

**Caring Without Collapse: Rethinking Compassion Fatigue to Sustain Service Excellence in
Canada's Federal Public Service**

Word count: 1394

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Across Canada's federal public service, emotionally demanding work that centres on supporting others in distress has become routine. Service Canada agents assist members of the public in navigating unemployment, disability, or housing insecurity. Immigration and refugee officers adjudicate claims involving trauma and displacement. Call-centre employees manage growing volumes of emotionally charged interactions, especially during times of economic uncertainty and policy change. Together, these public service roles require sustained emotional engagement. How can we better support these individuals who do so much for us and build a sustainable, efficient public service?

Canadian employees in these public-facing roles experience high levels of stress and burnout (Ontario Medical Association, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2023a; Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat & Statistics Canada, 2025), which erodes their health, well-being, and relationships (Finzi-Dottan & Kormosh, 2016). It also destabilizes Canada's public organizations. These roles often have higher rates of absenteeism, lower productivity, and increased turnover (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010), which are, in part, attributed to the emotional toll of these roles. These effects are reflected in national data. For instance, according to federal surveys, there has been a rise in disability claims for stress-related leave (Statistics Canada, 2023a; 2023b). Further, conservative estimates from economic analyses suggest that burnout-related absenteeism and turnover costs organisations \$6.3 billion annually across Canada (Deloitte Canada, 2019). This is largely driven by a loss of productivity and the cost of replacing trained public servants, which entails recruitment, onboarding, and lost institutional knowledge. Preventing avoidable attrition is, therefore, one of the most cost-effective strategies available. These workforce pressures are also experienced directly by the Canadians who receive these services through longer wait times, variable service quality, and procedural errors. In fact, the Clerk of the Privy Council recognises that addressing these costs is key to building a sustainable and efficient public service (Privy Council Office, 2025). Thus, addressing the cost of emotionally demanding work is not just of importance to those in these roles, but to those who receive them, and the system as a whole.

At the heart of this challenge is an experience called "compassion fatigue." Compassion fatigue is the idea that repeated exposure to suffering erodes empathy or caring (Figley, 2002). Currently, there are numerous interventions aimed at helping employees "preserve" or "restore" their compassion through resilience training, self-care initiatives, or wellness programming (Klein et al., 2018). However, my recent work suggests that repeated exposure to others' suffering does not actually erode compassion (Qaiser et al., under review), suggesting new interventions may be needed. Rather, compassionate responses often remain stable and high, even increasing over time. This is not to say that repeated exposure to others' suffering is not harmful. Reports of increased stress, difficulty coping, and reduced well-being do emerge. As a result, it appears that at its core, the issue is not an erosion of compassion, but the burden of sustained compassion. In other words, individuals may continue to care deeply even as the personal costs of caring accumulate.

This distinction has important implications for public policy. The challenge is not that public service employees become apathetic and lack compassion, but that the broader system relies on sustained compassion, without managing the cost of its sustained experience. An updated recommendation would be that policymakers shift from traditional wellness initiatives grounded in fostering compassion, under the assumption that it declines over time, and instead address structurally unsustainable demands. They should focus on solutions that acknowledge emotional demands in job design, workload planning, and performance metrics. Addressing compassion fatigue is a systemic challenge that requires support in providing sustained compassion by adequately managing its costs.

Policy Options and Recommendations

To align public service well-being with service excellence, this paper proposes three complementary policy interventions grounded in the most recent data-driven findings that compassion itself does not erode, but that the burden comes from sustaining compassion over time in one's professional role.

Recommendation 1: Classify Emotionally Demanding Roles as a Distinct Category of Work.

The federal government already classifies jobs based on factors like physical risk, security clearance, and technical complexity (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2022; 2023). The same approach should be applied to emotional exposure. The federal public service should consider:

- Developing an emotional demand classification for roles with regular exposure to distress, trauma, or intense interpersonal interactions.
- Integrating emotional exposure considerations into existing job descriptions, staffing models, and workforce planning.
- Using this classification to inform staffing ratios, task allocation, performance expectations, and recovery supports.

Classifying emotionally demanding roles as a distinct category of work acknowledges institutional responsibility for their inherent emotional strain. Recent work in psychology has found that further classifications can even be considered that divide the provision of emotional support into support for emotional trauma (e.g., mental health professionals) versus physical trauma (e.g., emergency responders) since they evoke different responses (Stellar et al., 2020). By planning for emotional demands, the public service can deploy staff more effectively, reduce burnout-related absences, and prevent costly turnover in critical public service jobs.

Recommendation 2: Embed Recovery-Focused Work Structures.

Research shows that sustainable performance depends less on resilience and more on the ability to recover (West et al., 2020). Accordingly, policy should move away from individual coping strategies to focus on how work is structured. For example, the United Kingdom's

National Health Service has implemented structured recovery practices, such as task rotation and protected downtime, to reduce stress-related attrition (Daniels et al., 2022).

For the federal public service, this could include:

- Recovery-protected scheduling: setting limits on consecutive high-exposure tasks and building in decompression periods.
- Role-rotation models: alternating emotionally intense duties with lower-exposure responsibilities.
- Managerial guidelines: treating recovery time as a core part of productivity.
- Targeted administrative offloading: reducing paperwork in roles where documentation adds to emotional strain.

Evidence from healthcare shows that administrative offloading, such as using artificially intelligent scribes to automatically generate notes and summaries, can reduce documentation time by up to 50 per cent, improve throughput, and maintain service quality without hurting client satisfaction (Ontario Medical Association, 2021). By reducing unnecessary administrative burden, recovery-focused work structures can lower absenteeism, stabilise output, and maintain service quality under fiscal restraint.

Recommendation 3: Integrate Compassion Burden into Performance Metrics.

Currently, service excellence frameworks prioritise speed, efficiency, and output volume. When metrics reward only throughput, they overlook the unsustainable human conditions behind service delivery that push employees to work harder and faster.

The government should consider:

- Expanding service quality indicators to include interaction quality, consistency, and long-term sustainability.
- Incorporating employee-reported coping capacity and recovery into organisational assessments alongside existing engagement and satisfaction metrics.
- Using these indicators to anticipate strain and adjust resources proactively.

If strain is detected early, preventative adjustments can be made that are far cheaper and sustainable than crisis interventions or replacing staff.

These recommendations do not require the development of new programs, funding, or administrative structures. They build on approaches already used by the federal public service, including job classification, occupational health and safety standards, workforce planning processes, and performance metrics. Therefore, these recommendations are well-suited for phased implementation and pilot programs.

Table 1 synthesises the above recommendations within a framework connecting challenges of compassion fatigue with common misdiagnoses, where responses often miss the mark, and recommended system-level policy solutions to address them.

Table 1

Reframing compassion fatigue: From observed problems to system-level policy solutions

Observed problem	Misdiagnosis	Misaligned response	System-level policy solutions
Accumulating emotional strain without formal recognition	Emotional labour is a personal trait, not a job demand	Emotional demands are invisible in job design	Formally recognise emotionally demanding roles within classification and workforce planning Reduce attrition through role classification and recovery-protected work structures
High turnover	Workers lack resilience	Recruitment and replacement after attrition	Redesign work to protect recovery, manage exposure, and sustain performance
Rising burnout, stress, and absenteeism	Compassion is depleted over time	Individual-focused solutions: resilience training, self-care, wellness programs	Align workloads and performance metrics with human capacity
Declining service consistency despite committed staff	Employees care less or are disengaged	Increased monitoring, productivity pressure	

Analysis and Conclusion

These policy options share a simple premise: declining compassion is not the problem. The real challenge is that the federal public service expects sustained compassion without creating the conditions that make caring work sustainable. By reframing the issue this way, policy can focus on evidence-based changes in recovery, workload design, and effectiveness (Ontario Medical Association, 2021). This approach is practical as it employs tools leaders are already familiar with. During this time of fiscal restraint and downsizing, service excellence cannot be achieved through marginal efficiency gains or by relying on wellness programs alone. It requires institutional designs that respect the psychological realities of emotionally demanding work.

When we define compassion fatigue as a decline in caring, policy options are limited. But when we understand it as the absence of recovery or support, it points to practical, systemic solutions. By recognising emotionally demanding roles, protecting recovery time, and integrating compassion burden into performance metrics, the federal public service can strengthen workforce sustainability while improving the quality and consistency of services Canadians depend on. In doing so, Canada can secure a public service that delivers excellence while safeguarding the capacity and resilience of the people who make it possible.

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