

BULLETIN

Members win fight to keep services for youth at risk

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When the Salvation Army decided to close Wiseman House last fall, HSA members acted quickly to secure assurances that the program would stay open until the spring. Labour Relations Officer Josef Rieder said this allowed the program to continue for a while, and also allowed our members to explore their options where appropriate.

"[Chief Steward] Alex Scott, along with representatives from HSA and the Salvation Army, met with the Ministry for Children and Families to discuss the future of the service contract and the fact that there was a necessary service being provided to the community," Rieder said.

"Alex was a great advocate for all the staff. It was her extensive knowledge of the needs of at-risk youth ... in relation to the resources available" that enabled her to provide the Ministry with the framework that they would readily accept for the continuation of youth care services."

Rieder noted that the successful transfer of service for Wiseman House members was a real team effort. "[Negotiator] Julio Trujillo and [Senior Labour Relations Officer] Dave Martin played key roles," he explained.

Alex Scott said that although she and her coworkers were concerned about losing their jobs, they were much more concerned about the at-risk youths they cared for through the Wiseman House residential care program. "I challenged the idea of closing the House," Scott said. "What about the kids? Where are they going to go? What services are they going to have if this happens?"

The parties finally agreed that the Salvation Army would maintain a new community-based youth day program from the Wiseman House premises. "Unfortunately, this switch from residential care to a day program meant the loss of four jobs ... the night supervisors, the cook, and one other staff member who didn't have the qualifications or experience required for this kind of work," Scott said. "However, as Community Youth Justice Services, we were able to continue to provide youth services. And we managed to keep seven jobs."

HSA's role in ensuring members had a voice in any transition was key. "From the beginning, the union insisted that the workers have a seat at any discussions about a change in service," Dave Martin said. "Most groups of non-union employees would likely not have had any say at all. But we made sure that our members at Wiseman House had strong advocacy."

"We also made sure that the employer paid for training where upgrading was required. This ensured a smooth transition for our members in moving from a residential program to a community-based program," he said. "In further honing their skills at specially-designed programs at the Justice Institute and Malaspina College, these members were able to step into their new roles with confidence.

"Providing youth services is where these members excel. The unions job is to help them continue providing outstanding service by securing a stable environment," he added.

But the challenge didnt end there. In a sudden change of heart, the Salvation Army decided they no longer wanted to keep this new youth day program, either ... even after the employees had undergone specialized training, and helped renovate Wiseman House from a residential to a community-outreach facility. They told employees to clear out with three days notice.

Alex Scott continued to pursue a resolution, which resulted in the day program being taken up by the John Howard Society of North Island. "John Howard has most of the youth justice contracts on the island," Scott said.

Scott says that although they have been through a difficult period, she and her coworkers are enthusiastic about their new program. "Its an interesting place to be," she said. "Wiseman House was a regional facility for young offenders from all over the island. When it closed, all those areas still wanted a program they could continue to utilize.

"This new program now covers the area from Duncan all the way to Campbell River; our workers travel to different communities and work with offenders who have been referred by probation officers."

Scott says that the new service involves working with youth who are at risk. "These are youth who come out of jail and need to be reintegrated into the community, and have issues that need to be worked out. Or they could be going into foster care, or independent living," she said. "We do one-on-one counselling to deal with issues that got them into the justice system in the first place. The new day program provides services to youth who are much more at risk and needy than the former Wiseman House residential program."

Scott has high praise for her colleagues. "We have a family support worker, a drug and alcohol worker, family and youth counsellors and an activity coordinator. Theyre really caring people who have managed to hang together through lots of ups and downs," she said. "Its their commitment to providing services for youth that we know they need, and being determined to be sure were there to do it, that helped us keep youth care services on the island."

"I dont think any of this could have taken place if we had any union other than HSA," she added. "Its the people, its the size of the organization, and the philosophy. We were very fortunate."

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