

Personal Support Worker flips script to provide support for PSWs

By Brock Weir

Personal Support Workers (PSWs) dedicate their working lives providing care and support for those who need it.

But who, at the end of the day, supports the PSW?

For Sheri-Lyn Steele, it's a question that needed to be answered.

The former Aurora resident has founded the Canadian PPE Network, an organization that takes its name from a term familiar to just about every person in the health care sector: Personal Protective Equipment.

'Your mask, your gown, your gloves ? these are the things that are meant to protect you,' says Ms. Steele. 'That's what PSWs do and that's what we do ? PSWs have to go to each other because they don't have anyone else.'

'We are driven by a single goal: to do our part in making the world a better place for all PSWs and front line health care workers ? at ground level,' she says. 'In a world where society is aging at an alarmingly rapid rate and PSWs are leaving the field at an equally alarming rate because of feeling devalued with chronic understaffing, unfair minimum wages and pay scales, and often overworked, we need to ensure that our PSWs that provide these critical care services are staying in the field and are taken care of properly at a personal level to be able to ensure that the care bring provided is the best, top-quality care possible. We want to help our PSWs and frontline workers feel valued and like they matter ? because they do. Truthfully, health care as we know it would crumble without them.'

The goal of The Canadian PPE Network is to provide mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, social, personal and educational resources, supports and programs to frontline workers at little to no cost to them through memberships, partnerships, donations and more, so they can continue to develop as PSWs, individuals and succeed professionally and personally.

'The reason we decided to start this up was because there are no supports,' says Ms. Steele. There are no resources and nowhere for PSWs to turn. They turn to each other online in Facebook groups, throw ideas around and try to console and support each other. I really started to notice a need for something just for PSWs. There is no governing body, we're not regulated, we're literally out there on our own. Nurses have [several organizations] and PSWs have nobody, not one single person. There is not one entity out there that provides support for PSWs.

'They need somewhere to turn when they say, 'I'm really struggling. I need bereavement counselling. Can you help me?' The way that we have structured it is it is membership based, so, as a member we are able to get you educational programs that are free or discounted. I have a program right now set up through Alzheimer's Ontario that we're going to be offering for educational resources for PSWs for Alzheimer's. It is kind of like a subsidy-type program as well.

'We believe that by giving this to them we can impact their morale, their pride, their competence, and in turn that is going to be passed on to the people they care for. PSWs love doing it but they can't afford to live. If we can give them something to want to stay in the profession, and bring more people into the profession, then it is just going to be all round better for everyone else ? the people getting the care and the people providing the care.'

The PPE Network was soft-launched online in October, followed by a formal launch at the Aurora Public Library attended by now-Mayor Tom Mrakas the following month. In that time, memberships began rolling in, as have partnerships.

'In the two months we have been doing this, we have already made a huge impact,' says Ms. Steele. 'In the next 12, it is going to be much bigger. Our main goal is to do Ontario first and by the time we're across the Province we're then going to want to branch out across Canada over the next three years.

For more information on The Canadian PPE Network, visit www.ppenetwork.com or call info@ppenetwork.com.