

## Training, dedication to help union members

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by LYN BLENKINSOP

Over the last three years it has been my very great privilege to have received HSA scholarships to train as a Union Counsellor. This has been one of the most valuable and rewarding experiences of my twenty-one years as an HSA member.

The Union Counselling program is mainly taught at the CLC Winter School at Harrison Hot Springs, BC. It is sponsored by the Canadian Labour Congress and taught by the Labour Participation Department of the United Way of the Lower Mainland.

As of this year, there are three levels of training available. The first year is a basic course designed to introduce participants to union counselling and to foster a desire to continue on with the service and the training. By the end of the course, the students are equipped to refer union members to services and agencies in the community.

The second year is an advanced course to further develop skills and knowledge of community resources, to refine interview techniques and to explore program implementation issues.

New this year is the third level of training, called Critical Incident Stress Management. Participants, already trained as Union Counsellors, are taught awareness of Critical Incident Stress by senior trainers from lower mainland fire departments: how to recognize it, and how best to deal with those exposed to it.

There are a growing number of HSA members who have received the Union Counselling One and Two training, 15 at the basic level, three at the Advanced level, and there are currently two of us who have completed all three levels of the program.

The aim of the program is to take union members who self-identify as natural listeners and train them to assist other union members who are experiencing personal problems.

The mandate is four-fold:

1. To be available and reliable.
2. To listen.
3. To be non-judgmental.
4. To enable the member to help themselves.

Union Counsellors are trained in listening skills, assessment and evaluation techniques and, most importantly, referral. Union Counsellors do not offer advice nor do they attempt to solve the member's problem for them. They do encourage and assist that member to find the appropriate help. The Union Counsellor has to be very aware of the resources that their community has to offer in order to be able to effectively refer someone who has a problem.

Examples of the types of issues that Union Counsellors are called on to help with include drug and alcohol problems, abuse, financial difficulties, medical and dental assistance, critical incident stress management and many, many others.

Union Counsellors do not deal with collective agreement issues and local stewards are one of the resources to whom members are routinely referred. The Union Counselling program is not meant to replace the Employee and Family Assistance Program but works in conjunction with it, if it is an effective program. The Union Counsellor may also refer a member to EFAP consultants, if appropriate.

Employers tend to support Union Counselling programs as they see us dealing with "problematic" union members and saving them the time and expense of having to be involved in an often messy situation. The union, on the other hand, prefers to view Union Counselling as a way of extending the "union umbrella" to cover and assist our members, when they wish it, in their personal as well as their professional lives.

Many unions have contract and constitutional language which supports the official existence of Union Counsellors in the workplace, and which ensures that the Counsellor has both the time to give to the members and a private location in which to meet with them.

While we still don't have specific union counselling language in our newly ratified agreement, we do have improvements in our OH&S Article 38. This includes a provision for critical incident stress defusing for traumatized employees. In order for this defusing to be effective, it is essential that the CISM program is set up and run by union members. Management has a major role to play in providing the necessary funding, but the day-to-day activities and functions of the team have been shown to be most effective when it is a peer-run program.

Union Counsellors are often the most appropriate people to organize this program in the work-place. Until now, Union Counsellors have been obliged to function in an unofficial capacity and on their own time. With the implementation of our new contract we will have taken a first step towards contract language which will legitimize the Union Counsellors role and hopefully, this will eventually lead to the establishment of the Union Counsellor and the Critical Incident Stress Management Team in every HSA facility.

I would urge you to seek out the Union Counsellors in your own facility and acquaint yourselves with the services that they can provide to you. In addition, I hope that you will encourage HSA to provide for additional Union Counselling services by bringing forward resolutions both to our bargaining committee and at our Annual Convention. These resolutions can guide our union towards providing additional education funds to support Union Counselling and CISM at more facilities. This will allow our negotiating team to take these issues to the table, and eventually get language in our agreement to allow us all access to these services.

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