



# **USW Local 1998 Staff-Appointed Unit Alternative Work Arrangements FAQ**

This FAQ is intended to address the ongoing situation regarding alternative work arrangements (AWAs) at the University of Toronto following President Woodin’s communication on October 3, 2025 entitled, [“Strengthening administrative staff presence across our campuses.”](#)

The collective agreement text dealing with alternative work arrangements is found in Article 24:05. The collective agreement is available on the Local 1998 website. A condensed, plain-language explanation of Article 24:05 is available starting on pg. 4 of our [Staff-Appointed contract FAQ](#). The FAQ document is also available on the Local 1998 website.

## **Does the President’s message mean everyone will have to come back to 100% onsite work?**

The Union takes the position that President Woodin’s October 3, 2025 communication, and follow-up messages that may have come from division heads, do not mandate a return to a five-day in-person schedule across the University, and do not invalidate the language regarding alternative work arrangements (AWAs) that is in Article 24:05 of our collective agreement.

## **Can the University change or end my current alternative work arrangement?**

The AWA language in our collective agreement says that if the University alters or ends an existing AWA arrangement, it is required to provide at least six weeks' notice to the individual (except in emergencies, unforeseen circumstances, and situations beyond the University's control). This means the University can end an existing AWA early, if they provide enough notice.

## **How does the University determine whether my alternative work arrangement request is approved?**

The collective agreement language says that management's AWA decisions must be based on four factors:

1. Departmental operational efficiency,
2. Service effectiveness,
3. The University's AWA Guidelines, and

#### 4. The individual duties, tasks and overall functions of the work

Management must respond to an AWA request within 15 working days. If your manager has not responded to your AWA request within 15 working days, we strongly encourage you to [contact a Steward or Grievance Officer](#) for your area right away.

It's important to remember that if your manager alters your AWA request and approves it with alterations, or if they deny your AWA request entirely, they must respond to you in writing with a written rationale. These rationales cannot be generic or vague. If your manager alters or denies your AWA and provides you with a generic or vague rationale, we strongly encourage you to [contact a Steward or Grievance Officer](#) for your area right away as that would violate the collective agreement and verbal agreements made at the bargaining table about these responses.

The University has further information and forms regarding AWAs on the [HR Service Centre](#). It's important for members to have their own copy of their AWA request form. It's not clear to the Union who receives a copy once it's submitted within the HR Service centre system, so we recommend making a PDF, hard copy, or screenshot before submitting the AWA request form so that you have a record of your request.

### When can I submit a new alternative work arrangement request?

Members always have the right to submit an AWA request—at any time. Even if you currently have an active AWA, you have the right to submit a new request.

### What should I put in my alternative work arrangement request?

We strongly recommend that members request the AWA that they want—whether that's a certain number of remote workdays, a certain length of time the AWA would be in effect, a specific altered schedule, etc. Of course, we encourage members to consider what makes reasonable sense given their duties and the operational needs of their department. That way, even if management alters the AWA request and approves an altered version, or if they deny it, there is a record of what the member wanted their AWA to be. Additionally, if someone submits an AWA request that simply says what management wants—and it therefore gets approved—then it's significantly more challenging to file a viable grievance, because the member's AWA request wasn't actually altered or denied.

Also, this forces management to provide a rationale for their decision, should they alter or deny an AWA request. If your manager fails to provide a rationale or provides one that is too generic or vague (e.g., “for operational reasons”), we strongly encourage you to [contact a Steward or Grievance Officer](#) for your area right away as that would violate the collective agreement and verbal agreements made at the bargaining table about these responses.

If your request is denied or altered and approved, we strongly encourage you to get the rationale for the decision from your manager and then [contact a Steward or Grievance Officer](#) for your area right away to discuss your options, including potentially [filing a grievance](#).



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If your desired AWA request is denied but you are aware that your manager might be more likely approve a different AWA, we would encourage you to submit a new AWA request with the following language:

Because my original AWA request sent on [submission date] was denied on [decision date], on a without precedent or prejudice basis I propose the following AWA...

### What should I do if my manager wants me to submit a new alternative work arrangement request before they've responded to one I've already submitted?

If you have submitted an AWA request and your manager directs you to submit a new AWA request before they've issued a formal response, our advice is to politely remind your manager that you have an outstanding AWA request and are awaiting their response to that request before submitting a new one.

Management must respond to an AWA request within 15 working days. If your manager has not responded to your AWA request within 15 working days, we strongly encourage you to [contact a Steward or Grievance Officer](#) for your area right away.

It's important to remember that if your manager alters your AWA request and approves it with alterations, or if they deny your AWA request entirely, they must respond to you in writing with a rationale. These rationales cannot be generic or vague. If your manager alters or denies your AWA and provides you with a generic or vague rationale, we strongly encourage you to [contact a Steward or Grievance Officer](#) for your area right away as that would violate the Collective Agreement and verbal agreements made at the bargaining table about these responses.

A manager's rationale may be helpful should you wish to [grieve an AWA decision](#). If management directs you to submit a new AWA request based on what they want to approve before responding to a request you've already sent, it may be a way to try and avoid providing you this rationale.

### What if I need an alternative work arrangement because of medical, religious, and/or family-care reasons?

Any changes to work location, schedule, hours of work, duties, etc. that relates to a human rights ground, such as disability, creed, or family status, must be handled as an accommodation, not as an alternative work arrangement. Alternative work arrangements are determined based on [the four factors noted in the collective agreement](#).

While some members' AWAs have had positive impact on their medical, religious, and/or family needs, those are not reasons under which an AWA request can be considered. Employers have a legal obligation to reasonably accommodate employees for human rights-related concerns and there are separate processes and requirements for those that lie outside of the AWA process.

Depending on the accommodation, members will reach out to different offices:

- For **family-related accommodations**, reach out to the [Family Care Office](#)
- For **religious accommodations**, reach out to the [Anti-Racism and Cultural Diversity Office](#)
- For **medical accommodations**, reach out to [Health and Well-Being](#)

Additionally, we encourage you to [contact a Steward or Grievance Officer](#) for your area to obtain assistance and support through the accommodation process.

### What about filing a grievance?

The Local has several individual AWA grievances from previous years which have been advanced to arbitration. The legal department of the USW Canadian National Office is taking the lead on these and we are working on getting dates for arbitration. Although they are individual grievances, the outcome of these grievances could set a precedent for subsequent grievances.

We have filed multiple policy and individual grievances since President Woodin's communication on October 3, 2025 and we are continuing to file more as we learn from members about how President Woodin's new direction for AWAs is impacting their department and themselves.

In general, grievances dealing with AWAs are very challenging due to how extensively labour laws favour the employer's ability to determine where and how work is performed. One way in which we might gain traction in a grievance is if we can show a clear pattern of discrimination. A possible example of discrimination is if all the men in a department are able to get an AWA, but members of other genders are consistently refused, or if there is discrimination based on another protected human rights category. Another way a grievance can be viable is if the decision to deny an AWA request meets the legal threshold for being considered arbitrary. An example of an arbitrary denial of an AWA request is if you and your co-worker both do the exact same job, submit similar AWAs and, with all other things being equal, your manager approves their AWA and denies yours. In that kind of situation, a grievance can be viable, although success is never guaranteed. Additionally, the rationale management provides for denying or altering an AWA can be very helpful in framing a grievance argument, so it's important for members to ensure they get a specific rationale if their AWA request is altered or denied, and not just a generic, vague response.

While every department's and individual's circumstances will be different, in general our position is that a blanket requirement for a certain number of in-person days that applies to all individuals in a department indicates that the University has not taken into consideration the collective agreement requirement that they consider the individual duties, tasks and overall functions of someone's work when they respond to an AWA request. This could be the basis for an individual and/or group grievance. We have already filed multiple policy grievances on these grounds based on AWA decisions we've seen in some departments since President Woodin's communication. We will continue to file policy grievances as members alert us to examples of managers making AWA request decisions that violate the collective agreement.



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While there have been some recent AWA-related arbitration decisions in favour of unions, the number is small and our Local, with the support of the Union’s legal department, is still analyzing whether they would be helpful to us and apply to the circumstances at the University.

If an AWA grievance were to be heard by a labour arbitrator, they would primarily look at whether the University considered [the four factors noted in the collective agreement](#). If it is determined that the University did consider the four factors, then the arbitrator would likely find that the University had not violated the collective agreement, regardless of whether their decision was a good one. This also means that when the University consider whether to approve an AWA request, they have no legal obligation to consider other factors, such as someone’s commute time. Employers have the legal right to make poor decisions—such as ones that negatively impact employee morale, lead to high turnover, cause increased stress leading to more illness and health-related absence, etc.—so long as they aren’t in violation of collective agreement language, the *Employment Standards Act*, the *Human Rights Code*, or any other laws.

**Regardless of the challenges AWA grievances may face, it’s still helpful for members and the Union to file them. On an individual basis, a member may still not end up getting exactly what they want, and the grievance process is not a fast process even when it’s successful, but most grievances filed become an additional piece of data the Union can show the University (including at the bargaining table) to point out that this new AWA direction is a problem, that members care about it deeply, and it needs to be fixed.**

### **What’s happening now?**

Since President Woodin’s communication on October 3, 2025 regarding alternative work arrangements (AWAs), the Local has been working to support the high number of members writing in with questions and concerns regarding existing and future AWAs. Between the two AWA town halls, many e-mails, and numerous meetings with members, your Stewards and Grievance Officers, as well as your elected leadership, have been learning more about how these changes are being interpreted and implemented by managers across our diverse workplaces. Additionally, the Local’s AWA fightback steering committee has been meeting to discuss and implement strategy, and our Staff Representative has been consulting with the USW Canadian National Office’s legal team to learn more about how we can best push back against the University and support the membership. The Local’s leadership has met with the University’s Labour Relations Department to advocate on behalf of members who have been negatively impacted by the University’s changes to the AWA program. In the long run, improving conditions around AWAs requires bargaining improvements to the language in our collective agreement. Our current Staff-Appointed collective agreement expires on June 30, 2026, but bargaining preparation has already begun. Dealing with the AWA program collective bargaining is going to be tough, so strong membership solidarity will be



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essential. Let's work together to show the University that this is a serious and important issue for members:

- Support your elected University of Toronto Staff-Appointed Unit Negotiating Committee with these [valuable tools](#)
- [Contact a Steward or Grievance Officer](#) for your area with information on how your department is implementing any changes in AWA practices
- Fill out the AWA survey and the [bargaining survey](#).
- Sign up for the [Communication Action Team \(CAT\)](#) and help engage fellow members
- Encourage your fellow members in your department to engage and show their solidarity with our union.