

BULLETIN

Safety Stewards: working to prevent workplace injuries

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HSA currently enjoys the privilege of having over 200 members who volunteer to represent their fellow members by advocating for a safe and healthy workplace.

At the same time, however, we also have over 20 facilities that do not currently have safety stewards. This role is critical, and volunteers are needed.

With the recent introduction of new health and safety regulations (April 1998) and proclamation of new health and safety legislation (October 1999), HSA members have new rights and new safety standards at their disposal to protect them from illness or injury in their workplaces.

However, these new rights and standards must be implemented by the employer and must be enforced - both by the WCB and workers with the help of the Safety Steward.

The role of the Safety Steward is to act as a watchdog on non-compliance, and participate in the development of measures designed to enhance workplace health and safety.

The new legislation sets out that every employer with 20 or more employees (including management) must have a workplace committee and at least two worker chosen Safety Stewards.

Any workplace with 10 to 20 employees must have a worker safety representative (i.e. they participate in inspections and investigations and deal directly with the employer on health and safety matters as there is no safety committee at the worksite because of its smaller size).

This new requirement means that there must be Safety Stewards in workplaces that didn't previously have them.

In addition, the new legislation obliges the employer to give stewards one paid day of leave per year for the purposes of health and safety education. HSA supplements this with three days of education on health and safety issues for each steward.

Safety Stewards play a critically important role at the workplace. Members who have concerns about hazards at the workplace can take those concerns to the Safety Steward who will be sure that it is dealt with through the health and safety committee and/ or through the legislation and regulations.

Safety Stewards conduct worksite inspections, talking to workers and identifying hazards to the employer that require fixing. They engage in accident investigations when an accident takes place. And they participate in the development of and subsequent monitoring of employer initiatives aimed at reducing hazards in the workplace.

Finally, they act as liaison between the members at the worksite and the HSA head office on health and safety issues that require provincial attention.

Vivian Campsall, a safety steward at Fort St. John General Hospital, says being able to make a real difference to the work lives of her co-workers makes the job worthwhile. "I advocated for better ventilation in the lab because the air intake was at street level," she said. "In Fort St. John, people leave their cars running outside their intake in the winter, so this was a problem. I'm very health conscious. I didn't want people to be exposed to toxic fumes all day. And now we've got funding to fix all that, very shortly. I feel very good about it."

George Jolly, the safety steward for the Mount Pleasant unit of Greater Vancouver Mental Health Services, encourages fellow members to become involved. "I'm glad that I'm a safety steward. I've really enjoyed it, and if anyone else gets a chance to do it, they should do it," he said. "It opens your eyes and makes you aware of what's in the contract."

Jolly has high praise for the training HSA offers to prepare stewards for their various roles. "Take the safety course. I found that was very helpful, because it gives you a history of the WCB. A lot of times employers will give you the impression that they're doing us a favour by paying for WCB benefits, but that's because years ago we gave up the right to sue employers for workplace injuries," he said. "That gave me a different slant on the WCB, and that makes it much easier for me to tell people it's their right if they have an injury to be forceful in making sure they receive the service they need and deserve."

Jolly says violence in the workplace is a particularly big issue for workers at GVMHS. "For example, we had a clerical staff member who was hit by a crowbar," he said. "We get people who are traumatized and disturbed and angry. At Mount Pleasant, we have zero-tolerance for any kind of violence, whether it's verbal or physical threats. Our staff is too important."

A few facilities currently do not have designated Safety Stewards. If you work at one of these facilities and would like to be a Safety Steward, contact either your Chief Steward or Rachel Notley at the HSA office for more information.

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