



# The Voice of Reason

Frontline news and views from OPSEU's Mental Health Division  
Spring 2003

## Union report gives restructuring a failing grade

Our report on the cuts to mental health beds and services, *Reality: Ontario's Mental Health System isn't working*, was released with a bang in November. It received press coverage and attracted the attention of hospital administrators and service providers across the province.

We followed up the report with a series of community forums held February to April in London, North Bay, Ottawa, Kingston, Thunder Bay, Penetanguishene, Niagara, Sudbury and Toronto.

### Patients will suffer

"It was important for us to get the message out to the public because the government is deceiving people," said Tony Morabito, the chair of the Mental Health Division. "Our patients and their families will bear the brunt of the destruction of mental health services."

Drawing on the experiences of OPSEU members, the *Reality* report describes a system that, as a result of restructuring, is more difficult to access, less humane and has far fewer beds, programs and services to offer.

The Division Executive briefed the Liberals, NDP and the Executive Assistant to Health Minister Tony Clement on our findings. We gave examples of how the restructuring is failing our patients and our communities.

Many thanks to our locals for organizing the community forums and to Local 500's Dale Fergusson for helping them. The locals invited an impressive list of speakers to participate, including police chiefs, psychiatrists, hospital administrators, consumer/survivors, food banks, municipal councillors, and community agencies.

OPSEU First Vice-President Warren (Smokey) Thomas was the union's speaker at the forums. Executive Board Members Nancy Pridham and Sue Brown spoke at the forums he could not attend. All three have many years of experience as front-line workers in mental health care.

### See you at the BPS conference

As a member of the Mental Health Division, your local is entitled to send delegates to OPSEU's BPS conference, June 6-7 and our Division Meeting, June 8.

The conference allows members in the Broader Public Service (BPS) to share ideas and strategies for bargaining, mobilizing and enforcing their contracts.

The BPS includes hospitals, community agencies and other workplaces that are funded by government, but are not directly part of the government.

Our Division will meet June 8 to elect our executive for the next two years.

If your local is in the OPS, you **are** entitled to send delegates to the conference and division meeting because our Division includes both OPS and BPS workplaces.

Your local can still register. All the documents you need are on the web: <http://www.opseu.org/bps/conference/bpsconference2003.htm>

To make our Division stronger, we need your local's participation.

## Keeping safe during home visits

Many members in our Division do home visits. The following safety tips were taken from OPSEU's "Safe Work, Healthy Work: A Guide for Home Care Workers". To get a copy, call OPSEU's Health and Safety Unit, 1-800-268-7376.

### Hazards faced by workers conducting home visits include:

- ergonomic concerns (lifting of clients)
- physical conditions
- (poor lighting, cold temperatures, broken stairs etc.)
- infectious disease
- hazardous chemicals
- environmental tobacco smoke
- violence

### Workers face special challenges during visits: Access to information

You often walk into a new client's home knowing nothing about the environment. The Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) section 25.2(a) says your employer must give you information, equipment and training to protect yourself. All employers must establish policies to reduce/handle risk to service providers as part of a workplace strategy and to assist staff to work with people who pose service challenges.

Your Joint Health and Safety Committees should review the policies to ensure

they meet safety requirements.

### Your workplace is someone's home

But applying the OHSA to homes is difficult. A Ministry of Labour inspector cannot enter your client's home without the client's permission or a search warrant. Although your employer does not control your client's home, they must make reasonable precautions for your safety under Section 25.2(h) of the Act. Your Joint Health and Safety Committee should discuss methods and policies to ensure safety.

### Working Alone

You work alone in clients' homes. You may be vulnerable to aggressive clients, and rarely have a chance to share information, experiences and strategies with your co-workers.

### Controlling Hazards when working alone:

**At the source:** Some clients cannot be cared for safely in their homes. If no effective controls exist, such clients should be discharged. Your employer must assess each new client's situation for possible violence.

Such assessments should be updated regularly and your

### Three basic principles of controlling a hazard

**At the source:** the most effective control. Example: replacing something with something else. In home care, that may mean discharging a client, or seeing a client somewhere else.

**Along the path:** placing a barrier or guard between the worker and the hazard. In home care that may mean using a mechanical device to lift a patient to avoid a worker injury.

**With the worker:** the least effective control. Example: some form of protective equipment, like latex gloves, or masks. **The employer has the legal duty to find a way to control the hazards you face.**

employer must tell you about risks and proper control strategies.

**Along the path: You need a dependable way to call for help.** These may include a cell phone, a personal alarm device, a special code when calling in to the office, or regular check-in calls. Your employer must know where you are on every shift.

The employer must set up an effective communication plan. Some clients should not be visited alone. You must be trained in assessing and diffusing potentially dangerous situations.

(Continued page 3)

From page 2

**With the worker:** Observe your environment for danger. If you feel there is an immediate risk, do not enter. You have a right to refuse unsafe work under Section 43 of the OHS Act. Avoid being cornered. Conduct interviews in the living or dining room. Keep your shoes on if possible, and sit between the client and the exit, and

where you have a good view of all your surroundings. Remain calm and alert. Watch your client's body language, and keep a six foot distance between you and the client.

### Focus on prevention

Report every incident to your supervisor and keep your Health and Safety Reps informed.

Have meetings to discuss

health and safety issues.

Complete surveys or questionnaires to identify priorities. Map hazards to find the links between work and health.

Know your health and safety rights provided under your collective agreement and the OHS Act. And most of all: participate.

## Who we are - Mental Health Division sites

We've found there is some confusion out there as to who's in the Mental Health Division.

The Division was founded Nov. 4, 2001, to provide a strong, cohesive voice within OPSEU to promote mental health issues. We include both OPS and BPS locals. Our members provide mental health care and are employed by provincial psychiatric hospitals, public hospitals and community mental health agencies.

The following locals and workplaces are in the Mental Health Division:

**Local 152, St. Joseph's Health Care**

**Local 201, Wellington Psychiatric Outreach Program**

**Local 301, Destiny Manor Treatment Services**

**Local 307, Oak Ridge Division, Penetanguishene Mental Health Centre**

**Local 309, Canadian Mental Health Association, Victoria County**

**Local 329, Penetanguishene Mental Health Centre**

**Local 331, Whitby Mental Health Centre**

**Local 431, Providence Continuing Care Centre-Mental Health Services**

**Local 439, Royal Ottawa Health Care Group - Brockville Psychiatric Hospital**

**Local 441, Leeds & Grenville Rehabilitation and Counselling Services**

**Local 488, Addiction Services of Eastern Ontario**

**Local 500, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health**

**Local 512, Women's Counselling Referral & Education Centre**

**Local 512, Toronto East Counselling Services, Community Housing Support Services**

**Local 548, Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre**

**Local 636, North Bay Psychiatric Hospital**

**Local 720, Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital**

### Mental Health Division Executive

Chair: **Anthony Morabito**, Local 636

Vice-chair: **Doris Meredith**, Local 720

Secretary: **Marty McFarlane**, Local 431

Treasurer: **Barry Newman**, Local 152

Health and Safety Co-ordinator: **Geoff McPhee**, Local 636

Public Policy and Campaigns: **Dave Erskine**, Local 152

Membership Co-ordinator: **Odilia Gouveia**, Local 152

Communications Co-ordinator: **Sheryl Ferguson**, Local 431

Bargaining Co-ordinator: **Al Donaldson**, Local 307

Authorized for distribution:



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