

# When a union cares

By Marilyn Spink

*Following up on CUPE's task force on nursing homes, Metro Toronto's Local 79 launched an investigation into Metro-operated homes for the aged. The findings were a bombshell that forced the politicians into action.*

Jeff Rose had been president of Local 79 for less than a year when the Greenacres story hit the papers. The Greenacres affair proved to the public, as well as to the local's 6,500 members, that the union had established a responsible and effective role, one that went beyond the bargaining table.

Greenacres is one of the seven homes for the aged that Metro Toronto operates. In the summer of 1981 Rose and the executive committee of the union announced that they were doing a study of the homes, and distributed a brief questionnaire to the 1,500 members of Local 79 who work in the nursing, housekeeping, and dietary divisions of the homes.

The executive committee also asked me to visit each of the homes last September and October. I talked to staff during their coffee, lunch, and dinner breaks, and spent time on



Jeff Rose

the floors watching people at work.

What I heard in every home, over and over again, was that the employees were upset about the hurried, assembly-line kind of care they were forced to give. There just weren't enough staff to give the old people the care and attention they needed. Supplies were short; equipment was outmoded and in need of repair.

Most staff members seemed to think that, although staffing and supplies were the major problems affecting their lives and the lives of the residents, they were problems that a union probably couldn't do much about. When they had complained to management, they'd been told that nothing could be done, that it was "up to city hall."

Rose and the local's executive were especially concerned about the critical situation at Greenacres, and prepared a report to take to city hall. ▶





The Greenacres report documents the shortage of nursing and house-keeping staff at the home. Ninety-six percent of the residents at Greenacres require extended nursing care, and many of them suffer from psychiatric and related problems.

A feeling of scarcity pervades the home: long, cheerless corridors, residents dressed in faded baggy clothing, beds without blankets, brown paper towels issued instead of face cloths.

The report is more than a catalogue of problems, and a plea on the residents' behalf. Rose and the executive felt that it was important to make their points in a constructive way, drawing upon the experience and knowledge of Local 79 members in the homes, so the report concludes with 12 recommendations for solving the problems.

Local 79's report was directed at the committee of politicians at Metro who

are responsible for the homes for the aged. While it had certainly not been a secret that Local 79 was doing a study of the homes, the report seemed to take management by surprise. The bureaucrats and politicians were furious; they denied that Greenacres was in a state of crisis.

Rose appeared before the politicians to defend the report. Metro Chairman Paul Godfrey grilled the union's president, trying to discredit the case that had been made. Godfrey asked where Rose got his information, implying that it had been spun out of someone's overactive imagination. Rose quietly answered that it was based on data from the questionnaires, and on visits to Greenacres.

Godfrey accused Rose of manufacturing publicity that upset relatives of the residents. A representative of a group of relatives told the Metro Chairman that relatives who visited

residents wouldn't be upset; they could confirm that the report was factual.

Godfrey didn't believe that some residents were without blankets. He referred to the response his staff had hastily prepared to the Greenacres report, denying most of the union's findings. A woman came to the microphone and told the chairman that her husband had been admitted to Greenacres two weeks previously and that overworked nurses were still searching for a blanket for his bed.

Godfrey's continuing attack seemed to indicate that he had lined up most of the politicians before the meeting, and that the Metro committee would send the Greenacres report to another committee for study and a slow death.

Then, the Medical Director of the Homes, Dr. Margaret Milton, came to the microphone. In a dramatic speech she told the committee that, although she knew that speaking out would jeopardize her job, she felt she had a responsibility to tell them that she'd been trying, without success, to get more staff at Greenacres for over a year. The union's report was true. Greenacres was in a state of crisis.

The committee was stunned. Godfrey rushed out of the room. He returned a few minutes later to announce that he had phoned Sam Ruth, a geriatric expert. Ruth agreed to examine the situation and report to the politicians in two weeks.

Everyone waited for Ruth's report. Meanwhile, Rose sent copies of the Greenacres report to opposition parties in the provincial legislature. The Metro bureaucrats had been placing the blame for the shortages on a lack of funds from the province, which had not yet approved the 1981 Metro budget.

During question period at Queen's Park, opposition members cross-examined Tory ministers. The Tories floundered; they said the union had exaggerated; they said paper towels were issued because residents were allergic to face-cloths!

However, when Ruth issued his report it confirmed the union's findings. He called for 39 more staff immediately, and recommended that a labour-management committee be set up at Greenacres to deal with some of the problems Local 79 had documented. Metro Council then commended the union for bringing the situation at Greenacres to their attention, and approved the funds for new staff.

Anxious to avoid another "Greenacres affair," Metro bureaucrats instructed administrators in the other six Metro-owned homes to set up labour-management committees at once.

The union expected Metro to move quickly to alleviate the shortage of staff and supplies in the other six homes. But that was not to be. So early this year the local mailed another short questionnaire to workers in the homes. People reported that supplies were still short, no new permanent staff had been hired, and management still wasn't providing coverage for employees who were away because of illness or injury. The workers gave the union a clear message that giving custodial care just wasn't acceptable: the old people needed more and deserved better.

Rose and the executive decided that it was time to put together another report — one that would outline the problems in *all* of the homes, and make recommendations for improvements.

Although the Greenacres report is a measured and carefully argued document, the press picked up on the stories of mice and cockroaches. The argument for more staff was overshadowed in headlines about vermin. The tone of Local 79's second report was again low-key and factual, but this time there is no mention of mice.

The local prepared a one-page summary for the media which outlined ways in which the staff shortage affects the comfort of residents. The stories about the second report reflect that summary, and not a mouse has crept in. The headlines read: "Residents suffering from lack of staff," exactly the message the report conveys.

Have things improved? "The biggest change has been in the public's perception of the situation in the homes," Rose says. "It's now an established fact that Metro isn't providing enough staff to give good care. The bureaucrats have stopped denying there's a problem and at last are talking about what to do about it."

Slowly things are changing. It's clear, though, that Local 79 won't be satisfied until the union's members tell them that every floor in every home has enough staff to give the quality care which they know the residents deserve. ■



*Marilyn Spink is a Local 79 staff member who conducted the research into Metro Toronto-owned nursing homes.*