

Proposal to Create Position of Steward

Background:

La Reunion Co-op has been functioning with a very limited membership of die-hard co-ops for the past four months, electing the officers necessary to keep the place running (along with a few other officers not required but very much desired by the membership). Now, as the co-op reaches nearly 2/3rds of the total building population as members of the Co-op, more labor hours are coming available, more folks are doing work, and just in general, more is happening.

In addition, over the past four months, many issues and suggestions have arisen that do not clearly fall under one specific officer's purview, and many people have expressed concerns that, to deal with, would require the coordination of multiple members and officers working together.

It has been my experience with Co-ops in college, Nicaragua and NYC, that the larger a Co-op is, the more important it becomes to have an individual responsible for coordinating all the officers, catching things that fall through the cracks and making sure they're dealt with, and in general being responsible for the overall functioning of the Co-op. When no individual is specifically tasked with this role, it becomes very easy for a member with a problem to feel disenfranchised and burnt out because they feel like they're the only one working on something. It can also lead to miscommunication between committees/officers, resulting in more issues.

One option to remedy this is to hold more meetings of the Co-op to maintain communication channels. For us, I do not believe this option would work, because we are all very busy people, working on the House, working to pay the bills, some of us going to school, some of us teaching, the meetings we already attend and the things we do to keep ourselves sane. Adding more meetings would take up even more of everyone's already strapped time, and lead to further potential for burnout.

Another option is to create a House Board that would meet more regularly than the entire membership and be empowered to take action on decisions made by the house. I believe that this would also not work for us, mainly for the same reasons as above. The officers we have now are already taking on the lion's share of work in the house, and expecting them to add more meetings into their schedule could push even more of them over the edge.

I will admit that when it comes to Co-ops, I come from a long history of highly effective lines of individual responsibility (≠power) and am a strong proponent of electing officers to handle the important tasks of delegation, coordination and communication. It works in houses of 10 and houses of 100 in Ann Arbor, it has worked there for the past 75

years, and continues to work effectively into the future. The same can be said of College Houses here, the Berkeley Student Co-ops, The co-ops in Oberlin, Chicago, and elsewhere. I would like to see this tradition come to La Reunion and have one person that everyone can go to for help if something doesn't seem right.

Proposal:

To create the elected officer position of Steward, to be worth two (2) lumps of labor, with the job description enumerated below. To hold an immediate special election to choose a Steward. This election shall be facilitated by the membership coordinator and any other interested members. Nominations shall be open until the Thursday following the meeting in which this proposal is passed, voting shall occur Friday through Sunday, and the winner shall be announced at the end of the Sunday house meeting.

Steward Job Description

- Represent the house on the CHEA Board of Directors, report back to the house on Board issues.
- Monitor central responsibilities of house officers and reporting delinquencies first to the officer, then to the committee that evaluates that officer (if it exists), then to the house if necessary.
- Be familiar with other officer's jobs to the extent that s/he may continue the performance of that job in an emergency or transitional period.
- Make sure committees meet regularly, expedite business, maintain attendance, post clear agendas and minutes... (i.e. making sure the committee chairs are doing their jobs).
- Make sure that house meetings expedite business and function according to the procedures (through the facilitator).
- Make sure minutes from house meetings and house policies are clear, current and posted for members to see.
- Be the first source to members for general information about the co-op and CHEA.
- Be the second contact in conflict resolution between members (after the membership coordinator).
- Be the first contact in conflict resolution between officers, or between an officer and member.
- Carry out evictions on behalf of the house membership and/or CHEA Board of Directors through collaboration with membership coordinator.
- Oversee membership reviews. Ensure that house policies regarding eviction meetings are followed. Inform the membership and the member being reviewed of all relevant policies.
- Conduct elections for officers and receive resignations of elected members in absence of labor czar.
- Make sure that there are regular meetings between officers and/or committee chairs.
- Encourage and maintain a spirit of cooperation and democratic participation within the house.
- Update the wiki when the house votes to change policies, labor descriptions, etc

- Train officers and committee chairs in the absence of previous officer/chair to do the same.
- Check with other officers to ensure they are doing their job.
- Act as the official spokesperson for the house.
- Pick up slack whenever necessary. Catch any important issues that fall through the cracks and ensure that they are dealt with.

Considerations:

- The job description is an adaptation of the Director job description from College Houses, with changes based on similar positions at Brooks House in Chicago (Loose Ends Coordinator), ICC Ann Arbor (President) and Sasona (Steward)
- We have already elected a CHEA board rep for this term, so that part of the job description will not go into effect until said elected Board Rep's term is up or the house decides to replace them
- This type of job will require much more than 2 hours of labor. Should we increase this number?

Drafted and submitted by Travis Jones

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La Reunion Cooperative, CHEA, Austin, TX

Appendix I

Existing job descriptions that this proposal is based on:

Brooks House Loose Ends Coordinator:

- Supervises Treasurer
- Assigns someone to write and post meeting agenda and minutes
- Chooses and trains effective meeting facilitators
- COUCH representative unless another is designated
- Picks up slack whenever necessary

College Houses Director:

1. Representing the house at the CH Board of Directors meetings in accordance with the attendance policies of the board (including board subcommittee meetings).
2. Maintaining general awareness of all board business, decisions and policies.
3. Seeing that completed move-out forms are taken to the central office within 5 days of the end of the contract period.
4. Filing for eviction when necessary through coordination with the office.
5. Being aware of individual problems and situations that might find their way into litigation so that there is a consistent source of such information.
6. Monitoring central responsibilities of house officers and reporting delinquencies first to the officer, then to the committee that evaluates that officer, then to the board if necessary.

7. Being familiar with other officer's jobs to the extent that s/he may continue the performance of that job in an emergency or transitional period.
8. Making sure committees meet regularly, expedite business, maintain attendance, post clear agendas and minutes... (i.e. making sure the committee chairs are doing their jobs).
9. Making sure that house meetings expedite business and function according to the procedures (through the facilitator).
10. Making sure minutes from house meetings and house policies are clear, current and posted for members to see. Also make sure copies get to the office.
11. Being the first source to members for general information about the co-op and College Houses.
12. Being the second contact in conflict resolution between members (after the membership coordinator).
13. Being the first contact in conflict resolution between officers, or between an officer and member.
14. Conducting elections for officers and receiving resignations of elected members.
15. Implementing the new member orientation process.
16. Providing expertise to the budget process in accordance with the policies of the board and committees.
17. Making sure that there are regular meetings between officers and/or committee chairs.
18. Training committee chairs in the absence of previous chair to do the same.
19. Checking with other officers to ensure they are doing their job.
20. Acting as the ultimate authority in house emergencies.
21. Acting as the official spokesperson for your house.
22. Attending social/educational and house officer meetings.
23. Attending house committee meetings as often as possible.
24. Read this manual and pass it on to the next person.
25. Train your successor.

Sasona Steward (Enchanting Wizard of Rhythm)

1. Represent the house on the CHEA Board of Directors. Report back to the house on Board issues.
2. Read all house documents -- the [TheContract](#), the [House Rules](#), the [House Bylaws](#), the [CHEA Articles of Incorporation](#), the [house budget](#), and the [labor descriptions](#) -- and be familiar with all of them. Be a source of information -- educate members about house policies. Work to make all policies and important house documents easily accessible to all members.
3. Fill in when important officer positions are temporarily vacant, and assure smooth transitions of officer positions from one member to another.
4. Work to find solutions to problems that don't fall in the jurisdiction of any other house officers or members.
5. As Pet Kaiser, communicate and enforce the house [Pet Policy](#). Keep track of members' compliance with the [Pet Policy](#). Ensure that the house pet limit is not exceeded.
6. Carry out elections in the absence of the Labor Czar.

7. Keep an eye on the books to ensure that they are updated. Ensure that the Treasurer gets members on [payment plans](#). When necessary, deliver the Elliot Blanton Memorial Eviction notice.
8. Carry out evictions on behalf of the house membership and/or CHEA Board of Directors (Section 4.3 of the House Rules).
9. Oversee Membership Reviews. Ensure that house policies regarding eviction meetings are followed (Section 4.7 of House Rules). Inform the membership and the member being reviewed of all relevant policies.
10. When needed, assist the Membership Coordinator to try to solve conflicts and mediate disputes. (See: [MediationInfo](#))
11. Encourage and maintain a spirit of cooperation and democratic participation in the house.
12. Update the wiki when the house votes to change policies, labor descriptions, etc (voted 4-4-10)
13. Ensure that taxes are filed on time. Be familiar with tax filing procedures. (See: [TaxFilingInformation](#).)
14. Pay attention to ensure Membership Coordinator duties are being completed. Check to ensure that the Membership Coordinator is posting ads on craigslist roughly once a week (whether we have any vacancies or not). Have read-only access to info@sasona.org . Check to ensure that the Membership Coordinator is answering emails in a reasonable amount of time. Check to ensure that the Membership Coordinator is adding accepted prospective members to the email list. (Voted 10-23-11.)
15. Pay attention to ensure Labor Czar duties are being completed. Communicate with the Labor Czar every month to ensure that make-up labor and labor fines are being assessed in a timely manner and emailed to the house (see [LaborPolicies](#)). Ensure that the Labor Czar is maintaining a publicly available format of each house member's no-shows, make-up labor hours owed, make-up labor hours completed, and labor fines owed. If these jobs are not being completed, no-show the Labor Czar. (Voted 1-27-13.)

Appendix II

Background/Opinions provided by Jim Jones (Co-op historian, guru, father of Travis)

1. Larger groups need more structure than smaller groups. More people mean that there are more diffuse patterns of communications, more opinions, etc., and the group as a whole can't coordinate as easily as a smaller group. Sasona is a little unique in this (and GRACC also uses this approach), where a smaller group (the board) acts as a coordinator, at least in some areas of responsibility, instead of the house as a whole.

Still, the larger the individual group, the more likely it is to need an officer whose role is to coordinate the whole. Since most new co-ops these days are quite small, this isn't as apparent as it was in the 1930s to 1960s, when it was easier to rent or buy very large rooming houses. The average new group these days is around 10-12 people, and a decentralized system seems to work fairly well up to around 20 or even a little larger.

Some of the largest and oldest groups, such as in Ann Arbor and Berkeley, once tended to formalize this more than is now common. The position of "House Manager" was often used back in the 1940s in many places, but it's almost gone now, outside of Berkeley. You and I both did this job at Tri/Joint/Jones/Baker, and it was NOT the role of president. President (most formally in Berkeley) is a communications position, often associated with chairing meetings, sitting on boards, etc. In Berkeley, however, the President is like the civilian position overseeing the work of the House Manager, who is responsible for coordinating the operations. Maybe a little like the Starship Enterprise model of Picard and Reicher. But no one expects the whole group to oversee the engine room. That works better when the starship has a smaller crew -- like maybe 10.

2. It's harder to take a small group system and scale up than to take a large house system and scale down. This may seem obvious, but it isn't all that clear to the small group trying to scale up, as is happening with CHEA. On the other hand, since many of the founders of Sasona came from the very large 21st Street group, they incorporated into the smaller group structure some of the large group systems, including the coordinating function. This is why they have a smaller board, separate from the house membership as a whole, while many new co-ops just rely on house meetings to manage things. (Since the board is no longer within one house, I'd guess that this may now be a more difficult task.)

But despite Sasona's ancestry, scaling up to deal with operations at LaReunion may be (and apparently is) difficult. This is probably all the more true because of the apartment-style structure -- that makes the communications even more difficult, peer pressures less effective, etc. Since you used to live at King House in Ann Arbor, you'll have some idea about the impact of apartment living, but few others from a group house background will intuitively grasp what new challenges are at hand.

3. Older groups tend to be more structured. This is partially true because they started with larger groups (many of which have been downsized since the early years), and also because of changing ideologies.

Since the 1970s, an anti-authoritarianism has tarred many of our organizations with an aversion to anything smacking of structure. Even in some of our older and larger groups, certain words have had some kind of visceral impact on people: "president" has come to mean something close to "power monger," and even "leader" is considered a bad word in some quarters. The word "Coordinator" still seems to be okay, however, and really embodies the original function of a "president," so I'd suggest using it whenever possible. Another variation on this was pioneered at Oberlin, where very large groups really called for something like a president, even though the word wasn't acceptable. Their term for this position became "Loose Ends Coordinator." I'm attaching the handbook for Brooks House in Urbana, Illinois, which found this term when getting established and incorporated it into their structure (see page 19). You'll notice that the term doesn't actually talk about supervision, except for the Treasurer (which is a long story in itself), but in practice that function was informally vested in the

LEC. perhaps it could be called more of a moral authority than a formal one, much like the way "chiefs" worked in band-level tribes of Native Americans (sorry -- that's the anthropology classes coming out in me).

4. Groups always have someone who takes on the role of "loose ends coordinator." When a group claims to have no one in charge, I always go to the Treasurer, who is generally a highly respected member and has more moral authority, even if nothing is in writing. Frankly, this is a crappy way of running a house, particularly in these days when "transparency" is supposedly important, but it does work. Again, however, size matters, and this informal authority is harder to exercise as communications become more complex.

5. Some groups get around the aversion to "authority" through hiring. This seems to be a more acceptable alternative than elections for some reason, perhaps because people feel like they can more easily hold the person responsible. On the other hand, hiring can lead to a "let-George-do-it" mentality, which can really screw things up.

6. Apartment co-ops are difficult, period. There are some in Austin at College Houses to look at for clues on operations, and there are more in Berkeley. And, of course, the family housing co-ops are almost all in apartments, but they generally have hired management companies -- no model to look at there.

There are only two structures that come to my mind for smoothing out the operations. One is what you suggest -- a more structured management to make sure that someone is watching the whole store rather than just parts of it. The other is a model that I've been talking about for maybe 15 years, from Australia. STUCCO co-op in Sydney is physically a little like La Reunion, in that it's built around a courtyard and is several floors of apartments, but with a total membership of 37. It is managed through a set of four committees, and every member is required appointed to one of them. It really works well. See: <http://www.stucco.org.au/about/>.

So good luck to you on this -- this first year will probably be a bit of a struggle, but things will eventually get sorted out. Things either work or they don't, and when they don't they will get changed. It's a little like what they say about entrepreneurs -- you can't be afraid of failure, since you learn from it and do better the next time. (Of course, it's still painful!) Yeah, easy for me to talk...