

Threatened on the job

SaskTel workers have some 'frightening' stories to tell

A joint union management committee that investigated the shooting death of a SaskTel service employee last August has uncovered a "frightening" number of incidents in which SaskTel employees have been threatened with firearms.

Gord Hunter, who sat on the committee as a representative of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, said the committee has concluded the shooting death of 45-year-old SaskTel Employee John Davies was "a random act of violence."

There was "practically nothing" that could have been done in that specific situation that could have saved Davies, Hunter said, in an interview Thursday. Davies was shot to death after being called from his Fort Qu'Appelle home in the early morning hours of Aug. 11, to do a service call at the Star Blanket Reserve.

While it is too late to help Davies, Hunter said the committee hopes its report will provide the catalyst for security improvements for SaskTel employees and perhaps for workers at other companies where employees work alone.

Darcee MacFarlane, the director of corporate affairs with Sasktel, agreed.

"At the end of the day, the safety of the employees is the first concern," MacFarlane said.

There are certain areas of the province where extra care is required to protect employees' safety, the report said.

"The level of poverty, drug and alcohol abuse and violence on some reserves has turned some of those communities in to powder kegs," the report said.

Similar situations exist in inner city areas of Regina and Saskatoon, the report said.

"These factors must not be ignored and have to be taken into consideration when sending in employees to potentially volatile situations," the report said.

Among the recommendations in the report is one that "employees should not be asked to work alone in potentially violent situations."

It is also suggested that SaskTel employees should not be asked to work in some dangerous situations unless they are accompanied by the RCMP or by police officers employed by Indian bands.

Better systems allowing employees to check in and supervisors to keep track of the location and status of the employees are also suggested.

A variety of technology-related options for keeping better track of employees and making it easier for them to get help in an emergency are also suggested.

Establishment of a better record-keeping system, so employees are not inadvertently sent back to locations where assaults or dangerous situations have occurred in the past, is also recommended.

Hunter said the committee heard repeated stories, during meetings with small groups of SaskTel workers, about employees being threatened, sometimes with guns.

For example:

- Residents have produced firearms when SaskTel employees have been sent to remove telephones from homes;
- An employee, up a pole, was recently told that he made a good target up there;
- An angry farmer chased SaskTel employees with a swather;
- Employees have been told by angry land owners "I hope I don't find your name in the obituary columns next week."

Aside from the incidents mentioned in the report, a SaskTel employee was punched while working in a back alley on the 1300 block of Retallack Street Monday afternoon, in what is being described as a random attack.

After being treated by the family doctor, the employee returned to work Tuesday.