

FACT SHEET

HOWARD MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES - UNION ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN

In June 1983, a worker at Howard Mental Health Services (HMHS) made contact with a representative of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). AFSCME is a national union with 1.2 million members in the public and private non-profit sectors. In Vermont, AFSCME represents municipal workers including those in the city of Burlington.

Over a three month period, an AFSCME organizer contacted most of the direct service employees at HMHS. It became clear that a great majority of these workers were interested in a union election. A range of reactions fed this. Some groups of workers wanted to improve their wages, others had serious concerns about working conditions, and nearly all of those supporting unionization felt that it would be the best and most democratic way to participate in decision-making at the agency.

On November 1, a petition was filed with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in Boston requesting that an election be conducted. The law requires that 30% of eligible employees must sign authorization cards to request an election; we had signed cards from far more than that.

Before we had even filed our petition, the management hired an attorney named Robert Moss to represent them. Mr. Moss is from the firm of Borris and Moss (1 Dag Hamerskjold Plaza, N.Y.C.) and is well known in the labor community in Vermont as a "union buster". Employees began receiving letters at home and at work from the management, opposing the union effort and attempting to discredit unionization as an effective tool at HMHS.

On November 21 the NLRB began conducting hearings to determine exactly which HMHS employees would be eligible for an election. Many of us were able to witness or participate in these hearings. It is our opinion that Mr. Moss used the hearings to distort the intentions of the union and to stall the process leading to an election. It is a common technique on the part of labor relations consultants to use legal maneuvers to delay an election when union sentiment is strong, thereby wearing out the employees and undermining union support. The hearings were concluded December 7 and a decision by the regional office of the NLRB is expected soon.

Both the union and management express a desire for a quick and fair election. However, management's attorney has set a process in motion that could delay an election indefinitely. Claiming that HMHS might not be a private employer but is in fact an "arm of the state", Mr. Moss has requested at the hearings and in a brief filed with the NLRB on December 28 that the case be transferred to the Washington, D.C. national office of the NLRB for a decision. If Mr. Moss' request is honored, the HMHS petition for election will join the 1,500 case backlog piled up in the Washington office... and possibly sit unresolved for months.

We believe that a union would be an asset to HMHS, that it would democratize the workplace and enable workers to have a larger stake in the agency. We believe it will enhance our work with clients because we will be working in an environment that we've helped to shape. We do not claim that all HMHS employees share this view, but we do know that a solid majority of our colleagues want an early election and resolution to the issue.

Sincerely,

Mary Bentley	Alan Kurtz
David Martin	Betsy deCastro
Anne Blazis	Ginni Stern
Pat Terrien	Lisa McNulty
Lynn Rockwell	Jane Mendelson
Pat Fontaine	Kate Luscomb

HMHS Organizing Committee

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December 1983

Dear

Since September of this year, employees at Howard Mental Health Services in Burlington have been involved in a union organizing campaign. At this point we feel that our efforts to establish a union could be greatly helped by a little support from members of the Burlington community. Below you will find a brief account of the events at HMHS. We hope that, based on what you see there, you can do the following: Write or call HMHS Executive Director Jim Leddy (300 Flynn Ave. Burlington) and HMHS Board President Dennis Voigt (110 S. Champlain Ave. Burlington) and urge them to facilitate a quick and fair election. Any other points which you would like to raise regarding unionization at HMHS can of course be included. If you feel so moved, send a letter to the Burlington Free Press. Please also send a copy to: Betsy DeCastro (130 Robinson Pkwy. Burlington). For any further information, call me at

Thank you,

In June 1983, a worker at Howard Mental Health Services (HMHS) made contact with a representative of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). AFSCME is a national union with 1.2 million members in the public and private, non-profit sectors. In Vermont, AFSCME represents 500 municipal workers including those in the city of Burlington.

After about three months of discussions with HMHS employees, it was clear that a great majority were interested in a union election. A wide range of reactions fed this. Some groups of workers would like to improve their wages, others have serious concerns about working conditions, and nearly all of those supporting unionization feel that it is the best and most democratic way to participate in decision making at the agency.

On November 1, a petition was filed with the National Labor Relations Board requesting that a certification election be conducted. The law requires that at least 30% of eligible employees must sign "authorization cards" to request an election; we had signed cards from 75%.

Before we had even filed our petition, the management had hired an attorney named Bob Moss to represent them. Mr. Moss is from the firm of Borris and Moss (1 Dag Hamersjkold Plaza, N.Y.) and is well known in the labor community in Vermont as a "union buster". Employees began receiving letters at home and at work from the management, opposing the union effort and attempting to discredit unionization as an effective tool at HMHS.

On November 21 the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) began conducting hearings to determine exactly which HMHS employees would be eligible for an election. The opinion of the many employees who were able to witness or participate in these hearings is that Mr. Moss used the hearings to distort the intentions of the union, and to stall the procedure in every way possible. It is a common union busting technique to use legal maneuvers to delay an election, thereby wearing out the employees and undermining union support. The hearings were concluded December 7, and a decision by the NLRB regional Boston office is awaited.

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At this point the management can either respect the wishes of the workers for a quick and fair election, or they can instruct their attorney to pursue his union busting strategy to the bitter end. It is within management's power to clear the way for a timely election by refraining from diversionary legal tactics. It is within our power to continue to let management know our true desire for a union election.

Those of us on the HMHS Organizing Committee are convinced that a union (which is only us the employees, after all), will be a great asset to the agency. We believe that it will stabilize worker-management relations and democratize the workplace. We believe that it will enhance our direct work with clients, because we will be operating in an environment which we've helped to shape. We do not claim that all HMHS employees share this view, but we do know that a solid majority of our colleagues want an early election and resolution to the issue.

We thank you for your consideration and assistance.

HMHS ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

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Anne Blazis
David Martin
Lynn Rockwell
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Betsy DeCastro
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