



Bargaining priorities set at community health conference, contract talks upcoming

With public sector negotiations around the corner, delegates to HEU's community health bargaining conference came together in Burnaby to discuss priorities, adopt bargaining demands and elect their bargaining committee.



For two days (May 8 and 9) members gathered to talk about the value of their work and the challenges they face on the job.

Community health workers are vital supports to society's most vulnerable. Their work, often not seen by the rest of society, allows individuals to find stability through accessing care, housing, food, support and life skills.

Conference delegates spoke about not being able to connect clients with services because of the heavy demand on the system as a whole. Underfunding, which continues to be a critical issue for the community health sector, is further complicated by the unique challenges brought on by the opioid crisis and the provincial housing crisis.

As one delegate put it, "we're at a crisis point finding it more difficult to help clients, and some of them are losing faith."

Home support workers raised concerns about the mandatory, unpaid, two-hour period of availability on each shift. "I can't tell you how many times I have found myself on the side of the road, in my car, in all types of weather, waiting an hour in-between clients," said one delegate.

All community health workers are increasingly bearing the brunt of underfunding and understaffing.

Many delegates spoke about the need to address workload issues to counteract burnout. This is especially significant for the majority of workers in the sector who witness traumatic situations while on the job.



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In her opening address, HEU's secretary-business manager Jennifer Whiteside emphasized the need to improve unsafe working conditions in the sector.

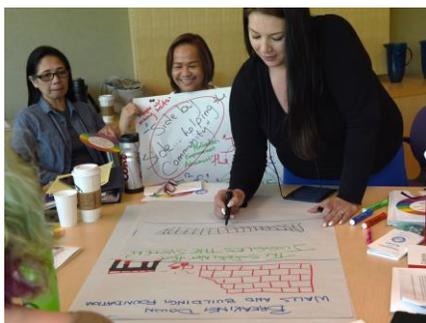
"We need to change the culture that puts workers at risk – the culture that accepts unsafe working conditions as part of the job. And that relies on so many to work alone with heavy workloads in stressful situations," she said.

Top bargaining priorities included: parity with the facilities sector, hours of work and transportation benefit entitlements for home support workers, enhanced job security, stronger health and safety protections, and paid time for personal leave.

HEU is one of eight unions represented in the Community Health Bargaining Association (CBA). Bargaining demands approved at the conference will be sent to the CBA on behalf of HEU's 2,300 community health members.

A new bargaining team, elected during the conference, will represent HEU at the multi-union table: Jessica Herzig (Prince George Local), Alyisha Knapp (Central Cariboo Local), and Janine Migneault and Gina Horne (Community Services 1998 Local). Two alternates were also chosen: James Clements (St. James Local) and Lisa Bouma (David Beamish Local).

Chris Dorais (director, Fraser region) and Ronnie Nicolasora (staff representative) will work closely with the newly elected team and act as spokesperson for HEU at the bargaining table.



During the conference, delegates heard from HEU president Victor Elkins and HEU financial secretary Donisa Bernardo.

Lisa Crema, who sits on HEU's provincial executive as regional vice-president (North), is a community health member and actively participated throughout the conference proceedings.

In addition, second vice-president Ken Robinson, regional vice-president (Fraser) Joanne Walker, regional vice-president (Interior) Shelley Bridge, and regional vice-president

(Vancouver Island) Barb Biley were on hand to meet delegates and learn more about on-the-job issues.

First vice-president Barb Nederpel and second vice-president Jim Calvin also attended parts of the conference to meet delegates and hear directly about the value of members' work and the challenges they experience.

Negotiations with the Health Employers Association of BC are set to begin on May 15.

Members are encouraged to talk to delegates from their locals who attended the conference, and to share information with others at their work sites.

If you would like to receive CBA bargaining updates directly, please send your name and contact info to members@heu.org or text 604-209-3861.

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