

Unifor Women's Advocates remain active during Covid-19

Unifor has a network of over 400 Women's Advocates across Canada. Our union has negotiated this position into our collective agreements with employers. Advocates are selected and receive special training through the union. Women's Advocates can be contacted by workers who are seeking information, support and referral on gender-based violence including domestic violence. They have a management counterpart that is responsible for handling issues of domestic violence that impacts the workplace. The Advocates all identify as women but workers of any gender can contact them.

Unifor is a general workers union. During the pandemic, approximately ½ of our membership has been laid off due to lack of work or due to government-ordered closures, predominantly in manufacturing and hospitality. The other ½ have been deemed essential services and have continued to work, mostly in public-facing positions.

Women's Advocates for the workplaces who have been laid off as well as those working from home are able to be contacted remotely through dedicated email addresses or cell phones. Advocates are working to reach out to local services, including shelters, to determine whether new protocols are in place due to the pandemic. Shelters have had to put rules in place due to physical distancing. Some have had to offer shelter in hotels where their shelters are full or they need to reduce the number of people at the shelter. Some shelters have put new processes in place to allow women to contact them for support, counselling and safety planning. Using text and online chat can allow women to reach out without being overheard by their abuser.

For Unifor Women's Advocates still in the workplace (e.g. healthcare workers, grocery stores, transit), they have carried on as usual for intake while respecting social distancing. They have also done outreach to familiarize themselves with how support services were operating.

Advocates have continued to lobby the government for specific supports for shelters and gender-based violence support services. This has resulted in the Canadian government committing \$40 million dollars to support these services to continue.

At the national union level, we have sent communications to our Advocates that included some information on challenges during the pandemic. This included the experience in other jurisdictions with increased domestic violence, awareness raising of the dangers for those isolated with their abusers, and some ideas on altered communication during these times. We have encouraged our Advocates to be mindful of their own needs and to engage in self-care. The national union has provided mental health support information that has been shared with Advocates. <https://www.unifor.org/en/covid-19-mental-health-guide>

Often our Advocates are high profile in the workplace and women and men reach out to them as a safe source of information and navigation through employer or government benefits. Many of our Advocates have been active in passing on the information from the national union's hub

on topics such as wage replacements and rights to personal protective equipment www.unifor.org/covid19.

The Director of the Women's Department along with an Advocate participated in a podcast hosted by the International Transport Workers Federation on domestic violence and women's advocates during the pandemic. The link was shared with our Advocates. <https://anchor.fm/itfglobal/episodes/Covid-19-impact-on-informal-transport-workers-ecipr8>

We continue to send out communications to our Advocates with links to resources and websites on domestic violence during the pandemic.

We've produced a resource document on workplace supports and domestic violence: <https://www.unifor.org/en/node/18937> and have publicized them through social media shareables: <https://www.unifor.org/en/safe-home-safe-work-end-domestic-violence>
We will be holding a webinar in June for our Advocates to update them and provide an opportunity for them to share their experiences.

In solidarity,
Lisa Kelly
Director
Unifor Women's Department