

Role of the VSEA Steward

The VSEA Steward serves as the workplace representative of the VSEA in local areas throughout the State. Informed, visible Stewards help form the foundation of any success enjoyed by the union.

It is not possible for every VSEA member to hold a statewide union office, serve on a committee or become involved in the bargaining process. However, for any truly democratic union to operate smoothly and effectively, all members must be kept informed and involved in the organization. Ultimately, the success of this endeavor rests at the worksite and chapter level through the efforts of Stewards and Chapter Officers.

As a VSEA Steward, you have been identified by the membership as possessing the ability and willingness to serve as a union leader. In order to perform that role you must keep the following three areas of responsibility in mind:

1) Communication: All Stewards serve as intermediaries between the employees they represent and those in leadership positions. The Steward is in the best position to apprise VSEA staff, bargaining team representatives, and Board of Trustees members of member concerns, needs, and priorities.

In addition, Stewards are responsible for disseminating to the members information regarding union and employment issues. This can be accomplished by posting *Updates* and other material received from VSEA Headquarters, in discussions with employees, and through alternative channels such as regular communication with Chapter worksite representatives. An uninformed membership will eventually become lethargic and cynical, which will ultimately undermine all that we do in collective bargaining, lobbying, and training.

2) Organizing: Every level of VSEA, especially the Stewards, must continually organize. The purpose of organizing is directly linked to the purpose of VSEA: to join together for the common good of employees.

When we talk about internal organizing, we generally concentrate on the non-member. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that internal organizing is really a service to our existing membership. When we accept non-membership, we accept a liability which deters the progress of the VSEA.

Non-membership weakens our clout at all levels: the worksite, the bargaining table and the Legislature. In addition, members of the union are forced to "carry" non-members who receive the same contractual benefits. All Stewards must become organizers to get all eligible employees to pay their fair share. There are of course several reasons for less than 100% membership -- but if we accept anything less as a goal we will not realize our full potential as an aggressive, effective representative of the concerns and interests of public sector employees.

Stewards are the most effective VSEA organizers!

Your co-workers see you on a regular basis, trust you and identify you as a VSEA representative. You are in the best position to explain the benefit of joining together to strengthen a union devoted to improving the wages, working conditions and lives in State government and other public services.

3) Contract Administration: Collective bargaining is the most important tool we possess to achieve the goal of improved wages and working conditions for our members. Effective contract administration is essential, both to guarantee that present benefits are received by our members and to lay a foundation for future rounds of bargaining.

Contract administration by a collective bargaining unit's Stewards provides a record of needed contract language changes.

Stewards should keep a record of grievances and areas in the contract which have been difficult to enforce or circumvented by management. If you need help setting up your records, please ask for ideas.

Effective contract administration by the union preserves the respect from the employer which each unit will need in order to continue to negotiate good contracts. For instance, the State's attitude and perspective regarding each unit is generally developed during the contract year. It is impossible to demand respect at the bargaining table if the contract is ignored or weakly enforced during the contract period.

In addition, we should not lose sight of the fact that effective contract administration is an excellent organizing tool. When employees see that their contract has real meaning and is adhered to by the parties they will become more likely to get involved with the union -- since that is the only way to effect the terms and conditions of one's employment.

Notes: