

Hard knocks pushed drive to unionize care workers

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Consecutive B.C. governments have ignored, abused and brushed off the sector for so long that it's no wonder almost every home- support agency is now unionized. Half of the agencies providing care in group homes for the mentally handicapped are also unionized, and the other half are undoubtedly making plans right now.

The government antes up for unionized agencies because the contracts are bargained at a provincial level. But the non-union agencies have to get by on whatever the government deigns to give them. Budget increases have been so skimpy in recent years that agencies can't afford any wage hikes.

[Ed Helfrich] says one Vernon service group unsuccessfully challenged the government's practice in court last year. The court ruled that the Community Social Services Employers Association, which bargains on behalf of employers, doesn't have the right to negotiate for non- union organizations – which make up half of CSSEA's membership.

FULL TEXT

At the heart of every union certification is a group of workers who have had just about enough.

And nowhere is it truer than in community care, currently gripped by the kind of chaos that's certain to drive the last of the holdouts into the arms of a union recruiter.

Unionized community care has its problems. Seniority gets in the way of making that perfect match of home-support worker and client. Split-shift limits can mean one caregiver in the morning and another at night. And the effect of a strike is that much more dramatic and divisive when the battle has to be fought in the homes of people needing constant care.

But consecutive B.C. governments have ignored, abused and brushed off the sector for so long that it's no wonder almost every home- support agency is now unionized. Half of the agencies providing care in group homes for the mentally handicapped are also unionized, and the other half are undoubtedly making plans right now.

"By the time our workers certified last year, there was such a discrepancy in funding that we were having difficulty attracting staff," says Linda Angus, assistant director for Nisika Home Support. "Since the union came in, people's wages have gone up by as much as \$3.37 an hour. Everyone got a pay increase."

The government funds hundreds of agencies throughout the province that provide various types of in-home care to people who are elderly, disabled or mentally handicapped.

Regardless of whether they're unionized, for-profit or non- profit, all agencies must meet the same standard of

care. The system doesn't allow clients to switch caregivers easily, so consistency from agency to agency is essential.

Given that, two similarly trained workers doing identical jobs at different agencies could presumably expect similar pay. But the government instead has a long history of funding unionized agencies at a higher rate while leaving non-union agencies to scrape by for yet another year with no money for a pay increase.

"The inequities between union and non-union continue to worsen," says Ed Helfrich, head of the B.C. Association for Private Care. "The non-union agencies haven't seen any increases since 1995. But if they were to unionize tomorrow, the government would give them more money."

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Layered on top of all that is a longstanding quarrel over different rates of pay in two government ministries, an issue that's fomenting rebellion even among unionized agencies.

The emotional three-week-old strike by 10,000 workers in the social-services sector is largely fuelled by years of empty promises to address inequities of as much as \$8 an hour between agencies that contract with the Health Ministry versus Children and Families.

"That's what brought four unions together at one bargaining table this time. We're all sitting at the table fighting for one cause," says Hospital Employees Union strike committee member Jennifer Neely. "We've all been promised and promised and promised, and now we want it."

Employees are also fighting for successorship, which comes down to the right to keep your job and your wage rate even if the ever-fickle government switches contractors, as happened at a Nanaimo agency this year where all staff was subsequently laid off.

That issue isn't just important to workers, but to clients, some of whom have been with the same workers for years. Caregivers have put up with poor pay and uncertain working conditions for years, naively thinking that the government really meant it when it kept on saying "Next time." But the push clearly doesn't register unless it comes from the strong hand of B.C.'s big unions.

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