

BULLETIN

Doris Peters, mental health clinician

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BY LAURA BUSHEIKIN

"Just what is our union doing for us?"

This was the question that set HSA member Doris Peters down a path that led, surprisingly quickly, to becoming a chief steward in June of last year.

After four years as a child and youth mental health clinician at Vancouver Children's Hospital, working with young children experiencing social or emotional difficulties, Peters felt she was ready to learn something about her union.

"Often among my colleagues in child and mental health I was hearing questions about the union. How was it representing us? Were we getting lost in the big picture?"

Peters had been to a few HSA meetings and decided to put her name forward for a steward position as a first step in getting involved. However, the chief steward role was vacant and her colleagues urged her to take it.

"The vice-chief said she would mentor me. So I just kind of jumped right in with both feet!

"My passion came from wanting members to have a greater understanding of the union's role. I heard Val Avery talk and was really energized to hear all the things HSA is doing for its members - for us. I thought what

I can do for my group is give them that same sort of energy."

Any trepidation Peters had about jumping in without much experience was soon allayed as she realized how much support was available.

"So far I've gone to a couple of Attendance Wellness Program meetings. I've done a grievance with a member. I've represented a member at a human resources meeting. Each time I was able to call the office and speak to a labour relations officer who guided me through my role so I felt comfortable. I really value the ready access to someone who is ready to answer questions and explain the process.

"I've learned that it's not only important to know what our role is but also what the limits of the role is. I originally was thinking, okay, I am supposed to be like a lawyer? I have to represent the member vigorously, do all the research and talking. When I learned that was not true, that alleviated a lot of stress. My role is to support the member emotionally and to ask some good questions, take good notes, and make sure the correct process is being followed. And any point I can call a caucus, take a break and call the union office to ask a question. So everything doesn't rest just on me.

"It's very satisfying to know, when I'm going into a meeting to support a member, that although I'm just one steward, I feel like all of us as stewards are there. There's no need to feel powerless. You don't have to feel you're just one person. Actually you are one person with a great number of people behind you."

Peters says her experience with HSA so far has exceeded her expectations. "I hadn't realized how important our role is for our members. We provide an ear. An issue may not be grievable; it might not be something we can take to any formal process, but members need to have someone hear them and provide clear information. That way people aren't falling through the cracks."

As well, Peters values the work HSA does in the community to promote social justice. "I was excited to find out that our union isn't just working in a micro-way for its members as individuals, but is also involved with the bigger picture, for instance, working against violence against women, and political work such as mobilizing members in the election," she says.

These days, when she hears colleagues asking what the union is doing for them, Peters has plenty of answers.

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180 East Columbia
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website
www.hsabc.org

Telephone 604-517-0994
1-800-663-2017