

## **Some reflections on the Rexdale Injured Workers Group February, 2007**

### **1) What factors or ideas motivated you into starting the group?**

The motivation came predominantly from watching injured worker after injured worker struggling with the same issues. Almost all of my clients had developed some form of depression from the affects of their injuries. Many spoke to me about their feelings of worthlessness and many were despondent. All of my clients were dealing with adverse decisions by the WSIB. Many were being pressed to return to work that they could not handle. Most were very demoralized at the treatment they received from WSIB adjudicators.

I could not help but seeing that their stories had many, many common elements and it seemed obvious that many would benefit and find some badly needed solidarity in speaking with other injured workers who were dealing with the same issues. I also thought it would have therapeutic effects for each of them to be working together towards reform of those laws and policies that had caused them so much difficulty.

Finally, I had the benefit of seeing the work that was being done by the specialty workers' compensation clinics who are specialists in community organizing. Groups that were organized such as Bright Lights, Women of Inspiration and the Chinese Injured Workers served as important role models that I could draw on in learning how to begin the Rexdale group.

### **2) How and when did you start it?**

I started the group by inviting my injured worker clients to a provincial conference that was organized by the Ontario Network of Injured Worker Groups in September 2005. Five came forward wanting to attend. From the clinic, we facilitated the attendance of these five to the conference in downtown Toronto (i.e. rides, introducing them to one another and being around at the conference to explain things, etc.)

The five who attended the conference were very interested in forming our own group in Rexdale (fairly remote geographically and far from downtown). In November 2005 we had our first meeting and have been meeting fairly regularly since (about once a month since then except for the summer months).

### **3) What activities has the group been involved in?**

- Attending demonstrations that are organized in the city;
- Writing a letter listing their concerns and demands to the Minister of Labour;

- Meeting with our local MPP to relate their stories to him personally;
- An ONIWG workshop given to our group by ONIWG, IWC and IAVGO on how to strengthen your local group.
- Injured worker “school” learning about the history of the workers’ compensation.

#### **4) What is your particular role in it?**

I plan the meetings, chair them and keep notes. Although, I think this should change as the group matures. Our office manager mails out invitations to all our injured worker clients. Ann and I both call and organize any guests for the meetings. We make sure there is lots of hot coffee and refreshments for the meetings. We also organize transportation for the downtown events.

#### **5) As the sole Workers’ Compensation (WC) practitioner in your clinic, what challenges has this presented? How have you dealt with them?**

This becomes challenging when I have to consult on a legal or strategic question. It can also raise challenges if I am unable to attend a hearing. I am very reluctant to adjourn when something unforeseen arises in my schedule because injured workers wait a long time for their hearings. So dealing with my own schedule can be a challenge.

I have dealt with these challenges by seeking the advice and help of the clinics who are specialists in workers’ compensation law, which they generously give whenever I ask. I try to attend our local workers’ comp. study group and I am on the provincial network which helps me stay current with what may be happening in other centres and across the province. There is also a case consultation component to these meetings which I often take advantage of. I try to keep a completely current library on general legal materials and any legal clinic materials being produced. I try to attend LSUC, OBA and WSIAT sponsored trainings. I am on the clinic system’s workers’ comp. list-serve as well as the Office of the Worker Adviser list and the ONIWG list.

#### **6) Has this aspect of community organising made a difference to the injured workers? To your work? How?**

I think it is early to judge whether the Rexdale Injured Workers group has made a big difference to the injured workers. It is still early in the life of the group. I am certain it has for some of the regulars. If nothing else, it has given them a place to go and talk about their experiences with others who understand and empathize with them. I think it has raised their awareness on the issues and the political process necessary to reform laws. The members of the group have also formed friendships among themselves and have met others involved in the injured worker movement. These connections, I am sure, help to sustain them when they are feeling depressed.

I think my work has been enhanced in that I am able to provide a more complete service rather than just the casework. It has also enabled me to see these clients as the complete individuals that they are. My advocacy on their behalf is better and more persuasive for reason of this added insight. I think it helps me to command greater respect for them in dealings with the institutions that can sometimes see them as less than whole people.

**7) What advice would you give someone who is the only WC practitioner in his/her clinic, and at the beginning stage of organising injured workers?**

Get help! First from someone else in your clinic. You can then divide up some of the meeting work and the planning of the excursions.

Next from one of the specialists within the system, for advice and even help with ideas for the meetings.

Call me if you like.

Connect with one of the injured worker groups already active in your community, with ONIWG, or a trade union local.

Keep informed regarding any events in your community that could be used as a focal point for organizing your group.

Buy lots of coffee. Learn how to make it.

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