

THE FLAP AT CAP

Years of management problems at the AIDS service agency have led employees to organize to form a union

by Inga Sorensen



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

(From left) Tom Cotter, Laura Rittall, Wendi Johnson, Brian Hoop, David Brinkman and Ena Eakin, some of the employees who support union organizing efforts at CAP

At press time, Amy Stear, Oregon Public Employees Union's director of organizing, told *Just Out* that the relevant parties in this case signed an agreement on May 13 paving the way for a card count that could lead to the establishment of a union at Cascade AIDS Project.

She says the count is set for the week of May 20-24. CAP staffers supporting the union hail the move, calling it an important step in the agency's evolutionary process. We spoke with some of those staffers days before the agreement was signed. What follows is a look at some of their concerns.

When roughly half of Cascade AIDS Project's staff—carrying a stack of union authorization cards—recently marched into the office of the nonprofit agency's executive director, Susan Stoltenberg, it was, she admits, one of life's "mystical moments."

"It was one of those moments where you go, 'Whoa...'" recounts Stoltenberg, an occasionally contentious figure in the HIV/AIDS community, who took a "very, very long walk" afterward to try and clear her head and "root out what was or wasn't to be taken personally."

"I was completely surprised," she says. "I had never before been approached by them in a unified way."

During the afternoon of April 15, after the overwhelming majority of CAP's estimated 30 employees had signed union authorization cards, a group of staffers piled into Stoltenberg's office. They came—unannounced—to demand recognition of the union they were building with Oregon Public Employees Union/Service Employees International Union/Local 503.

"At that point Susan could have said, 'I recognize you.' That didn't happen. It is, of course, very rare for management anywhere to automatically recognize a new union," explains Laura

Grant, a 30-year-old OPEU union organizer who first met with CAP staff several weeks ago to discuss the possible formation of a union.

On April 16, a petition for election was filed with the National Labor Relations Board, after more than 80 percent of CAP employees signed the cards to authorize the election.

"People who are happy with their work environments usually don't come to us, so I assume if they do there is a problem in the workplace," says Grant. "At CAP, the problems really revolved around issues of respect and dignity—in that employees do not feel they are being respected—and of a lack of clear personnel guidelines pertaining to the hiring and firing of employees, evaluations—you name it."

Step into the downtown Portland lobby of CAP, Oregon's largest HIV/AIDS education and nonmedical service organization, and you're greeted with walls coated with calming shades of green, blue and lavender.

The atmosphere seems tranquil to the uninitiated, but talk with many CAP employees and they will tell you that looks can be deceiving.

They say high staff turnover, subtle and overt threats of dismissal from some supervisors, and lax personnel policies have created an often insufferable environment that distracts them from efficiently serving their clients.

Controversy is not new to the agency, which was founded in 1983. Over the years CAP, which relies heavily on private donations as well as federal and state funding, has experienced numerous managerial, procedural and financial problems.

One example: In the early 1990s CAP had a projected \$140,000 budget shortfall. A subsequent probe by the state Justice Department led investigators to conclude that the shortfall grew from administrative mismanagement, but they also believed it "more likely than not" that the former chief financial officer, Rob Kaōfa Bradley

Strahan, had siphoned about \$15,000 of CAP funds into his own bank account.

Strahan was officially removed from the post in April 1994, and several steps were taken by CAP to clear up the financial debacle, including the hiring of a new executive director—Stoltenberg—and a treasurer, as well as a re-vamping of the board.

A Department of Justice report released in the fall of 1994 gave CAP a clean bill of financial health and endorsed Stoltenberg and new policies that were being implemented.

As the administrative problems festered, however, CAP's client base and staff grew. In 1992, for example, the agency had a staff of 16, a \$600,000 budget, and an active caseload of 400-plus clients. Four years later, the client caseload has rocketed to 1,500, the budget has increased to \$1.4 million, and the staff has nearly doubled.

In such a climate of incredible growth and ongoing flux, personnel policies have fallen by the wayside, say some employees, who now believe a union is the only way to protect themselves and clients and create a stable work environment.

This is not a personal thing. These problems have existed at CAP for a long time, certainly before Susan got here," says 26-year-old Ena Eakin, CAP's HIV education program coordinator.

With roughly three years of employment at the agency under her belt, Eakin describes herself as a long-term employee, perhaps the most senior of them all.

"Many of the people here stay for a year and then leave," she says. "I believe a union will make it easier for employees—who do this because they love the work—to stay longer than that, which benefits our clients and the community."

Eakin was among a group of agency employees, all of whom support the union, who met with *Just Out* on May 9 at the CAP office.

"This is a very strong group of people, and the

group dynamic is critical when you're talking about unionizing," Grant told *Just Out* during an earlier interview.

Grant says when she first met with CAP employees about unionizing, they shared stories of abuse and an "unhealthy power dynamic" between workers and management.

"In the CAP Employee Handbook there is a section that says 'You are at-will,' meaning employees can be fired any time for any reason or no reason at all. People generally don't press the point," she says. "Apparently CAP employees were constantly being told that 'You are an at-will employee, and we could let you go at any time.' There was no subtlety about it."

"One thing that really shook people was the recent dismissal of an employee who was respected and viewed as having done a good job," continues Grant. "The employee was let go without having an opportunity to say, 'Hey, what did I do wrong and how can I improve?'"

She adds, "We believe there should be a series of disciplinary actions that employees undergo in order for them to have a chance to improve. The steps are progressive. If, after the employee has gone through the process, they still aren't doing the job, then they should be let go. Not before."

According to Brian Hoop, CAP's HIV primary prevention specialist, staff seriously began pondering launching a union in late winter and early spring after a respected employee was allegedly "told to pack his stuff up and be out of the building in 10 minutes."

"In a nutshell, that's what happened," says Jonathan Kessler, 30, who maintains he was laid off Jan. 31 after nine months of full-time employment at CAP.

"I had been praised by the board and the executive director for some of the events I had pulled together," says Kessler, who was a development associate handling special events.

Kessler says he helped organize the annual AIDS Walk last September, which he estimates