

BULLETIN

## Workload survey proves members are overworked

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by DAN KEETON

HSA members at Vernon Jubilee hospital knew they were being seriously overworked. Now, after initiating a survey of members at the facility, they have proof.

The chapter at the Okanagan hospital is also a bit of a Cinderella story. It now has several active stewards and regular union-management meetings to discuss workload and other issues, thanks to a rigorous application of what is called the organizing model of trade unionism.

Their efforts have also paid off with the addition of several desperately needed staff in the hospital's imaging department, said Chief Steward Chris Marioni.

For much of the 90s, Vernon Jubilee had been experiencing a low level of union participation. Marioni said the training and resources offered through the organizing model has helped turn this around. "There was only one steward here. His job frequently kept him too busy to attend to HSA matters. At my orientation, there was no [union presence] there," he related.

"I became a steward partially just to learn what my rights were," said Marioni. "I started to learn there were others with similar problems."

He and another steward were kept busy through negotiations for the previous collective agreement in 1998, organizing job action. "That's the time members really care about the union." Once the contract was settled, Marioni figured it was time to make a pitch to the members.

"I asked for one person from each department to become a steward. I promised everyone I'd make it fun, with dinner meetings right after work." He pointed out that the more stewards there were, the easier the task would be for each union activist.

Twelve people subsequently became stewards, Marioni said. Their enthusiasm continues today.

One of these new stewards was Darlene Hraynyk, the steward most responsible for carrying out the workplace survey last year.

"The idea was to educate staff about their rights," Hraynyk said. The stewards found that members were sometimes uncertain about their contract rights — for example, most believed management when told they would have to work more than 15 minutes of overtime to be eligible for overtime pay.

Fifty-three per cent of the members returned completed surveys, which Hraynyk said meant "we were doing pretty well since the union was not very visible before."

Some 79 per cent of the survey's respondents answered "yes" to a question asking if they had a workload

problem, saying they had been handed increasing amounts of work per shift during the past four years. Many affirmed they had worked through their breaks and put in unpaid overtime.

Almost 77 per cent acknowledged they had difficulty completing work if they followed the proper protocols. More than 95 per cent stated they worried about deteriorating professional standards.

Hraynyk noted that 54.7 per cent reported their departments were lacking updated protocols. "I find that personally pretty alarming," she commented.

Most respondents said they'd never filed a grievance around workload issues. "There are a lot more grievances being filed now. That means a lot more work for us, but people are now demanding their rights," said Hraynyk.

Lis Pedersen, the HSA Labour Relations Officer responsible for Vernon Jubilee, said the turnaround from an almost zero union presence and involvement to today's well-organized, grassroots activism is nothing short of amazing.

"One of the key challenges they faced was being recognized as legitimate union representatives by management," she said. "But they've been a very hardworking group, and they've made some big changes."

Marioni discovered the organizing model through attending an HSA educational workshop with other Vernon Jubilee stewards. "I decided, that's for me," he recalls.

HSA Education Officer Leila Lolua described the organizing model of unionism as "getting members involved in working on their own issues, locally."

"We knew there were significant issues at Vernon Jubilee, but no one was bringing them forward before," Lolua recalls. "But we knew things were really happening when we got five stewards at one workshop. They really wanted help to get their chapter going."

They were enthusiastic participants, Lolua related. "They took pictures of all the stewards to post on the HSA bulletin board so that members would know who their stewards were."

Since the organizing model was adopted, Vernon Jubilee chapter meetings have been well-attended, Marioni said. That's because members see the union as an extension of themselves, and HSA's victories are their victories.

Marioni said the increased participation means all members "not just the stewards" must work together to achieve common goals for the workplace. "We made it clear that the union was not there to take them by the hand and do it for them, but that we were here to support them."

There are plenty of further issues at the hospital to tackle, Marioni said. "The lab has a big workload issue." He also sees an opportunity in the current task of setting essential service levels in the event of job action. "I can see ideas coming out of this. I'd like to see some information sessions called after the collective agreement is settled."

The HSA members at Vernon Jubilee are holding tight to their unity as well, Marioni said. "We don't lose sight of the notion that we have to help each other."

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