

BULLETIN

Easter Tocol, social worker and constituency liaison

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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

This quote by anthropologist Margaret Mead nicely sums up the motivation social worker Easter Tocol brings to her work with the HSA constituency liaison program.

This program trains and coaches HSA members so they can meet with their MLAs to talk about the public policies that matter to the union. The goal is to educate and engage the MLA, ultimately in aid of better health care and social services policies.

Tocol brought to the position a deep belief in the power of civic engagement – and a ton of relevant experience. Before becoming a social worker she worked with youth and children in the social services and non-profit sector. She then worked as a constituency assistant for an MLA for four years, and in that role was active on many community committees, working on homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction and other issues. She is currently an oncology social worker at Burnaby Hospital's outpatient cancer centre, providing mental and emotional counselling and daily advocacy for patients and families dealing with financial and practical

needs.

In 2013, Tocol became the president of the Filipino Social Workers Association of British Columbia where, among other activities, she took the lead in organizing a ground-breaking conference to help service providers and care-givers better understand Filipino issues.

"We are the third-largest visible immigrant community in BC, and no one knew how to work with our community. The conference helped us increase understanding of our culture – for instance attitudes towards child rearing and parenting," says Tocol.

Given her history, it's not surprising that Tocol agreed enthusiastically when, after serving as steward at Burnaby Hospital for a couple of years, she was recruited to become a constituency liaison.

"It's so important to educate and inform our politicians about how their decisions impact people on a daily basis," she says. "Politicians are there to represent us, so they need to hear what is actually happening in our lives."

HSA provides training for constituency liaisons. Experienced staff and outside experts are brought in to provide an introduction to the political landscape and practice of government relations, and practical tips to help prepare for meetings. Liaisons are provided with detailed information packages to guide them through briefings about the main issues. After meeting with the MLA, the liaison reports back to HSA on the MLA's response.

"Currently, professional shortages are a big issue. When we talk about them we highlight our shared goal of filling the health care skills gap and maintaining cost-effective health-care," says Tocol.

Although the constituency liaison program focuses on MLAs, Tocol says it is also essential to keep an eye on federal politics, especially now with a federal election in full swing. Tocol recently helped present the Canadian Labour Congress' Better Choice campaign, aimed at educating HSA members on important election issues, at Burnaby Hospital.

"We had a couple of education sessions with our members where we had lunch and talked about four main issues: child care, better jobs, pensions, and medicare. It was very positive! We reached out to almost 100 members in the hospital. A lot of the members had valid concerns and it was a great opportunity to talk and get them thinking about making good decisions in the election. They can now ask these questions to their local political candidates," says Tocol.

Tocol says that no one should ever doubt that their voice has power. "One of the most powerful things you can do is talk from your heart and share your personal story. That way our decision-makers can understand how their policies are affecting people. Sometimes these stories are brought up in the legislature, and it has a powerful effect.

"I encourage people to take action. In my work as an Constituency Assistant, I saw how a group of, say, just ten people can have an impact by putting pressure on an MLA. It can cause change. It's do-able."

Like Margaret Mead, she has absolutely no doubt that she, as a "thoughtful, committed citizen" working with others, can improve her world.

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