

CMHA BC workers: Why we unionized

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In May 2019, 31 social program staff at CMHA BC joined HSA. CMHA employees share why they came together and unionized, and what helped them persevere through a sometimes challenging unionization drive.

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) prides itself on being one of Canada's oldest continuing charities in Canada, and a leader in the area of mental health.

But in the months leading up to the BC Division's annual high profile conference on workplace mental health in spring 2018, many of us were considering our own workplace experiences, and conversations started to take place about workplace mental health at CMHA BC. We started to hear all-too-familiar stories from our colleagues of untenable working conditions that were making it difficult to work.

Management was making decisions, in the name of organizational best interests, that significantly impacted staff and our work without any avenues for consultation, feedback, or recourse. Staff increasingly felt there was a lack of consistency and accountability from management.

Reports of experiences of bullying, discrimination, and harassment were dismissed or minimized. Wages were below standard for the training and qualifications required to perform this important work. Turnover and dissatisfaction were higher than ever before, and morale was at its lowest. Change was needed.

To improve working conditions in a lasting, systemic way, staff at CMHA BC decided to unionize.

After recognizing the commonalities in our experiences and desire for change, we challenged management to walk the walk. Instead of our only options being either to leave or stay in a toxic environment, a union presented a third option to improve things - both for staff and for management. Perhaps most importantly, we knew that having a union in place would help ensure fair, transparent, and consistent workplace policies and procedures.

Though exhilarating and empowering at times, it was an uphill battle. After the application to unionize was submitted to the Labour Relations Board in May 2018, and staff voted on whether to join the Health Sciences Association (HSA), management efforts to resist unionization continued through legal avenues.

CMHA BC's legal representative, the Health Employers' Association of BC (HEABC), engaged in a process that resulted in a delay of almost a year before the vote was counted. We felt the employer's legal objections demonstrated they undervalued our work and skills, so it was validating to receive a decision from the Labour Board that supported us and our work.

Once all the legal arguments had been made and decided on, the votes were finally counted: 100 per cent of staff had voted in favour of joining HSA and bringing a union to CMHA BC!

Everyone involved sacrificed something to make CMHA BC a better workplace, whether it was personal time, health, relationships, or sleep, as we met outside work hours on evenings and weekends to strategize. But we are in a better place because of it, and hope our experience will help shine a light for other workplaces weighing their options.

While every union drive experience is different, one of the most important pieces to keep front and center is to remain soft on the people and hard on the issues. As there will likely be pushback from management, remember to act with integrity and in solidarity, and stay focused on the end goal.

It is very possible you will receive more support than you expect if you are persistent in reaching out and patient with change. Through this process deep and lasting friendships were forged, and like us, you may well find new meaning and appreciation for both the work and workplace.

During trying times we leaned on a motto from our workplace: "You're stronger than you think." And we are stronger than ever before. We are committed to advocating for a fair, just, respectful, and kind working environment, with clear, fair, transparent policies and procedures.

We believe all employees are entitled to a psychologically safe and healthy workplace that they can look forward to coming to every day - a place where employees are able to do jobs they are passionate about and can hold their heads high.

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