

Employees 'out of character' from workload



Webb, top, is joined by, clockwise, Dunning, Bowers, Peery, Sytsma, Sumerlin, Dunlap, Donahoo, Simmons and Deas to see what can be done about AFS workloads.

Workloads, particularly among welfare assistance workers, in Adult and Family Services, are causing nervous problems, emotional problems, drinking problems, anger and frustration. Management's response seems to be to throw up its hands and to say that state and federal regulations prohibit it from making any changes.

June 22, eight representatives of OSEA took the case on behalf of all AFS workers statewide, to AFS assistant administrator for field operations Leonard Sytsma and agency personnel officer Pat Dunning.

Representing OSEA were Donna Bowers and Mary Peery of Klamath Falls AFS, Virginia Sumerlin and Fred Simmons of Roseburg AFS, Frankie Dunlap and Cheri Donahoo of Central Point AFS, and OSEA employee representatives Phil Deas and Gordon Webb. After meeting from 3 p.m. to 5:15 p.m., the workers were not left with the feeling that their workload would soon be lifted.

The next day, Peery and Bowers talked at length with The OSEA News.

The workers want their caseloads reduced to manageable levels or they want management to prioritize their duties so that they know what duties can be left undone when no more hours remain in the day. The alternative is the tension, frustration and anxiety that now exists in the office.

"When I walk into the Roseburg office, I have to cut through the tension," said Deas. "I notice it more now that I'm not working for AFS." Deas, now an OSEA employee representative who works out of the Medford branch office had been an assistance worker.

To make matters worse, when new directives do come down from Salem, they are "retroactive." In other words, not only do the employees have to learn a new system, but they must stop what they're doing and change all the work they've done for the past several weeks. Paraphrasing Sytsma, Bowers said that the changes "don't make your job any easier, they're to make the system more efficient."

Peery said that the workers understand the reasons that

these changes are necessary. They come about as a result of court cases, and changes in state and federal law and regulation. The employees in the branch offices appreciate that the changes must be made. What the workers want is for management in Salem to consider these duties a part of a reasonable caseload.

Needless to say, the excessive workload causes delays in the direct service to the clients. And the delays increase the volume of the phone calls and the hostility of the calls. "You have to wait until they quit yelling at you, before you can explain why their welfare check or their food stamp voucher isn't ready," said Bowers.

Despite the paperwork and because of it, these two workers believe fraud or overpayments that should be detected are getting through. Expensive ambulances are being used by clients, when a relative or a neighbor with a car or even a taxi is the authorized mode of transportation. The workers see this and wonder if the agency isn't being penny wise and

pound foolish by sticking to its current staffing levels.

Money problems have limited the services that AFS can provide its clients. Medical treatment, for example, has been limited to emergencies. That's agency policy and the workers know it. Still, as Bowers and Peery point out, "every request that comes in we have to write up and have it denied."

A lot of additional work has come into AFS recently from other agencies, principally the Children's Services Division. Such jobs as finding medical care, transportation and lodging for clients has been taken over by AFS.

Service to the client is being hurt, and in the long run it's probably more expensive to the state, but it's the toll on the workers themselves where the workload problem is most evident. The strain is causing employees "to act out of

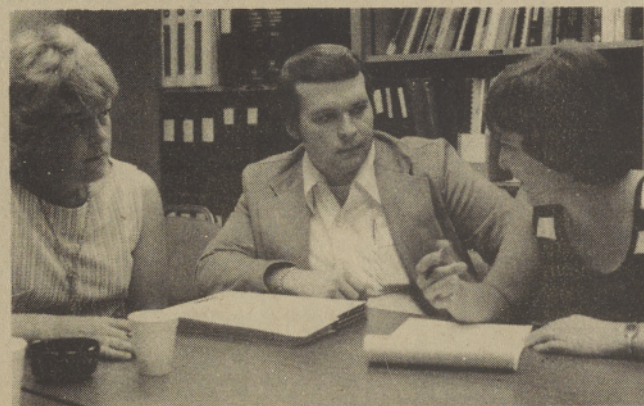
workloads or paperwork mean from the point of view of the "shop floor." That would help bring to life the statistics that management has at hand.

The work load problem started out as an assistance worker problem but now it includes the entire office, Bowers and Peery say. If the client is not getting his or her checks on time, until the middle of the month, the client's bills are not getting paid.

The appearance as things stand now is that nothing is being done. Management claims that its hands are tied; it can neither provide more workers nor set priorities because there is no money and everything is a priority.

"We're only responding to the client who is screaming at us," said Peery. "The quiet client sitting at home is getting no help at all."

"You feel your empathy for the client draining out of you,"



Bowers, Deas and Peery.

character," as Bowers puts it.

And when management goes to the legislature to request money for more staff to reduce work loads, it goes in with statistics. "They don't say, 'Look, I have employees popping pills or quitting or seeking professional help because of the job,'" said Bowers and Peery.

To take the case to the legislature, OSEA has recommended to AFS management that a committee of employees be named to help management describe to the lawmakers just what excessive

she continued, "until you say, 'My God, what is happening to me?'"

It can be argued that these problems were not anticipated by management. One position description for a welfare assistance worker where it says "Working conditions: Describe unusual risks, exertions or disagreeable elements" says "Sometimes hostile clients; high volume of paper work." Another says, "Hostile clients -- high pressure."

Hillcrest officers have message for members

As your newly elected officers, we are faced with the perpetual question "How to get members at Hillcrest to participate in their union." We'd like to inform you of changes that have taken place in the Union and solicit your response to changes you would like to see.

Before state employees in Oregon were given the right to strike, OSEA was not a true union. Collective bargaining was more like "collective begging" and the grievance process had no real muscle behind it. But with the right to strike, OSEA began to evolve from an "employees' organization" with more of a social function into a union which has negotiated a series of dramatic increases in wages and benefits. Oregon State employees now rank eighth in the nation in average wages paid per employee. Also, Oregon ranks 48th in the nation in the number of state employees per capita, which may explain why you've been feeling overworked lately.

We recently sent copies of the CSD contract to all OSEA

members at Hillcrest. If you did not receive a contract let us know. Read your contract, you might be surprised by some of the clauses. Did you know that your eight hours of personal business time off for this year must be used up by July 1 or it will be lost? Did you know that you will be reimbursed for clothing or personal effects which are damaged while working for instance while subduing an out of control resident or pursuing an AWOL? Did you know that if qualified the employee with the most seniority should be selected for a lateral transfer, and if not selected, an employee can request and will receive a written explanation of why he was not chosen?

The real work of a union is not in negotiating contracts, but in enforcing them. The grievance procedures is a tool for enforcing contracts. A grievance is an act or omission by an employer which an employee believes is unjust, inequitable, or in violation of contract.

Until about two years ago, there had never been, to our

knowledge, a grievance filed at Hillcrest. This has been due, in part, to the fact that management at Hillcrest has traditionally been very pro-OSA. With the influx of employees transferring from MacLaren, where the union has always been more active, the attitude towards grievances has been slowly changing. It was once thought that grievances were only filed by malcontents. This is not so. Properly used, the grievance system can benefit employees and management alike. A grievance allows an employee to bring his problem out in the open, to be discussed without fear of reprisal. If an employee knows his rights can be protected, he will feel less need to "bad mouth" his employer behind his back. This leads to a healthier attitude in all work areas. The grievance procedures must be viewed by employee and employer alike, not as an aggressive weapon, but as an assertive tool for the protection of all workers' rights.

Education is the key to an effective grievance procedure. You, the employee, must know

your contractual rights. If you have any questions you should ask your job representative. For GLC staff, your job rep is Bill Adams on Delta. Teachers can talk to Bob Utchell in the school; and service workers should contact Dan Donaldson in Maintenance. Your job rep has received specialized training in contract language and the grievance procedure. If you cannot contact the job rep in your area, feel free to call any of the other reps, or contact Ralph Connor, on Kappa. Ralph is our immediate past president and has had extensive union experience. You will find that your job reps are eager to talk to you and if they cannot answer your questions immediately, they will find the answers and get back to you.

If you are a non-member reading this, we would like to emphasize that we are also addressing you. OSEA is required by law to represent members and non-members alike, so we want to encourage you to come to us with your questions. There will be no pressure put upon you to join the Union. We just want to see

that you are educated to your rights.

Enclosed with this memo you will find a ballot for district director. This is an important position, which, not only provides leadership for the chapters in our district, but also serves as your voice on the OSEA Board of Directors. Study the candidates' statements in your last OSEA News and return your marked ballot in the enclosed envelope.

Also enclosed, you will find a notice for our next Chapter meeting. Please make it a point to attend. Ken Allen, our employee rep from headquarters will be there to help answer any questions. We need your help in making some important decisions about the direction that OSEA at Hillcrest is growing. If you would like to attend, but cannot at this time, stick a note in with your ballot indicating a time more favorable to you.

Thank you for your attention. Your newly elected officers.

Dan Donaldson, President
Roseann Schu, Vice Pres.
Linda Foster, Secretary
Eva Watts, Treasurer