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Public Employee Press

Jailed Fighting workplace violence



Local 1549's Claudia Barrow was arrested because she pressed charges.

"Claudia Barrow is a hero for standing up and saying she wouldn't tolerate the abuse."

—Kenny Mulligan
Grievance Rep

By MOLLY CHARBONEAU

Right after she was assaulted Feb. 12 at the Euclid Job Center, Local 1549 member Claudia Barrow decided "enough" - she had to take a stand against workplace violence.

And like other unionists before her who have drawn the line and stood up for their rights, Ms. Barrow ended up spending the night in jail.

"I was told if I pressed charges against the man who attacked me, he would press charges against me and I'd be arrested, even though I didn't do anything," explained Ms. Barrow, a Job Opportunity Specialist.

"I decided: I'm pressing charges, and if I have to get handcuffed, so be it."

That's how the soft-spoken, 5 foot 2 inch worker found herself behind bars at the 75th Precinct, while the union and her family worked to get her out.

"Our members are getting beaten up, but the city makes us the villains," said Local 1549 Grievance Rep Kenny Mulligan. "Ms. Barrow is a hero to her co-workers for standing up and saying she wouldn't tolerate the abuse."

Attack danger grows

Workplace attacks on DC 37 members at HRA facilities are a serious hazard as looming benefit cutoffs create a sense of desperation and clients take out their frustrations on the

staff. Crowded centers, understaffing, long waits, delays from malfunctioning computer systems and an inadequate privatized security force add to the risk.

The day she was attacked, Ms. Barrow was assigned to handle random cases rather than her usual caseload. "I was confronted by a client who said she had to see me, that she was owed money. I asked her to be patient," Ms. Barrow explained. "When her turn came, the computer showed she had received all the money she had coming. When I told her that, she went off." Ms. Barrow called security to escort the client out, and her co-workers gathered around after hearing the commotion.

"Next thing I knew, a 300-pound guy who was with the client was escorted into my cubicle by security," said Ms. Barrow. "He punched me in the face and I landed on the floor, then he began beating me with the wastebasket. The workers were yelling and someone called 911. The man also punched a dent in the cubicle wall and threatened to kill anyone who touched him." The police caught him heading down the stairs.

Ms. Barrow, still shaken and with a huge lump on her head, was taken to a management office where the assistant office manager, two police officers and the private security supervisor told her that if she pressed charges, she, too, would go to jail - because the man claimed she threw a stapler at him. That's when she made up her mind: "I'll go to jail if I have to, because it's not right to have this happen to me or my co-workers."

Another member called the union for help, and the local worked to expedite Ms. Barrow's case. After being seen at Kings County Hospital, she was released without bail the next morning. The union is now helping her file for Workers' Compensation and other benefits to help her recover at home.

Locals press for action

"We met with the city on March 1 to tell them: no more meetings, fix the problem," said Local 1549 President Eddie Rodriguez.

"HRA is not taking care of our members, and we're not tolerating this anymore." The local has pressed to replace private security guards with agency peace officers, and in the interim, to station Police Officers at HRA facilities.

"Our members are also at risk, and HRA must do something programmatically to solve the problem of too many clients, too few staff, and long delays," said Shirley Aldebol, assistant to the president of Social Service Employees Union Local 371.

"Police Officers won't stop the anger; clients will take it out on whoever's there," Ms. Aldebol said.