less than the Can\$ \$31.05 average for all workers in B.C.<sup>5</sup> Like many organizations in Canada, Hughes and the leadership team at ASK were feeling the pain of low unemployment, rising inflation, and an exhausted workforce following almost two years of a pandemic that was particularly challenging for ASK's vulnerable clients.

**Exhibit 1. Summary of Services Offered under the Four Pillars**

Source: ASK Wellness Society. (2022, January 5). About ASK.

Retrieved from ASK Wellness Society: <https://askwellness.ca/about-ask/>

**STREETS**

These services ensure that individuals living without an address or engaging in substance use or sex work had the essentials they needed and resources to be safe. One program is the Community Drug Checking Service which provided free, quick, and anonymous substance testing for substance use. SHOP was a long-running program that worked to provide Social and Health Options for People who worked in sex work, and the Community Transitions Team (CTT) was formed to investigate the service gaps that people transitioning from prison to the community faced.

**HOMES**

The Housing outreach Team assisted residents who needed help keeping or finding safe and secure housing. Low- and moderate-income people could choose from a variety of inexpensive housing options. The society taught individuals some fundamental life skills and connected them with mental health resources.

**HEALTH**

These services helped people improve their health by providing services such as locating a doctor, managing medications, and transporting patients to specialists. Those who had successfully completed detox were provided with resources and housing by the society. The group provided support and resources to persons with developmental disabilities who may also be coping with mental illness. Adults with developmental disabilities were also supported by the society. TiOAT is an alternative to traditional opioid medication for patients who do not respond to them and is relatively new to the agency.

**EMPLOYMENT**

One of the main employment programs offered by ASK was the City of Kamloops mattress recycling program. The program helped people with challenges to employment find meaningful work in a social enterprise that offered benefits to the community and the environment. Members in the program collected mattresses from local landfills, dismantled them, and recycled or repurposed the materials. The program intended to extend the life of Kamloop's region's landfills while also promoting a local economy through new meaningful jobs for individuals in need of assistance. ASK planned to open a vocational training center in Kamloops in 2022 and has launched a Community Ambassador program in Penticton.

**Exhibit 2. 2018-2019 Estimated Employee Count – Union vs. Non-Union**

Source: Community Social Services Employer's Association of B.C. (2012). FTE Count.

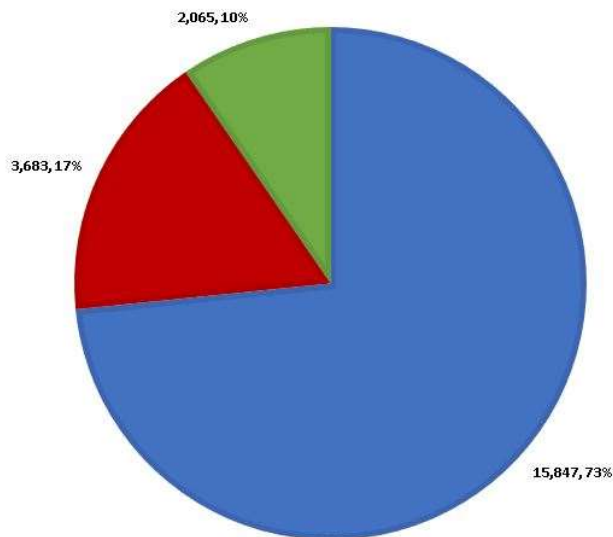
Retrieved from Community Social Services Employer's Association of BC:

[https://www.cssea.bc.ca/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=164&Itemid=283](https://www.cssea.bc.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=164&Itemid=283)

2018-19 ESTIMATED EMPLOYEE COUNT: 21,594

COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR

■ Unionized ■ Non-Union ■ Management and Exempt



### ASK Wellness Society: Grassroots Growth for Social Good

In 2006, when Hughes joined the agency as Executive Director, he became employee number seven in a group that worked out of a small downtown Kamloops office. As the story went, the organization was created when a group of HIV/AIDS advocates met on a basement couch in an effort to support people in the community who were suffering from the illness. In 1992, they formed the AIDS Society of Kamloops with a focus on providing *"health and wellness and to provide education to strengthen the Kamloops community."*<sup>16</sup> In these early days and for many years that followed, the services offered by the organization were directed towards advocacy and education for people living with HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C.

Shortly after Hughes joined the agency, he saw in the newspaper that a small local hotel was for sale; he had an idea. Financially, the agency was struggling to survive in the long-term, and

Hughes could see the potential for steady income if ASK became a landlord. He also saw an opportunity to support ASK's clients on their road to wellness as so many struggled to find stable, affordable and/or supportive housing, a resource lacking in the community at the time. Supportive housing was "*subsidized housing with on-site supports for single adults, seniors and people with disabilities at risk of or experiencing homelessness.*"<sup>7</sup> The type of support offered varied, but generally included access to 24/7 on site support staff, mental health support, meals, and other health and wellbeing services.

The Whistler Inn was a 28-unit property listed for an asking price of Can\$ 1.1 million. Hughes took his idea to the Board of Directors and pitched a plan for financial stability through affordable housing management. With the Board's support, he found an audience with B.C. Housing, a Provincial Government organization that worked with private and public sector partners providing housing to British Columbians who struggled to find and secure housing on their own. B.C. Housing offered a continuum of housing options that ranged from shelters and housing for those who were homeless to assistance for individuals who were securing mortgages for a home.<sup>8</sup>

At the time of Hughes' request, ASK was already offering a pilot housing outreach project that was funded by B.C. Housing, but ASK was not on B.C. Housing's radar. It turned out that Hughes' timing was perfect because B.C. Housing had already been looking for a property and someone to run a supportive housing program. With this knowledge, Hughes submitted his first Request for Proposal (RFP) and secured the first contract for a 24/7 supportive housing program in Kamloops. ASK changed the name of the property to Henry Leland House (who the building was named after). From that moment on, growth was exponential for the small grassroots agency, and B.C. Housing remained ASK's most important funder and partner.

In 2010, ASK purchased The Crossroads, a property blocks away from the Henry Leland House, with funding from a federal funding partner and an operating contract from B.C. Housing. The Crossroads was a much larger property and was better set up for supportive housing, so the

leadership team at ASK made a courageous move and shifted the 24/7 supportive housing model from Henry Leland House to The Crossroads so that more individuals with complicated health challenges and addictions could be helped. ASK then turned the Henry Leland House into second stage affordable housing that was suited to individuals who were more independent.

The next housing project was Tina Baptiste in 2012. After sharing a drink with the Vice-President of a successful local property management company, Hughes was offered the opportunity to run 14 affordable housing units in a downtown building the company had just purchased. It was the second floor of the property, which the sentimental Executive Director named after an outspoken advocate. From there, the agency purchased two other Kamloops motels; The Fountain in 2014 and the Maverick in 2016. The Maverick was another unique property as it was situated out of the downtown core, had a pool with a waterslide (that was decommissioned), and had part of the property leased to the owners of a restaurant offering Chinese cuisine. Because of its unique location, the Maverick was an ideal property for clients of the agency who were independent and ready for the fourth pillar of ASK's vision: employment.

### **Beyond Kamloops**

When Hughes started with the agency in 2006, ASK had a small contract to provide housing outreach services one day per week in Merritt, B.C., a small community of just over 7,000 people<sup>9</sup> located 45 minutes south of Kamloops. (See Exhibit 3 for a map of all ASK locations.) The Merritt housing contract was the only one for many years, until B.C. Housing approached Hughes to provide an operating contract for a small property called Trade Winds.

Following that, Hughes attempted to purchase a motel to increase the housing capacity in Merritt, but was unsuccessful. The tenacious Executive Director persisted, and eventually convinced the Development Services Representative from B.C. Housing to support a new build.

From there, Juniper House became the first new build for the agency. It was a remarkable achievement, not only because it was ASK's first building project, but also because it was the first affordable housing project in B.C. to be built to Passive House standards. Passive House standards, when followed, resulted in an energy-efficient building with low operating costs. The agency continued to take on projects to support the community of Merritt and, in 2022 became the most prominent housing operator in the city with 160 affordable housing units under its management.

In 2017, the agency and Board of Directors made a thoughtful but difficult decision to extend services to the City of Penticton; a community that had struggled with providing affordable housing and had an extremely high *per capita* rates of unhoused people. Two hours away from Kamloops, Penticton also happened to be the location of B.C. Housing's head office, and it was the government organization that reached out to see if Hughes and his team were ready for a new challenge in a new community. ASK entered Penticton by taking over an exciting housing project called Fairhaven. In 2018, it opened a new modular housing facility called Burdock house, named after the Board Member who had been instrumental in the decision to expand to the community. In spring 2022, a third housing location opened for a total of 158 units in the city of approximately 33,000 people.<sup>10</sup>

Exhibit 3. Map of ASK Wellness Society Locations in British Columbia

Source: World Atlas. (2022). Maps of British Columbia





## Funders and Finances

ASK's revenue was generated from a variety of sources, but primarily from four funders. Funding came from both provincial and municipal sources, as well as a healthy rent roll.

Hughes's instinct to pursue housing as a means of financial security couldn't have been more on point. In his first year with the agency, ASK operated with a total budget of Can\$ 540,000. At the end of fiscal 2021, the agency posted an income statement with revenues over Can\$ 15M, almost half of which was generated by B.C. Housing contracts. (See Exhibit 4 below for a revenue summary and Exhibit 5 for a complete Statement of Operations for the year ended March 31, 2021.) Typical of most service-focused non-profit organizations, the agency's biggest expenses were wages and employee benefits, accounting for almost Can\$ 10M.

### Exhibit 4. ASK Wellness Society Revenue 2021

*Source: ASK Wellness Society*

Revenue Source	2021
BC Housing Management Commission operating and support services	6,725,176
Rents	3,582,008
Community Living BC	1,517,877
Interior Health	1,819,583
Fundraising, donations and other revenue	975,526
City of Kamloops	653,066
BC Housing Management Commission rental support	541,169

**Exhibit 5. Statement of Operations Year ended March 31, 2021**

Source: KPMG. (2021, October 6). Financial Statements of ASK Wellness Society. Retrieved from ASK Wellness Society: <https://askwellness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/2021-03-31-ASK-Wellness-Society-FS.pdf>

Values in Canadian Dollars

<b>Revenue</b>	<b>2021</b>
BC Housing Management Commission Operating and Support Services	\$6,725,176
Rents	3,582,008
Community Living BC	1,517,877
Interior Health	1,819,583
Fundraising, Donations and Other Revenue	975,526
City of Kamloops	653,066
BC Housing Management Commission Rental Support	541,169
	<u>\$15,814,405</u>
<b>Expenses</b>	
Accreditation	2,600
Advertising and Fundraising	19,294
Amortization	441,059
BC Housing Rental Support	395,573
Computer and Technology	122,014
Emergency Response (COVID-19)	91,627
Honorariums	19,245
Insurance	83,107
Interest and Bank Charges	7,086
Interest on Long-Term Debt	198,571
Meetings and Conventions	9,905
Office	57,282
Photocopy and Printing	22,645
Professional Fees	44,526
Program Resources and Supplies	269,402
Program Participation Food	653,752
Property Taxes	36,142
Rent	1,179,737
Repairs and Maintenance	851,809
Telephone and Utilities	922,590
Training	19,700
Travel	98,514
Uncollectable Rents	25,156
Wages and Benefits	9,798,270
	<u>\$15,369,606</u>
<b>Other Income (Expenses)</b>	
BC Housing Management Commission-Project Funding	4,245,388
Repairs and Maintenance-Project Funded	(4,245,388)
Amortization of Forgivable Loans	119,785
Amortization of Deferred Capital Contributions	99,155
	218,940
<b>Excess of Revenues Over Expenses</b>	<u>\$218,940</u>

Although ASK had a reputation for delivering what was expected in contracts, funding was never guaranteed. Every year or two years, the agency would need to submit updated budget requests for existing projects or renewable contracts. Hughes and his team needed to anticipate future operating costs, salary and benefit increases, and attempt to plan for contingencies.

Although funders were motivated to keep ASK as an operator, they didn't always accept budget increases; as such, Hughes was often in negotiations.

### Clarity and Culture Drive Success

As a result of ASK's ability to deliver a variety of housing options, programs and services to the most vulnerable people in three communities, funding agencies trusted Bob Hughes and the ASK management team. Nonetheless, with rapid growth, there was a need for more sophisticated management of people and the growing operation. In 2014, on the heels of Hughes completing his master degree, the ASK Board of Directors realized that the organization needed a clearer strategic direction and greater emphasis on structure, process, and risk management. What was critically important to Hughes was that ASK continued to maintain its grassroots tribal culture.

Under the leadership of then Board Chair, Dr. Andrew Fergus, the organization undertook a visioning and strategic planning process. The result was the "*streets to homes to health to employment*" model of program service delivery, also called the "*Continuum of Care*." (See Exhibit 6 for a table of programs under each of the four pillars in the Continuum of Care.) It was this clarity that helped ASK's employees work toward a common goal and create a much-needed structure.

**Exhibit 6. Continuum of Care and Program Delivery by Location**

Source: ASK Wellness Society

Pillars	Locations	Services
STREETS	Kamloops	Street Outreach
		Overdose Prevention
		Drug Checking
		Shop
		Community Transition Team
		Naloxone Training
	Merritt	Street Outreach
		Drug Checking
		Naloxone Training
Penticton	No outreach support	
HOMES	Kamloops	Housing Outreach & Crisis Funding
		Supportive Housing
		Transitional Housing
		Affordable &/ or 55+ Housing
		Tenant Development
	Merritt	Housing Outreach & Crisis Funding
		Supportive Housing
		Affordable &/ or 55+ Housing
	Penticton	Supportive Housing
HEALTH	Kamloops	Health Navigation, Blood Borne Infection Management and Harm Reduction
		Adult Addiction and Supportive Housing (AASH)
		Mental Health and Independent Supportive Housing (MHASH)
		Community Integration and Developmental Disabilities Supports
		Tablet Injectable Opioid Agonist Treatment (TIOAT)
		Maverick Supportive Recovery and Career Development Program
	Merritt	Health Navigation, Blood Borne Infection Management and Harm Reduction
		Adult Addiction and Supportive Housing (AASH)
		Community Integration and Developmental Disabilities Supports
	Penticton	No Health services provided
	EMPLOYMENT	Kamloops
Merritt		No Employment services as of Jan 2022.
Penticton		Penticton Ambassador Program

## Exhibit 7. Vision, Mission, Values and Guiding Principles of ASK Wellness

Source: ASK Wellness Society

**Vision:**

*The vision of ASK Wellness Society is to work towards a society that recognizes the value and potential of each individual and our mission is to provide outreach, housing, health, education, employment, and emotional support services for the marginalized and persons at risk.*

**Mission Statement:**

*To provide those in need with HOUSING, HEALTH SERVICES, and EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES*

**Core Values:**

- ASK believes **TRUST** is at the heart of community both in Ask Wellness Society and in the communities we serve.
- ASK believes a healthy community is one that is **INCLUSIVE**.
- ASK believes the key to helping people to become self-sufficient is through **HOPE**.
- ASK believes **COMPASSION** ensures no one gets left behind.

**Guiding Principles:**

- **Housing First**
- **Client Centered**
- **Harm Reduction**
- **Social Justice**

The four pillars soon became the tools that drove the organization's vision, which was to *"to work towards a society that recognizes the value and potential of each individual."*<sup>11</sup> Along with the vision, the organization carved out a clear Mission, Core Values and a set of Guiding Principles (see Exhibit 7 for a summary).

Hughes believed that maintaining ASK's culture while evolving into a more structured organization was a factor for remaining non-unionized in an industry where the majority of employees were represented by unions. Staying true to its founding value of *"remaining kind of quirky, a sense of kind of clan or doing things a little different"*<sup>12</sup> made employees feel special.

Other ways Hughes worked to maintain ASK's culture over the years was through interesting job titles such as "Special Ops," supporting individual employees when they had personal financial challenges, making accommodations for people who wouldn't be possible under a union contract, and truly embracing a Servant Leadership approach. Both Hughes and COO Kim Galloway would take on-call shifts responding to emergencies after hours and on weekends and engaged in some of the most challenging jobs such as operating the Bed Bug removal machine. Every month, Hughes called an all-staff meeting where he discussed what was happening across the organization and what it was trying to accomplish.

Cheryl Doolan, Director of People and Culture joined ASK in September 2008 as an Executive Assistant when her family moved to Kamloops from Calgary. She was hired by Hughes to work three days per week to help organize his papers, schedule and files. Cheryl was quickly in demand and moved up to a full-time role and an Office Manager title. Doolan described the organization's culture as a kind of "functioning disfunction"<sup>13</sup> with the flexibility that came with an organization that could get things done. ASK's funders and partners appreciated how the organization could rally people and resources when a crisis or ongoing need presented itself. On one occasion, Doolan recalled a fire breaking out in an apartment building in Kamloops. Although not asked to help, ten people from the agency showed up and started meeting the displaced residents to offer them support with finding somewhere new to live.

A culture of *doing what was needed at any given moment* was also reflected when devastating floods caused the entire City of Merritt to be evacuated in November 2021. With multiple properties in the community housing ASK clients, both Doolan and Hughes jumped into their vehicles, drove to the small community and started knocking on the doors of the buildings to make sure residence were out and safe. *"That's the culture of ASK. We're amazing at crisis management and being the one agency that will show up if nobody else will."*<sup>14</sup>

Hughes believed that staying union-free required two things. First, the agency had to offer employees what a union would without the added bureaucracy. Second, the employees

continued to believe that the entire leadership team, particularly Hughes, had their best interests at heart: *"My job exists because of the work that people do, it's not the other way around."*<sup>15</sup>

The second part was well within the agencies control. As the organization grew, both Doolan and Hughes recognized that it was getting more difficult to maintain the unique and responsive culture they had created. Hughes felt strongly that the leadership team's passion for the vision and mission would not diminish, and that ASK could deliver on employee expectations. However, offering the best of collective bargaining agreements negotiated by some of the most powerful unions in the province meant the agency would need the cooperation of funders whose mandates could shift with the winds of politics.

### The People and Culture Challenge

In ASK's early days of rapid growth, Doolan indicated that there were few human resource policies and procedures even though the organization was hiring at a frantic pace.

*"As we grew, Bob was just hiring anybody who would come through the door and anybody who was interested in working for us. There was no process. There was a small little binder with maybe a few policies, but that's kind of it."*<sup>16</sup>

A natural organizer, Doolan set out to implement some structure by preparing policies or procedure documents. But when the agency took on a contract in Merritt, she shifted to spending time in operations planning events such as *World AIDS Day* and *Dining Out for Life*. As the agency continued to grow, human resources needed more attention.

Doolan handed over her event-planning hat and began to focus on Human Resources Management full-time. In the first couple of years that the People and Culture department existed, Doolan had part-time help - often not from the same person. This quickly became untenable, so in 2017 Hughes proposed a full-time, qualified Human Resource Professional be

added to the management team. "[And] since then, it's been amazing! I don't know how I could have done my job without help."<sup>17</sup>

In 2019, ASK pursued another organizational challenge by applying for accreditation with the Council of Accreditation (COA). Doolan believed that this gave the People and Culture department some backing to add badly needed processes that previously had not been in place, although these changes came with growing pains. As the organization shifted from approaching human resources management processes in an *ad hoc* way, there was a lot of push back from managers:

*"At that point, HR was the enemy. They hated us. We were the people creating all these barriers."*<sup>18</sup>

The feedback motivated Doolan and her team to show employees and managers that they remained approachable, flexible people with a common goal. It took a consistent effort, but eventually the tone shifted, and the department was viewed as a trusted partner once again.

One of the practices that the agency had implemented was an annual employee engagement survey. The team set a participation goal of 75%. Although ASK struggled to meet this target, it improved over time. In 2019, participation was 53% and in 2020 this jumped to 63%. In 2021 ASK was on track to hit the goal.

Overall, employees seemed to be engaged with the agency and its purpose. Some of the comments shared by employees in the 2019 engagement survey indicated that employees' core values aligned with the values of the organization; employees felt that they were treated with dignity and respect. Employees also felt satisfied by the work they were doing, and enjoyed the autonomy they had to do their work and make decisions. Employees were somewhat satisfied with their compensation and felt that benefits generally met their needs.

Despite the goodwill the agency had with its employees, ASK struggled to recruit a sufficient number of employees. One of the key factors both Hughes and Doolan identified was the labor



market. At the end of 2021, the province of B.C. had an unemployment rate of 5.3%, down from 8.0% at the beginning of the year with labor market participation hovering around 65%.<sup>19</sup> The real effects of the labor market were present in tough job offer negotiations where candidates would walk away if they did not get the salary they were looking for (despite the rate of pay being advertised). In some instances, interviews would be scheduled, and candidates simply didn't show up.

Wage parity with other agencies was a major factor. At the end of 2021, Hughes set out on a mission to understand just how significant the salary discrepancies were. With the help of his team, he looked at union contracts for similar classifications and determined that the agency was behind their union counterparts by 8% in base wages. Hughes then prepared his 2022 annual budgets for his biggest funders with a request for wage parity.

### **The Union Question**

To Hughes and Doolan's knowledge, employees had never actively sought representation from a union, though they often wondered if it was only a matter of time. Employees from unionized counterparts received the benefit of a large bargaining association called the Community Social Services Bargaining Association (CSSBA), which was backed by ten unions, some of which were the largest and most powerful unions in British Columbia. The CSSBA bargaining association included the B.C. Nurses Union (BNU), the B.C. Government Employees Union (BCGEU), and Canada's largest union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).<sup>20</sup> Through this collective bargaining council, unions negotiated three master agreements with the majority of contract terms offering similar wages and benefits to employees across a range of organizations.

The CSSBA would then negotiate local issues to form individual contracts for each organization. On the other side of the table, the employer's bargaining council aided unionized employers with human resource management, contract negotiations with the CSSBA, and setting up

systems and processes when employees unionize. While Hughes could access some *'fee for service'* consulting from CSSEA, ASK could not become a full member of the association if it did not manage a unionized workplace.

Doolan saw some benefits if employees were represented by a union. Primarily in the short-term, there was a sense that unionization would address the wage parity issue with funders, and it might give employees a sense of control and greater job security. Employees might also feel that they had a greater understanding of when and how wage increases would be offered. For the People and Culture department, this would remove some of the ongoing negotiations with employees, and simplify processes. On the other hand, without experience in a unionized workplace, Doolan feared the unknown that came with adding a union. If employees were represented by a union, ASK would lose some flexibility to adapt, which could ultimately affect their overall engagement and unique organizational culture. If employees did seek unionization, ASK might be dealing with *multiple unions* due to the variety of roles the agency offered: addictions counsellors, nurses, facilities managers, support workers, and custodial workers.

Before his role at ASK, Hughes served as a shop steward and area representative handling grievances as a member of the BCGEU. He was familiar with union processes and collective agreements and had personal experience with the pros and cons of a unionized workplace. However, Doolan's lack of experience in a unionized setting left her less comfortable with what life would be like if working with a union was part of her role. Both Hughes and Doolan enjoyed the flexibility they had to respond to employees' needs quickly and creatively, which they knew would be diminished if a union were present. On the other hand, they recognized the benefit of having a third party in place to help navigate employee concerns and issues.

## The Pressure Was On

In January 2022, ASK employed 270 people across the three communities. In February of the same year, ASK was scheduled to add 37 seniors housing units in Kamloops, 54 units in Penticton, and 46 in Merritt in the fall of 2022. By the end of 2022, the agency would have 817 housing units under its management. With all those units came a need to find qualified, reliable employees to provide much-needed services and support. Hughes knew the pressure was on to position the agency as an employer of choice for those working in the community social service field - and salary was a key factor.

The question was how to secure the funding he needed to compete in an ever-tightening labor market when the need for affordable housing and community social services was not slowing down. As he checked the weather app on his phone one more time, Hughes couldn't help but wonder if there was another way. If the agency was unionized, like so many other community social services organizations in the province of B.C., he would be able to increase wages and benefits and possibly improve their competitive position as an employer of choice. At the very least, it would put him on an even playing field with similar organizations.

What he knew for sure was that as the organization grew, ASK's in-demand programs and services would be at risk. Hughes wondered if he could convince his funders that without matching the salary structure of unionized counterparts, ASK would not be able to continue with its projects. If funders said "no" to his proposed 8% salary increase, should his next move be to encourage his employees to seek union representation? Or should he follow through on his threat to wind down the organization and hand in the keys?

Hughes sat at his desk with his mouse hovering over the send icon. Would clicking the button be the catalyst for a complete collapse of the unique culture his team had created, the collapse of the entire organization, or would this move be precisely what the agency needed to address a complex competitive challenge?



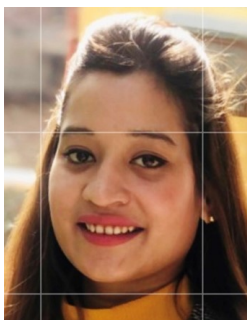
**Melanie Reed** is an Assistant Teaching Professor at Thompson Rivers University where she teaches Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior. Professor Reed holds an MBA and certifications in Change Leadership, Strategic Workforce Planning, and Compensation Management. As a passionate advocate for equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), she has led EDI and academic integrity committees within the Gaglardi School of Business and Economics and held a Thompson Rivers EDI Fellowship position. Passionate about case writing, she served as President of the Western Casewriters Association and is currently the Vice-President Programs Elect for the North American Case Research Association (NACRA). She has over 20 years of experience in corporate Human Resource roles in private and public sector organizations and held leadership roles in Workforce Planning, Recruitment and Total Rewards.



**Kyle Senft** is a graduate of Thompson Rivers University where he obtained a Bachelor degree from the School of Business and Economics with a major in Human Resources. He is passionate about creating safe workspaces that promote open and honest communication between employees and management. He is currently applying his skills at an organization that assists at risk youth all across the province.



**Ankita Sherkane** graduated from Thompson River University with a post-baccalaureate Diploma in Human Resource Management. Previously, she completed her Master in Pharmaceutical Biotechnology from India. Her master thesis included research on "Mechanism of radiation-induced epithelial to mesenchymal like changes in MCF-7 human Breast carcinoma cells with relevance to tumor invasion and metastasis." She published her first review article on "Pulsatile Drug Delivery System" in her bachelor degree. Currently, she works as a Talent Acquisition Specialist for Maxwell Management Group and has more than two years experience in HR. Ankita has a love and passion for doing "henna"- an Indian traditional art, and she is a part-time voice artist.



**Swati Sinha** is a graduate of Thompson Rivers University Human Resource post-baccalaureate Diploma program. During her time at Thompson Rivers University, Swati was a member of the TRU HR Club and is currently a member of the CPHR BC & Yukon. She has over eleven years of experience working in union and non-union organizations and has a keen interest in HR, Labor Relations and HR Analytics.



## References

- <sup>1</sup> BCGEU. (2012). FAQ. Retrieved from BC's Community Social Service Workers: <http://www.cssfairdeal.ca/faq>
- <sup>2</sup> Community Social Services Employer's Association of BC. (2012). Sector Overview. Retrieved from Community Social Services Employer's Association of BC: [https://www.cssea.bc.ca/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=167&Itemid=286](https://www.cssea.bc.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=167&Itemid=286)
- <sup>3</sup> Government of Canada, S. C. (2022, November 23). *Unionization in Canada, 1981 to 2022*. www150.Statcan.gc.ca. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2022011/article/00001-eng.htm>
- <sup>4</sup> Government of Canada, S. C. (2022, December 2). *Labour force characteristics by industry, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality*. Wwww150.Statcan.gc.ca. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410002201>
- <sup>5</sup> Government of Canada, S. C. (2016, January 26). *Employee wages by occupation, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality*. Wwww150.Statcan.gc.ca. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410030601>
- <sup>6</sup> ASK Wellness Society. (2022, January 5). *About ASK*. Retrieved from ASK Wellness Society: <https://askwellness.ca/about-ask/>
- <sup>7</sup> *Supportive Housing*. (n.d.). www.bchousing.org. <https://www.bchousing.org/housing-assistance/housing-with-support/supportive-housing>
- <sup>8</sup> BC Housing. (2022, January 12). Our Organization. Retrieved from BC Housing: <https://www.bchousing.org/about/our-organization>
- <sup>9</sup> Townfolio. (2022, January 12). Merritt Demographics. Retrieved from Townfolio: <https://townfolio.co/bc/merritt/demographics>
- <sup>10</sup> City of Penticton. (2022). About Us. Retrieved from City of Penticton: <https://www.penticton.ca/our-community/about-us>
- <sup>11</sup> ASK Wellness Society. (2022, January 5). *About ASK*. Retrieved from ASK Wellness Society: <https://askwellness.ca/about-ask/>
- <sup>12</sup> Hughes, B. (2022, January 7). CEO. (M. Reed, Interviewer)
- <sup>13</sup> Doolan, C. (2022, January 7). Director, People & Culture. (M. Reed, Interviewer)
- <sup>14</sup> Doolan, C. (2022, January 7). Director, People & Culture. (M. Reed, Interviewer)
- <sup>15</sup> Hughes, B. (2022, January 7). CEO. (M. Reed, Interviewer)
- <sup>16</sup> Doolan, C. (2022, January 7). Director, People & Culture. (M. Reed, Interviewer)
- <sup>17</sup> Doolan, C. (2022, January 7). Director, People & Culture. (M. Reed, Interviewer)
- <sup>18</sup> Doolan, C. (2022, January 7). Director, People & Culture. (M. Reed, Interviewer)
- <sup>19</sup> Province of British Columbia. (2022). *Labour Market Snapshots*. Retrieved from Work BC: <https://www.workbc.ca/Labour-Market-Industry/B-C-s-Economy/Labour-market-snapshots.aspx?month=December&year=2021>
- <sup>20</sup> BCGEU. (2012). FAQ. Retrieved from BC's Community Social Service Workers: <http://www.cssfairdeal.ca/faq>