

# Witnessing An MHR/Client Interview

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It is recommended that a person receiving income assistance have someone attend ministry appointments with them. Where a client has been abused by an employee of the ministry, this is essential.

The person attending with the client serves as a witness.

A witness can be a family member, friend, neighbour, or professional support worker.

A recipient of income assistance is always entitled to bring a non-abusive person into a ministry interview room.

Neither the client nor the witness are required to explain or justify the witness's presence, relationship, title, role, or activity to a worker.
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In fact, the client and witness are encouraged to limit explanations to a worker, as this 'feeding' into a worker's irrelevant questioning can discourage appropriate boundaries. It is sufficient to politely explain, "I am here to support John." Where a worker refuses entry to a witness, or continues to direct irrelevant questions to a witness (eg. "Are you an advocate? Who do you work for?"), the witness should ask to speak with the District Office Supervisor immediately.

## Qualities of a Witness

A witness must be able to communicate calmly in an interview, no matter what comes up.

A witness must be assertive, but not aggressive.

A witness must be reliable –arriving for appointments on time, and bringing pen and paper to every interview.

## Before the Interview

The witness asks the client how the client would like the witness to introduce herself to the worker. The client may prefer the witness to be introduced as "friend", "support person", or by any other term.

The witness goes over her possible roles with the client and asks the client to clarify which level of activity the client wants the witness to engage in. (See 'Role of the Witness'.)

The witness discusses with the client what they will accomplish in this interview. Usually, this will be 'gathering information' from the worker as to what is required. It may involve the client asking for the presence of the District Office Supervisor when the client feels uncomfortable. It is essential to determine together what the client wants the witness to do should the worker engage in abuse of the client.

The witness and client may also devise hand or touch signals to indicate when help is wanted, when the client is beginning to feel agitated, etc.

## **Role of the Witness**

At the most basic level, a witness sits quietly beside the client for the duration of the interview. The witness is there to encourage, by her presence alone, fine conduct by the worker.

The witness may also act as observer. In the role of observer, the witness will jot down what she sees and hears. She will take down direct quotes. She will record intimidating expressions, body language, or anything else of concern.

At a further degree of activity, the witness may gather information. In this role, the witness records the worker's concerns and questions. The witness then repeats the notes back to the worker to clarify and ensure accuracy.

At this level of activity, every so often the witness should calmly ask, "Is there anything else needed?" and "When is this needed by?" "By a 'vehicle transfer paper' do you mean..." When the worker indicates he has nothing more to request, the witness reads the record back to the worker. Once the worker confirms that the witness has noted all the "requirements" for information and documentation, the witness asks the EAW if he will initial the record as accurate. (It is up to the worker whether to do so or not.)

The witness then asks the client if she has any questions for the worker. Finally, the witness thanks the worker, informs the worker that the required documentation and information will be submitted in writing by the client, and exits the room with the client.

The record of requirements should be clearly labelled, eg. "Requests from John Doe, EAW February 18th, 2003".

In some cases, the witness may observe a request that violates legislation, violates human rights, violates a person's dignity, or is impossible for the client to comply with.

If a request seems inappropriate to you or to the client, do not argue it with the worker. Simply continue gathering info until the end of the interview, get the list stamped and submitted, then contact the District Office Supervisor with your concerns.

## **After the Interview**

After the interview, the witness will help the client to approach the front desk to have the record stamped 'received' by the office. One copy will remain with the office; the client will keep one stamped copy.

## **From Witness to Advocate**

If the witness feels comfortable doing so, and if the client agrees, the witness may at this point take on the role of advocate. Otherwise, the witness may help the client to find an advocate.

If the EAW's requests are fair and reasonable, the advocate will show the client where in law these requests are made valid.

Where these points are allowed, the advocate will help the client to fulfill the requirements in writing, and remind the client to get all documentation stamped 'received'.

## **Abuse**

It is essential to determine the client's preferred course of action before entering the interview room.

If the worker is abusive, beyond making undue requests (eg. name calling, stereotyping, refusing to let the client leave the interview to use the washroom, etc), you can either

- (a) allow the natural course of events, recording all observations of concern, to result in a weighty report to the District Office Supervisor, or
- (b) call in the District Office Supervisor before the interview proceeds further. You and the client can leave the room and wait for the DOS in the lobby if desired.

## **Clarifying with Client**

In some cases, a client may need help understanding what can be requested of MHR and what cannot be provided by that ministry. A client may be helped to

- (a) ask only for what can be provided, saving herself time, energy, and grief
- (b) pursue that which can be provided in a manner that is efficient and respectful of her own time, energy, and dignity
- (c) focus on finding alternate sources for what she needs and for what the ministry cannot, legislatively, provide

Note: For the correspondence version of the workshop, "Achieving Effective Self-Advocacy", which addresses the above self-advocacy points and more, please contact [skylark@telus.net](mailto:skylark@telus.net)