OPERATIONS BRIEF FOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS & PROGRAM LEADERS

The Hidden Cost of Sick-Call Coverage

What manual shift coverage really costs a BC social-services agency, and why almost none of it shows up on your budget.

> **In one line:** For a 50-person agency, manual sick-call coverage quietly costs roughly **$27,000 a year**, most of it hidden inside salaries, overtime, and turnover, before counting grievance risk or the care quality lost when a shift goes short. This brief shows where that money goes, built bottom-up from how BC agencies actually run callouts.

Prepared June 2026. Built from interviews with **three managers and two frontline staff** across BC social-services programs, cross-checked against StatCan, CSSEA/FCSSBC, CIHI, and SHRM benchmarks. Every figure is an editable assumption, not a vendor claim. It pairs with an interactive calculator you can run on your own numbers.

The cost you don't see on the P&L

Ask most executives what shift coverage costs and they'll point at the overtime line. That line is real, but it's the small, visible tip. The larger cost is **distributed and disguised**: it sits in salaried management hours, in a shrinking casual pool, in compliance exposure with no paper trail, and in the quality of care that quietly drops when a program runs short. None of it is labelled "coverage," so none of it gets managed.

Every manager we interviewed described coverage as the dominant part of their job. As one put it: *"Managing the scheduling is basically most of what a manager does, making sure there's a body in every shift."*

How coverage actually works today

When a staff member calls in sick at 6 AM for a 7 AM shift, the same manual escalation plays out across every agency we spoke to:

- **Check who's available** , in a system like ComVida, or just from memory.
- **Call casuals one by one** down a list, until someone accepts. Often not strict seniority order, whoever is reached first.
- **Then part-time staff** to top up their hours, or pull someone from a program that can run lighter.
- **Fall back to overtime** when the pool is empty.
- **Last resort: the on-call manager works the shift** themselves, or arranges a double.

A single callout takes **10–20 minutes**, reported independently by two managers, and the record of who was called, in what order, and who declined is kept **in the manager's head**, then typed into the schedule the next day, if at all. The tools are "a series of Excel sheets that aren't even in a central folder."

The six hidden costs

1. Management time, paid out of salary

At ~15 minutes a callout and roughly 345 callouts a year, a 50-staff agency spends about **86 management hours, over two working weeks, just dialling for coverage**. It never appears as a cost because it's already inside a salary. But it is two weeks of senior attention not spent on staff, clients, or growth.

2. Overtime premium leakage

Overtime is the standing fallback when the pool fails. The base hours would be paid anyway, but the **time-and-a-half premium is a pure coverage-failure tax**. On our defaults that's ~$10,800/year, and it climbs as the casual pool thins.

3. Senior staff doing frontline work

When the manager covers the shift, the agency pays a manager's rate for a frontline job **and** loses the manager's own work for that shift. We count only the wage delta; the opportunity cost is larger.

4. The casual-pool death spiral

Both managers said casuals leave for the same reason: *"they can't get enough consistent hours or a stable line."* Every exit shrinks the pool that coverage depends on, which forces more overtime and more manager scrambling, which burns out whoever's left. Replacing one lower-wage employee costs about **16% of salary**; the sector's turnover and burnout are already among the highest in the workforce.

5. Grievance and audit exposure

> **No paper trail = provable risk**
> Both managers confirmed there is **no real-time record** of who was called, in what order, or who declined, "if someone challenged the callout order later, it may be difficult to prove what happened." Under a collective agreement, one arbitrated out-of-seniority grievance can run **thousands in back-pay, legal fees, and management time**. Frontline staff also flagged a fairness rule, a required 15-minute wait between calls, that is "rarely followed," leaving staff who miss the call frustrated when the shift is already gone.

6. "Lockdown", the care cost

When a shift can't be covered, frontline staff described going into **"lockdown"**: clients can't go in or out, and required responsibilities get dropped, automatic on night shifts. This is the cost a board and a funder actually care about, and it never reaches the budget. It is the reputational and accreditation exposure sitting behind every uncovered shift.

Putting a number on it

Because no one tracks these costs, we built them bottom-up from the interviews and anchored the volume to a legislated, measured absence rate rather than a guess.[1]

Hidden cost	What it is	Est. / yr*
Manager dialing time	345 callouts × ~15 min × loaded manager rate, buried in salary	**$4,140**
Overtime premium	The avoidable time-and-a-half on OT-filled callouts	**$10,764**
Senior staff on shift	Manager covering a frontline shift at the wage delta	**$4,858**
Casual churn	Coverage-driven turnover × 16% replacement cost	**$7,392**
Total modeled hidden cost, 50-staff organization		**≈ $27,150**

* Defaults for a 50-staff agency. Conservative by design, it excludes grievance exposure and care-quality loss. Swap in your own staff count and wages in the companion **Hidden-Cost Calculator** to see your figure.

Why this gets worse, not better

- **Absence is rising.** BC employees averaged 9.2 sick days in 2023–24, up from 5.9 in 2020–21, and 5 paid sick days are now a legislated entitlement, including for casuals. The volume you must backfill is structurally climbing.
- **The pool is shrinking.** Community-living, shelter, and mental-health work runs on casual and relief staff, exactly where turnover and burnout are highest. The supply of people to call is contracting.
- **The escape valve is closing.** As of October 2025, BC stopped funding overtime and agency staffing in long-term care. The subsidy that has masked coverage costs is politically exposed; more of the bill lands on operators.

Five questions worth asking your own team

- How many hours a week do my managers actually spend finding coverage, and what aren't they doing instead?
- If a casual grieved an out-of-seniority call tomorrow, could we prove the order we called in?
- What is our real overtime premium spend on coverage, and is it trending up?
- How often does a program go into "lockdown," and who sees that number?
- Why are our casuals actually leaving, and what does each exit cost us to replace?

> **About this brief.** Avover is researching how BC social-services agencies handle sick-call

[1] Derived: 50 staff × 9.2 sick days/yr (StatCan 2023–24) × 75% backfill = 345 callouts/yr. Model is deliberately conservative, premium-only on overtime, wage-delta only on manager-worked shifts, and excludes the grievance and care-quality costs described in this brief.

> coverage, to publish a sector view of the problem. We're not selling in these conversations, we're comparing notes. If the numbers here look low or high against your own, that's exactly the conversation we want to have. **segun@avover.ca · avover.ca**