

Clerical team focuses on compensation, benefits at pre-bargaining conference

Unity was evident throughout HEU's clerical conference when about 90 members gathered at the union's Provincial Office last week to discuss their family of health care jobs, set bargaining priorities, and develop strategies that will clearly highlight the value of their work to employers and health authorities.

Clerical subcommittee co-chairs Gregg Steele, a stat ultrasound modality booking clerk from Vancouver Island, and HEU 2nd vice-president Carol Kenzie, a purchasing clerk from Kelowna Amalgamated, opened the two-day event by welcoming participants, introducing Provincial Executive and clerical subcommittee members, and briefly outlining the conference agenda.



Kenzie noted the importance of demonstrating, at the bargaining table, the critical link between clerical work and patient care. She spoke of tracking an imaginary patient from emergency room entry through hospital stay to discharge, documenting the clerical “touch” at every point along the way.

In his introduction of HEU secretary-business manager Judy Darcy, Steele noted that she “is a genuine activist to the core” and that her union story began as a library worker in Toronto.

Darcy set the stage for bargaining, and emphasized key areas to consider over the next two days. She thanked conference participants for “taking responsibility for coming here” because they will be key to engaging members in their locals as the union prepares for facilities subsector negotiations.

She acknowledged that multi-tasking has become the symbol of clerical workers as illustrated by “Fredrica”, the character that figures prominently on the subcommittee newsletter *PaperWork*, and is featured on the poster for Clerical Team Appreciation Day on November 18.

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The conference participants work in numerous clerical jobs across the province, including nursing unit assistants (unit clerks, unit coordinators); admitting, ultrasound, bed booking, O.R., purchasing, finance, medical records and staffing clerks, medical stenographers and transcriptionists, and switchboard operators.

They quickly got down to the business of establishing top-of-mind bargaining issues by breaking into small groups. There, they also talked about some of the most satisfying and frustrating aspects of their jobs. Comments described the comprehensive nature of their work, and how seriously their responsibility to patients – and to co-workers as part of the health care team – is taken.

“We’re expected to know everything – and if we don’t know, we’re supposed to be able to find it,” said one nursing unit assistant.

“People visiting from out-of-country [who find themselves in hospital] are so concerned about how they’re going to pay. Once I talk with them, they relax. Then they can start healing,” described an accounts receivable clerk.

“Our work is integral to tracking patient progress,” noted a medical transcriptionist.

“We are the skeleton, the bones of the system,” commented a timekeeping/scheduling clerk.

“Nothing starts unless we do our job,” said an admitting/bed booking clerk.

The groups reconvened in a plenary session to present descriptions of their work through poster art.

Bargaining

In the afternoon, Darcy centered attention on bargaining with particular mention of the status of the clerical benchmark review.

“Right from the beginning, health employers have put up enormous roadblocks,” she said. “But now, we have a commitment that with the help of Vince Ready, all outstanding issues in the benchmark review will be resolved by October 30, before our Wage Policy Conference.”

Darcy said that this round of negotiations is a time to stay focused and united. “We are being forthright about the conditions under which we will be bargaining, so that we can have frank discussions at these occupational conferences and reach decisions about our priorities.”

Clerical benchmark review update

The three-million dollar clerical benchmark review, established in the 2006-2010 facilities contract, had stalled over the issues of wage-sensitive benefits – like CPP and EI statutory deductions – and determining which benchmarks required change.

During mediation in July, the parties agreed to resume talks over the summer to complete the benchmark review process, and refer any disputes that may arise – such as benchmark content or allocation of available funds – to respected labour arbitrator Vince Ready by October 15.

Although the employer wanted 30 per cent of the fund to cover wage-sensitive benefits, the union was able to negotiate that cost-sharing down to 21 per cent. Talks are continuing at press time, and Ready will issue an expedited, final and binding decision on all outstanding issues by the end of October.

Bargaining priorities streamlined

Participants worked in occupation-based and regional groups to discuss a wide range of bargaining priorities, some general and some very specific.

When the members returned to talk about their findings, they spent several hours narrowing their issues into a tight package of critical and achievable priorities to send on to the Provincial Executive.

They identified the following bargaining priorities: retaining current health and welfare benefits, seeking higher compensation for nursing unit assistants, no re-testing, no contracting out, and compensation for training.

“That’s a pretty impressive list,” said Darcy in her closing remarks. “I want to congratulate you because I know how hard these discussions can be, especially considering the economic situation. And then to identify a certain group, nursing unit assistants, for special compensation demonstrates a lot of support and recognition for the value of that work.”

Darcy talked about the importance of spreading that support for our clerical members at work sites, among colleagues, health employers, politicians and communities throughout B.C.

“We need to mobilize and build solidarity among clerical workers and other HEU groups across the province,” said Darcy. “It’s important to go out there and make the case to decision-makers, so that by the time we get to the bargaining table, everyone will know what clerical workers contribute to the health care team.

“I think we are equipped and have the strength inside our union to take on this difficult round of bargaining,” she concluded. “If we support each other and advocate for each other, we’re going to come through this stronger.”

September 23, 2009