



# How unionizing transformed our workplace

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In February and July of 2020, the Victoria branch staff of the Canadian Mental Health Association joined HSA and entered the Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association (HSPBA) and the Community Bargaining Association (CBA) —a decision that has given me the opportunity to be a part of incredible changes in our office over the past year.

As we know, the world has entered a period of uncertainty, and my coworkers and I appreciate the security and collective strength that comes with joining a union. Along with the empowerment and security, we are grateful for the opportunity to continue growing in our careers and to better serve our clients, achieving this by becoming more connected to a broad network of support systems within the union.

Our office expanded in Victoria in the spring of last year after the major pieces of a key program had been developed (the Confident Parents: Thriving Kids - Anxiety Program). This expansion brought roughly 20 new staff members to the branch and it wasn't very long before we became a very close team.

Our new program had similar components to the Confident Parents Thriving Kids: Behaviour Program in Vancouver, so it wasn't very long until we had heard of their efforts in organizing. Reaching out and connecting with staff in Vancouver was integral to seeing what was possible for our office as well, and during this period we were inspired to begin organizing ourselves.

Following the Vancouver office drive from the sidelines, so to speak, and witnessing them unionize successfully brought us a huge amount of joy and excitement for what they had done together. Their organizing process laid down a lot of the groundwork for us and their success made us feel more connected to the entire BC division of CMHA.

Organizing for us in Victoria started up in the summer of 2019 with a small group of us who worked together under the guidance and support of HSA staff person Nadia Santoro—our union organizer. The process was a

practice in collective effort and an example of our new team coming together for a common goal and purpose. Fortunately for us, it was smooth and we secured a vote and a decisive victory to join the union!

We have noticed tangible changes at the Victoria branch since unionizing. This includes improved monetary provisions and job security for staff. While working in the often-undervalued field of mental health in the midst of a pandemic, wage, job, and retirement security are becoming higher and higher priorities for workers.

We have gained a noticeable sense of security through wage increases and enrollment in the extended health and benefits package and Municipal Pension Plan. Our office consists of a wide array of workers, some whom have just begun their careers, and others who bring years of work experience into the field. Regardless of where we are in our careers, these changes ensure that we as workers are set up for future security.

Along with these changes, there have been positive shifts regarding our connection to resources and support networks, which will have long-lasting effects on our organization, our clients, and the broader community. Learning more about these member supports has been a priority for our newly-formed steward team - myself (chief steward), alongside Angela Miranda (assistant chief steward) and Elise Cassidy (OH&S steward).

We are embracing our new roles and discovering some of the many ways that we can support our fellow co-workers. I'm particularly excited to learn more about the professional development opportunities and scholarship and bursaries available to help continue our educational journeys.

I think that these resources will serve the interests of my coworkers while creating a stronger program with highly-skilled workers that will ultimately better support our clients and serve our communities. Along with this, we are excited to continue building upon our foundation of respectful policies. We aim to use the resources available to us to better educate ourselves about our own rights and responsibilities, and integrate campaigns to further socially progressive goals.

Ultimately, I am very happy that we were able to come together early on as a group. This process has shown me what is achievable and how coming together in a union can drastically influence positive change within an organization. I am excited to see where this decision takes us and how we can continue to work together.

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