

## Creative energy for a better workplace

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Most stewards agree: the work as a union rep is rewarding, but the workload can be intense. That was the answer stewards gave HSA in a 1994 survey designed to assess the needs of HSA activists.

As a result, the union made a decision later that year to implement the Organizing Model at three facilities.

#### ***Current Organizing Model facilities***

- Burnaby Hospital
- Chilliwack Hospital
- Kelowna General Hospital
- Lions Gate Hospital
- Prince George Hospital
- St. Pauls Hospital
- Surrey Memorial Hospital
- Vancouver Hospital
- Vernon Jubilee Hospital

For more about the Organizing Model, see "[Across the Province.](#)"

#### **What is the Organizing Model?**

The Organizing Model of Unionism emerged in 1988 from an American Federation of Labour conference that brought together union leaders and activists to develop new strategies for mobilizing union members throughout the labour movement.

The Organizing Model seeks to revitalize local unions and to work with local activists in developing new tools to deal with workplace problems. The AFL-CIO sought to differentiate between something they called the "Servicing Model" of unionism and the newly emerging "Organizing Model" of unionism.

The "Servicing Model" involves unions "trying to help people by solving problems for them," as opposed to the "Organizing Model," which works to involve members in developing and implementing solutions.

To Maryann Abbs, HSA's Education Officer, the Organizing Model is a way of going back to the roots of the union movement. "Unions are about people gaining power within their workplaces and their communities," she said. "The Organizing Model helps us focus on developing people's power and creativity in the workplace, by utilizing a wide range of strategies in dealing with various problems they might be facing.

"*Organizing Model* might be a confusing name ... otherways to describe it might be Participatory Unionism, or the Culture of Solidarity. One of the goals is to have a workplace where if something unfair is happening, people recognize that it's unfair, and are able to address it right away."

For example, Abbs described a hypothetical situation where a co-worker is being harassed by a manager or a doctor. "In a good work environment, this person's colleagues would be able to recognize the harassing behaviour, and also know how to step in to stop it ... which doesn't necessarily have to involve the traditional grievance process."

Why do we need it?

When sonographer Chris Marioni started work at Vernon Jubilee Hospital five years ago, he was barely aware of any union participation among his 174 fellow HSA members.

"It seemed no one understood their rights under the collective agreement. Management was getting away with a lot, and no one was fighting," he said. "I couldn't even get a copy of the contract at my orientation."

Marioni soon found that the chapter's Chief Steward, Randy Niro, was struggling to juggle members' various issues along with a job in extended care that often took him outside the workplace. "He was doing what he could, but this is a large facility. It's too much work for one person."

When it became clear that the situation wasn't getting better, Marioni immediately offered to help. "I asked Randy if I could become a steward and joined up right away," he said. "I did my training, learning about how the contract worked, and from there I started learning to advocate for others."

However, he could see that this still wasn't enough. "We were still realizing that two stewards weren't enough. I started to wonder where this was going to go, and how much longer I could carry on like this ... more and more people were recognizing me as a steward, and approaching me with their issues. I guess because my work is on-site, I was more visible in the cafeteria and other places around the hospital."

Randy Niro agrees that widening the focus has re-energized the HSA membership at Vernon Jubilee Hospital. "Before, all we were able to do was put out fires. We weren't able to do anything proactive to advocate for the union. Now, with regular labour / management meetings, a lot of the problems are being addressed before they start, and more people understand what the unions about," he said.

"People are realizing that you're not a bad employee if you file a grievance; you're just asking for what is given in the contract. People are understanding now that sometimes you have to file a grievance to let the employer know what our rights are."

How do we get started?

While he was struggling with his steward workload, Marioni learned about the *Organizing Model* at a chapter meeting with Region 8 Director Maureen Ross and Labour Relations Officer Lis Pedersen.

"I remembered the idea being presented at Steward Training I, but I now wanted to know more about it," he said. "They explained what it was, and that there was a budget for the union to help us get it organized."

The two stewards immediately applied to have Vernon considered as a potential "*Organizing Model*" facility, and were told they had been brought into the program just as job action heated up last winter.

Although the winters repeated calls for job action ... first for the nurses, then for paramedical professionals ... made for a very busy time for Niro and Marioni, it provided ideal opportunities to talk to members about their ideas for expanding union representation for the membership at Vernon.

"It was a great time for us to meet everybody, and get people involved," Marioni said. "We went around describing the Organizing Model concept, telling people we needed more representation for this to work, and asking them if they'd be willing to help out. Since people had been attending strike votes and were feeling proactive, we had a great response."

How does it work?

As job action wound down, Leila Lolua and Lis Pedersen from the union office met with interested members to provide initial support and information for the expanding steward team. "We asked for one person from every department. I told people about how this benefits workers, and asked them for their ideas about how we could make this fun," Marioni said.

"Eventually, people started getting psyched up about it."

Twelve stewards came forward at the next election, who then worked together on developing an interlocking, truly supportive steward network, as well as new, creative ways to deal with workplace issues.

"We've taken one steward from each department and asked them to be in charge of an area outside their department," Marioni said. "That worked really well."

Marioni says if a member is not familiar with the steward for their department, the contact steward helps the member get in touch, sometimes with the help of a large photo on the union bulletin board.

"For example, the steward who works in the lab would handle issues that arise in medical imaging. They can also be a contact and resource for the steward who is dealing with issues in the lab. This means that if there's a grievance, there's one steward from outside the department handling it, and that steward also has someone to back them up who is familiar with the issues."

The steward team at Vernon also holds a dinner meeting once a month, shortly before each scheduled labour / management meeting. In addition, Marioni said this team approach means members at Vernon can feel secure knowing that there are enough representatives so that stewards can be present at all important meetings, and be available to take part in various committees.

Does it make a difference?

Marioni has nothing but praise for his fellow stewards, and credits the Organizing Model with allowing him to continue on as steward. "I don't think I could have kept on being steward without this support," he said. "I couldn't have done it. The Organizing Model has been of tremendous value."

Medical Technologist Neil Lalach says he got involved because of the renewed energy at Vernon Jubilee. "Without the Organizing Model, I was in no position to become a steward," he said. "I didn't feel vulnerable any more, and it was a opportunity to step forward and speak up. I wouldn't have done that if there weren't so much emphasis on trying to get lots of people involved, and spread out the work. It's easier than we think. All it takes is a little time and effort."

Lalach is clear-sighted about the team's objectives. "We want to do what's fair, and just follow the collective

agreement. When you've got a good group like we've got, it works really well. It's rewarding ... especially when you can see that it's not impossible."

Brenda Richards, a Health Records Administrator, agrees. "From my perspective, being a union representative is helping to ensure that the process is followed. It's not an antagonistic role; I feel that it's a role in which I can help people in following the rules and processes as laid out in the collective agreement."

Richards was previously involved as a steward, but decided to get back involved at the first Organizing Model meeting. And she can see the difference. "Before, we spent a lot of time calling HSA," she said. "Now we work internally and try to solve problems here first with the information we have ... with the support of the union office, rather than feeling like we need to call for everything."

"I think it's really important for people to see things in a problem-solving method. It's important that we each know the collective agreement, and support each other in that knowledge."

Social Worker Murray Shaw is another experienced steward who has renewed his involvement in the union. Shaw has a broad, insightful view of what the Organizing Model means, both to members at his facility, and to the labour movement as a whole.

Shaw was the Chief Steward for 10 years before stepping down in 1989 to take on more clinical responsibilities at the hospital. It is clear he has given much thought to the difference he is seeing now at his facility, and is well aware of the wider issues.

"There are two things going on right now that could have some negative impact on our members: regionalization and program management. Regionalization has caused a great deal of alienation, because our members now feel they always have to struggle to make sure their voices are heard at higher management levels," he said.

"The other issue is program management. The way it's being brought into Vernon, departments are being dissipated and people are ending up as members of functional units, which means individual disciplines are losing their voice," he said. "Without departments, people could begin to lose their professional identity, especially when they're new grads. This is a big threat to health care, and contributes to poor morale."

"At Vernon, we have a large core of very dedicated, professional workers who've been here a long time. They're good at what they do, and they're dedicated to providing the best possible care. *Altruism* isn't too strong a word to describe their dedication. Before the Organizing Model, these people were feeling pretty alienated ... they've been feeling unheard, and they've had to be dealing with cutback for a long time. It's not surprising that they were feeling discouraged."

Shaw says the Organizing Model's team approach is "the way to go." "This is what union work *should* be," he said. "Something has shifted. HSA people are beginning to talk to each other about our work and what we do."

"I really like the feel of the people who are involved with the Organizing Model," he said. "They know what's going on. They have pride in that. It's especially evident that this core group of stewards is focused, and clear. They realize that they are speaking for fellow workers ... fellow professional workers."

Is it effective?

Just one year after implementing the Organizing Model at Vernon Jubilee Hospital, members can see and feel

the difference in their workplace. Chief Steward Chris Marioni is very excited about the new positive energy at the hospital ... and his enthusiasm is catching. "Members in the hospital definitely feel more empowered," he said. "Union morale has increased dramatically. People feel encouraged to take a stand when they see problems, and they know that there's someone to advocate for them if they need it.

"People are realizing that we're here. They're not rolling over and giving in anymore. They don't have to."

Marioni says the regular labour / management meetings have been a great help. "The employer now knows that if there's a problem, it's not just going to go away. We're not aggressive. That's not the point. We just sit down with them and discuss issues about the collective agreement, which is a document both parties have agreed to.

"I think it's working really well."

*For more information about the Organizing Model, please contact Education Officer Maryann Abbs at the HSA Office.*

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