



2011 ANNUAL REPORT
Providing advocacy, education, community building

“It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world.”

—MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

WHO WE ARE

Together Against Poverty Society (TAPS) is the largest anti-poverty organization on Vancouver Island. We have a positive impact on people's lives in ways that honour and promote human rights, justice, and a healthy, sustainable community. TAPS is a recognized leader and resource for citizens, community groups, and social agencies attempting to reduce poverty. Our education and advocacy services touch over 4,000 people per year – and we are not yet meeting the needs of all who approach us. We provide services to residents of the Greater Victoria area and adjacent municipalities including the Western Communities, Saanich Peninsula and the Southern Gulf Islands.

TAPS was established and registered as a Society in 1989, receiving charitable tax status in 1994. TAPS is a non-profit society whose membership is open to individuals or groups concerned with the preservation of civil society, the social justice movement, the eradication of poverty, as well as the continuing moral progress of those ideals.

THE PURPOSES OF TAPS

- to better the lifestyle and living conditions of persons on a low income
- to enable social services and faith-based groups to network for the purpose of helping persons requiring assistance
- to make the general public aware of the problems persons on low income have and ways in which they could assist in solving these problems
- to focus a special interest on the welfare of children.
- to educate and inform persons on low income of their rights and to provide a support system assisting such persons.
- to form a network of people in poverty to enable them to solve their own problems.
- to maintain current records of what assistance is available for persons in need and where to obtain this assistance.

WHAT WE DO

- Advocacy services in the areas of income assistance and tenancy including information, summary advice, negotiation and or representation to persons of no, low or fixed income;
- Training for low income persons and other interested community groups and organizations, which then enables them to advocate for themselves or for their members;
- Identify, research and address issues relating to poverty with particular emphasis on those that affect our local community and;
- Work in cooperation with other community groups and social service providers in advancing poverty issues.

Executive Director's Annual Report 2011

It has been an exciting year of challenges, changes and triumphs at Together Against Poverty Society. In my role as Executive Director I have worked to advance the strategic goals of the organization. The goals are to: (1) Provide a consistent, high level of individual legal advocacy services; (2) Engage the board of directors in broader community activism; (3) Increase opportunities for volunteers and students; (4) Increase and broaden our public legal education and community outreach; and (5) Ensure the sustainability of TAPS.

Over the past year, TAPS has continued to provide high quality legal advocacy services in the areas of income assistance, provincial disability benefits and tenancy to the Greater Victoria community. We faced some challenges in terms of staffing as two of our dedicated and knowledgeable income assistance advocates, Susan Rassmussen and Candace Witkowskyj, moved on to other pursuits, while our tenacious tenant advocate, Thea McDonogh is busy welcoming a new addition to her household! We were fortunate to find excellent new advocates, Erin Pritchard, Amy Johnston and Tasha Johnson.

One of the most significant changes to occur within the organization this year was in terms of legal supervision. TAPS changed legal supervisors in July 2011 for the first time since 2007. Roland Kuczma was TAPS legal supervisor from February 2007–July 2011. We are extremely grateful for the service and supervision he provided to TAPS advocates over that period. As of July 2011 Lisa Cowan is TAPS Legal Supervisor. We are excited about having Lisa on board in this capacity. She is eminently qualified and brings a wealth of experience to the position including her previous role as Senior Supervising Solicitor of the Justice, Employment and Education Group of the Legal Services Branch of the Ministry of Attorney General of BC. Lisa has been involved with TAPS as a Volunteer Disability Advocate and coordinator of TAPS mentoring program. Her previous experience and familiarity with TAPS has made for a very smooth transition in supervising lawyers.

One of the highlights of TAPS work this year was in regards to the Community Volunteer Supplement (CVS). Through a combination of TAPS individual advocacy services and broader, systemic advocacy TAPS assisted in getting over 5000 people across the province off the CVS waitlist and on to the supplement. Although the provincial government cancelled the program, the government also committed to investing a further 10 million dollars a year to a new volunteer supplement program for recipients of Persons with Disabilities benefits in British Columbia. We look forward with great anticipation for the announcement of that new program.

TAPS continues to rely on the skill and support of volunteers to run its programs efficiently and effectively. We continue to see a steady flow of new volunteers through our doors and are proud of our ability to retain our volunteers. TAPS front desk continues to be staffed by highly skilled,

compassionate and dedicated volunteers and we greatly appreciate their significant contribution to our organization. Our amazing volunteer coordinator, Heidi deserves a great deal of credit for TAPS success in this regard. The number of volunteers actively participating in the Volunteer Disability Advocacy Project has remained steady over the past year, averaging about twenty-four at any given time. We have seen a notable increase in the number of cases that each volunteer is able to take on because their skills have been improving with time and experience, therefore their capacity has grown.

TAPS advocates continue to be actively involved in presenting Public Legal Education workshops to the community. There are a number of organizations that request PLE's on a regular basis. For example, The Law Centre invites advocates from TAPS to present each time a new class of law students begins their placement. AIDS Vancouver Island, the Single Parent Resource Center and PEERS Victoria Resource Society are just a few examples of community groups where TAPS does regular presentations. TAPS board, staff, volunteers and Executive Director have been actively involved in community outreach activities over the past year. Although these activities are not formal Public Legal Education presentations, we always bring information about our programs and services and engage with the public about the work we do at TAPS. A few examples of the types of community outreach events TAPS has been involved in over the past year are: Law Days, Project Connect and Coalition Connect – hosted by the Victoria Native Friendship Centre and the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness, the Community Agency Networking Fair and World Hepatitis C day. These are great opportunities to share information about what we do at TAPS with other service providers and the community as a whole.

I am pleased to report that TAPS met its budget goals this year. We expanded the number of funders investing in TAPS, thereby ensuring the sustainability of the organization. We are now receiving funding from the Vancouver Foundation, Coast Capital Savings and The United Way of Greater Victoria. Coast Capital is assisting with the costs associated with our Community Volunteer Income Tax program and the United Way of Greater Victoria is funding some of our core costs which are a great help to our organization. We are hoping to continue these funding relationships and develop more throughout the upcoming year.

TAPS has flourished both in terms of providing accurate individual legal advocacy services and education to the people of Greater Victoria. Finally, I would like to acknowledge what a privilege it is to work with some of the most highly intelligent, dedicated and caring staff, board and volunteers in our community.

KELLY NEWHOOK

November 2011

2011 President's Report

I am so pleased to report that TAPS is doing well in this our 22nd year. There are four major factors in this success.

First, last year we hired Kelly Newhook as TAPS first Executive Director and she is doing outstanding work. We needed a full time operations manager and someone to do effective outreach to the broader community. Kelly has excelled at both these tasks.

Second, we did not put our new Strategic Plan on a shelf and forget about it!

We have taken action to support the goals of the Plan that were developed by staff, volunteers and Board members. One of the goals is to engage the Board of Directors in broader community advocacy and activism. For example, we organized a letter writing campaign by the Board about the importance of access to the Community Volunteer Supplement. Another example of Board members getting more involved in advocacy is that I am now Co-Chair of the Social Justice Advisory Council at the University of Victoria. The mandate of this group is to connect more closely the important work that is being done at the Social Justice Studies program at the university and the important work being done by TAPS and others in the community. The Council is planning workshops and forums on social justice and law.

Third, the staff and volunteers are major players in the success of TAPS. We welcome Erin Pritchard as our full-time income assistance advocate, Amy Johnston as our part-time income assistance advocate and Tasha Johnson as our part-time tenant advocate. And, of course, we want to thank John Cooke, and Stephen Portman for their continued good work. Lisa Cowan is our new Legal Supervisor. Lisa will mentor staff and provide legal advice. Thanks to our staff we continue to provide a consistent and high level of individual advocacy services

Heidi is our star volunteer organizer! Our volunteers at the front desk, working on the newsletter and answering income tax questions all contribute to the success of TAPS. The Board members are also volunteers. Thanks so much everyone.

The fourth major factor in the success of TAPS is funding. The sustainability of TAPS is the bottom line of our success. The Law Foundation of British Columbia continues to be TAPS largest funder and we are extremely grateful for their support of our legal advocacy programs. This year we did get the Community Gaming Grant and we are pleased that the United Way, the Vancouver Foundation, the Provincial Employees Community Services Fund and Coast Capital Savings all provided us with funding to help us serve our community. I want to thank these major funders. I also want to thank all the individuals who give money to TAPS. Some give a few dollars and some give much more. All is appreciated.

I am so pleased to be part of an organization that tries each day to meet our mission which is to better the lives of persons living in poverty through individual and community advocacy and public legal education. The dedicated work of staff and volunteers is vital to so many. We do make a difference.

JOAN MCHARDY

November 2011

2011 Tenant Advocacy Project

TASHA JOHNSON AND JOHN COOKE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The TAPS Tenant Advocacy Project provides a unique and vital service to the tenant community of Greater Victoria and surrounding region, including:

- legal information for tenants regarding their rights and responsibilities under the British Columbia *Residential Tenancy Act*,
- mediation for and negotiation on behalf of clients with their landlords toward the equitable resolution of disputes,
- legal advocacy on behalf of clients at Residential Tenancy Branch Dispute Resolution hearings,
- Community Public Legal Education for tenants, professionals and other stakeholders regarding tenancy issues, rights and responsibilities and,
- Assistance and support for individuals in order that they might be better capable of advocating on their own behalf.

Direct advocacy services are provided to the public by way of information (either by phone consultation, drop-in or appointment), summary advice or, as part of a caseload.

The ongoing services of a caseload may include contacting a client's landlord and/or providing ongoing support and representation at formal Dispute Resolution proceedings.

The tenant advocates also spend a significant amount of time interviewing clients, preparing witnesses for hearing as well as researching case law in addition to the collection, dissemination and disclosure of evidence.

CASE WORK

Case Files are opened when:

- a client has commenced an application for Dispute Resolution with the Residential Tenancy Branch against a former or current landlord and/or conversely,
- a current or former landlord has filed a Statement of Claim seeking damages against a tenant or,
- circumstances are such that both parties to a tenancy relationship may have filed Statements of Claim against each other simultaneously.
- Some Case Files are legally complex in their origins and may take upwards of a week's preparation; whether it be toward a (pre-hearing) negotiated settlement of a particular dispute or before a final, legally binding decision that would be rendered by an adjudicator at a formal Dispute Resolution proceeding.

Matters going forward at hearing typically might involve:

- Claims in Damages,
- Notices (of eviction) for Non-Payment of Rent and/or Utilities, Repeated Late Payment of Rent, (1 Month) Notices to End for Cause, (2 Month) Notices for Landlord's Use of Property,
- Applications requesting Orders for Service and Repair,

- Applications disputing unlawful Rent Increases,
- Applications requesting Orders for the return of either a Security/Pet Deposit or, both.

CASE TRENDS

As is a constant over the past year, the advocates are inundated by and constantly negotiating on behalf of their clients in attempts to recover Security/Pet Deposits, defending against Notices to End Tenancy along with managing the other aspects of this work already mentioned.

Of particular concern at present is what is known as the Fixed Term Tenancy Agreement or *FTA's* (with no option to renew) and, currently very much in vogue amongst the landlord community.

Whereas previously, a tenant may have entered into a one year lease with the option to renew (or, revert to a month to month tenancy at expiration) more and more, private landlords and various property management firms have now elected to enter into Fixed Term (non-renewable) rental agreements.

FTA's may be “periodic” and as short as 30 days in duration. They can also run consecutively and are often times premised as “probationary.” More often than not though and aside from the obvious benefits, entering into non-renewable *FTA's* allows the landlord two other flexible, if not advantageous options;

- end the tenancy at its expiration date and, if market conditions are right, i.e., gain greater value for the rental suite and in so doing,
- circumvent what is known as the *Annual Allowable Rate of Rent Increase* or *ARI*.
- A third possible option would be to enter into a new *FTA* with the existing tenant(s) but, at a significantly greater amount of monthly rent.

If the existing tenant were to balk, the landlord could simply apply for an Order of Possession at the Residential Tenancy Branch seeking Damages from the *occupant* (...and, no longer a tenant) for over-holding the rental suite.

Case in point and to perhaps better illustrate:

A tenant enters into a one year *FTA* with a landlord, presupposing (wrongly) that the landlord will exercise his/her option to renew or, allow the tenancy to revert to a month to month on or before the expiration date of the lease. The rent at commencement is established at \$875.00 per month, for a one-bedroom suite.

Also, at commencement of the lease, the vacancy rate is 3.5% whereas at lease's end it is hovering around 1.2%. Based on supply and demand, the lower vacancy rate dictates that the same rental suite would command substantially more revenue than the current tenant is paying.

At tenancy's end, the landlord merely gives the tenant two choices:

- move out or,
- enter into a new *FTA* and, given the low vacancy rate, for \$1,250.00 per mo.

... and thus, getting around the *ARI* at the same time.

** Please note: in 2011 the ARI is 2.3%. However, in 2012 it is set at 4.3%. If you are already paying \$1,600.00 for a 2 bedroom unit, your rent would increase at minimum by an additional \$68.00 per month and, with no right of dispute.*

PUBLIC LEGAL EDUCATION

TAPS Tenant Advocacy Project staff have participated in a number of other activities over the past year.

The advocates have provided Public Legal Education to tenants and service providers at various organizations in the Greater Victoria area, including but not limited to; Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) Emergency Mental Health Teams and other professionals of Royal Jubilee Hospital (Eric Martin Pavilion–Mental Health Services), the Victoria Inter-Cultural Association, AIDS Vancouver Island–Outreach “Street School,” The Prostitute Education and Empowerment Society (PEERS), Single Parent Resource Centre and BC Families in Transition.

Most recently, the Tenant Advocacy Project was invited to participate in the UVIC Access Pro Bono’s public “Advice-a-thon.”

Ongoing, we have met with representatives of the UVIC Student Society with the goal of establishing a series of regular *Tenants Rights and Responsibilities Work-Shops* specifically tailored for the UVIC Student community and, with an added emphasis on the foreign student population.

CASE PROFILE

A young family came into TAPS seeking assistance with a significant claim in damages that their previous landlord had made against them with the Residential Tenancy Branch.

This family had been living in a building notorious for its state of disrepair. The unit the family lived in had a number of problems, the most significant being bed bugs that had spread to their unit from a pre-existing infestation in the building. The tenants were intimidated by the landlord who, despite numerous requests to complete repairs and properly deal with the bed bugs did nothing. They felt they were being charged for damages that were a result of the landlords neglect.

The Tenancy Advocacy Project represented this family in a dispute resolution hearing at the Residential Tenancy Branch and was successful in demonstrating that the tenants were not responsible for the damages to the unit and ensured that they would retain their security deposit from the landlord.

The total number of clients served by The Tenant Advocacy Project for this reporting period is 1251.

Volunteer Disability Advocacy Project

STEPHEN PORTMAN

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

TAPS' Volunteer Disability Advocacy project provides legal advocacy and support to economically disadvantaged persons applying for Persons with Disability (PWD) status. The Volunteer Disability Advocacy Project delivers a well-coordinated training and support initiative to volunteer advocates – in the interest of reducing the wait for individuals seeking advocacy services.

OBJECTIVES

- To assist people with disabilities to apply and qualify for Persons With Disabilities (PWD) status with the Ministry of Social Development.
- To train, maintain and supervise an innovative and diverse volunteer network of advocates specializing in disability advocacy.
- To update and refine the TAPS Disability Advocacy Training Manual
- To design and deliver a regular training program for volunteer advocates
- To engage in public legal education on disability issues.

VOLUNTEER ADVOCATES

The Volunteer Disability Advocacy Program currently relies on dedicated volunteers. Volunteer advocates engage in an initial interview with a client where they discuss the requirements for PWD status, explain the layout of the form, and listen to the client's explanation of their disability and how it affects their day to day life. These interviews generally last an hour and a half and can often be longer. After the interview, an advocate writes a 'section one' report for the application. The advocate also ensures that the information provided by the physician and the assessor are consistent. Throughout the process, the advocate ensures that the client understands the process as well as the outcomes.

The volunteer advocates work tirelessly and diligently, committing approximately 6 hours a week to their TAPS advocacy position. Prior to engaging in advocacy work volunteers attend a three part training program delivered by TAPS Volunteer Disability Advocacy Project Coordinator that reviews the PWD process, legislation, and professional standards of advocacy. The training program also includes observation sessions with current advocates in order to see advocacy skills and methods in action. Advocates are provided a training manual which includes all the materials relevant to advocacy for the PWD form.

CASE TRENDS

Case trends for the project in 2011 are similar to the trends reported in 2010. The rate of disability applicants approved at the reconsideration level is far higher than the amount of applicants approved on initial application. The continuing trend of denying initial applications has led to a high level

of pressure on the project to aid clients with complex and time consuming appeals. The number of clients entering the project for assistance has increased dramatically and volunteers have been busy keeping up with the demand.

PUBLIC LEGAL EDUCATION

VDAP also engages in Public Legal Education. This includes the training sessions for TAPS volunteer advocates as well as training sessions for community organizations. The program has provided training sessions for advocates from the Disability Resource Center and public legal education to Street School run by AIDS Vancouver Island.

CASE PROFILE

An elderly gentleman in his late fifties has been living in a garage attached to a single family home for the past eight years. Over this period he has been struggling to pay for rent, food, and hydro with a part time job as a janitor and some ministry assistance. He is only able to work one day a week as he was born with a curvature of the spine that has slowly grown more pronounced over the years making it difficult for him to lift, bend, or walk for extended periods. He has also been diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease which makes breathing very difficult for him. Long ago, he was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder and always remembers being a bit of an outsider when forced to be in social situations. Struggling with alcohol and addiction for over twenty years he has now been clean for three. He chooses to live in near complete isolation so that he does not have to face the temptation of relapsing and he would tell you to your face that things are much better when you are alone.

Last year he had a rental increase that put his monthly expenses at a level that he could not afford. He had always been against applying for disability because he did not want to be any additional burden on other people. One month after his rental increase he lost his job as he was no longer physically able to do his job and subsequently decided to apply for disability to the ministry. He had his doctor and only friend fill out his application and submitted it to the ministry. For three months he did odd jobs around the house for his old boss to make up his rent. Around Christmas time he received a letter in the mail from the ministry saying that he did not have a severe impairment and so would not be eligible for a disability pension.

Not knowing what to do next he went to his doctor who referred him to our office. He met with a volunteer advocate who reviewed the application and the ministry decision with him. The client and the advocate worked together to obtain additional evidence from the Doctor and a few other people in town that were familiar with the case. A month following his meeting in our office he was approved for disability.

This year the Volunteer Disability Advocacy Project worked on 715 case files.

Income Assistance Advocacy Project 2011

ERIN PRITCHARD AND AMY JOHNSTON

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Currently the Income Assistance Advocacy program is supported by two advocates (one full time, one part time). This program offers information, summary advice, negotiation and representation at hearings in all classifications of provincial income assistance benefits (including hardship assistance, income assistance, persons with persistent multiple barriers assistance, and persons with disabilities assistance).

OBJECTIVES

- Enhance access to justice by providing reliable legal information to people living in poverty about their rights, as well as the benefits and entitlements available to them through income assistance programs
- Provide vigorous advocacy services to people living in poverty by negotiation and written submissions with Ministry staff and full representation in income assistance appeal hearings
- Offer engaging and informative legal presentations to community groups and their clients about the rights and entitlements of income assistance law
- Educate and empower individuals to effectively advocate on their own behalf

CASE WORK

Case trends this year largely involved growing difficulties accessing various supplements and health benefits. Clients have also faced considerable barriers in initial income assistance applications. New intakes for clients who had been placed on the waitlist for the Community Volunteer Supplement (CVS) continued until mid-August, when significant changes were made to the CVS by the Ministry of Social Development. There has also been a noticeable increase in clients with roommates being denied benefits because of a “marriage-like” relationship.

There have been an increasing number of clients who are being told contradictory information by Ministry staff. First time applicants for income assistance are being told that the online application is the only option, while Ministry supervisors insist it is simply another choice and that clients can have access to worker assistance. In addition, clients are still dealing with unacceptable wait times. MSD policy states that new applicants determined to be in a state of hardship should be given an intake appointment within one business day. Currently they are being asked to wait 3-4 weeks for an intake appointment. Clients who are deemed non-emergency wait up to 2 months for assistance. As a result, advocates are often working backwards attempting to request crisis grants for clients with overdue rent or bill payments. This can significantly impact clients housing, as some clients have either been evicted or are late with rent. Advocates have had ongoing difficulties assisting clients in obtaining funds for moving, which has resulted in more appeals in relation to moving supplements. There has also been an increase in complaints from clients regarding wait times for in-person service at the MSD office. Furthermore, there are ongoing complaints from clients that MSD staff at the downtown Victoria office close the doors around 3pm and often will not let more people in after that.

MSD’s central phone number, the “1-866 number” was extremely ineffective for much of this year with calls being dropped and waits times inexcusably high – sometimes over 2 hours. This service

improved during the months of May, June and July because MSD altered the service for Victoria and dedicated a section of the call centre to Victoria calls only. However, they have changed the system again and the extremely long wait times are back. This issue has been brought forward at the Provincial Moving Forward Steering Committee meetings held for Ministry staff and advocates. It is extremely frustrating for clients and has a significant impact on TAPS advocates workload as clients often call TAPS to have questions answered when they are unable to reach MSD.

Despite the increasing need for crisis grants, clients continue to experience difficulties accessing emergency crisis grants for food, shelter and clothing. Similar difficulties are faced in accessing health supplements. Ministry staff members are requesting increased amounts of documentation, often above and beyond the legislative requirements. As a result, advocates frequently have to inform MSD of the legislation and negotiate with Ministry staff to accept alternative forms of documentation. TAPS advocates have seen a number of cases where the decision to deny a client a benefit has been so egregious that direct advocacy with staff at the Health Assistance Branch and/or the Health Reconsideration Branch has been the preferred option. We are pleased that for the most part Ministry staff have been reasonable and responsive to this approach but remain concerned about the original decisions.

There has been an increase in the number of clients receiving (or applying for) Persons with Disabilities benefits that have the ability to put some of their financial resources into a trust or RDSP. Clients with trust funds often have difficulties and delays getting approved, getting documentation, and seem to experience more claims by Ministry staff that documents have not been received, etc. These cases often involve consultation and referrals to other legal resources in the community – such as John Minkley, a trust lawyer in TAPS building who will sometimes assist TAPS clients on a pro bono basis.

Finally, the Canada Post mail strike had a significant impact on many of TAPS clients during the latter part of the year. Consequently, this increased the volume of clients approaching TAPS for assistance, many of whom were very frustrated with the impact of the strike on their benefits.

CASE PROFILE #1

TAPS advocates have seen an increase in the number of denials in initial application stage at all levels (PWD applications, supplement applications, crisis grants, etc), but have also seen a large increase in the number of approvals at the Request for Reconsideration Stage. This is frustrating for clients who receive a denial in the initial stage, even with very strong documentation, however it is positive in that clients and advocates have to attend fewer Tribunal hearings. An example of a success in this case is a single father who had recently completed supportive recovery for substance misuse issues and was denied PWD at the initial application stage, then with advocate assistance he was later approved at the Request for Reconsideration stage. He was also denied a moving supplement as he was moving from a single occupancy room to low income housing that would accommodate his children, yet the ministry denied him as it was more expensive than the single room. The advocate was able to obtain moving funds through appealing the ministry's decision.

CASE PROFILE #2

A young man came into TAPS seeking assistance with a Request for Reconsideration after being denied Persons with Disabilities status. The client had been diagnosed with cerebral

palsy after suffering a stroke at the time of birth, leaving him paralyzed on his left side. The income assistance advocates worked with the client on the Reconsideration, and collected letters from his physician, mother, and a family friend confirming the severity of the client's disability, and the impact on his day to day life. Despite the apparent strength of the submission, the Reconsideration was denied, as the adjudicator determined that although the client was completely unable to use his left hand and arm at all, the right side of his body was unaffected. The Ministry found that taking approximately 5 times longer than the average person to complete any activity involving the hands did not constitute a significant restriction of the client's daily living activities. Moreover, the Ministry completely ignored additional information provided by the client's physician with the Reconsideration submission, and even used the client's mother's statement that he worked hard to overcome his challenges to reinforce the reasons for denial. Undeterred, the income assistance advocates collaborated to prepare for tribunal. This process included negotiations with the Ministry in an attempt to have the appeal dismissed given the clear lack of reasonableness in the decision. The case was successful at tribunal, largely due to the fact that the Ministry had not based its reconsideration decision on all available evidence.

Total number of clients assisted this year by the Income Assistance Advocacy Project: 1693.

Volunteer Coordination Project Report

TAPS relies on the hard work and dedication of its many volunteers. We currently have about 50 active volunteers doing everything from helping people prepare their tax returns to disability advocacy to front desk reception to data entry.

People volunteer at TAPS for many reasons – to join the fight against poverty, to be involved in the community, to help others. Our volunteers are people who have experienced poverty firsthand, people with a commitment to social justice, students, retirees, and people with disabilities. Some have specific skills they want to use, such as writing or drawing or database development; they also come to gain skills and experience – in legal advocacy or office reception, for example. Many simply want to be involved in an organization that helps people.

FRONT DESK

There are ten shifts per week on the front desk, so we need to keep a team of ten active front desk volunteers, plus a few volunteers “on call” to cover shifts if the regular volunteer is away. Over the course of the past year, we have trained about ten new front desk volunteers. We have also kept a core of five or six people who have been on the front desk for several years

SILENT WITNESS

In March 2011 we held a training session for silent witness volunteers, and we now have nine people who are available to accompany TAPS clients to appointments at the Ministry of Social Development.

DATABASE

During this past year, a new volunteer has overhauled our database, and we now also have another volunteer doing data entry.

TAPROOT NEWSLETTER REPORT

Taproot is published six times per year, in December, February, April, June, August, and October.

We print between 500 and 650 copies of each issue. The newsletter is distributed to our membership by mail or by e-mail. We also deliver newsletters to over 40 organizations around Victoria, including the Brain Injury Program, AIDS Vancouver Island, PEERS, the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre and the central library. People also pass it on to their friends. As one member wrote to us, “The Taproot is my favourite newsletter and I send it on to several friends who are on disability. Thank you.”

The Taproot includes articles by staff, board and volunteers. Staff members write articles that inform readers on their rights in relation to income assistance, disability or tenancy. In the past year, we have had articles on problems with the Ministry of Social Development’s community volunteer supplement, cuts to legal aid, MSD’s “spouse-in-the-house” investigations, and, in tenancy, how to apply for a review of a dispute resolution officer’s decision. We have a regular contributor who explores, through fictional stories, the reality of life in poverty. We are also able to keep our readers up to date on what’s happening at TAPS.

Several volunteers work on the newsletter team: we have two artists contributing artwork, one regular writer and another who contributes occasional articles. We have a volunteer who proofreads the final copy. And we have one stalwart volunteer who takes on the task of distribution, doing the mailout and keeping our delivery list up to date. We also benefit from the help of volunteers from the Garth Homer Society who deliver the newsletters to organizations around Victoria.

TAPS COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER INCOME TAX PROGRAM

TAPS provides weekly free face-to-face income tax preparation from Sept through mid-July for eligible individuals (low-income, disabled, seniors, new immigrants, students). Over the past year we had up to four volunteers working together to serve TAPS clients from Sooke to Sidney. The demand has been great and continues unabated, whether it is tax season or not. This is a much needed service in our community as Canada Revenue Agency no longer provides counter service to clients, and other agencies that provide this service either do not provide face-to-face service or do not provide service post tax season. As a result, there is a significant demand for TAPS services, especially from those individuals facing low literacy levels or other barriers.

TAPS is an approved community partner with the Canada Revenue Agency hosting trained volunteers to provide free income tax preparation. This service is part of the network across Canada that assists taxfilers, regardless of ability to pay, or level of literacy, to have access to the tax system.

Why do TAPS clients need their income tax done? To receive their income tax refund! Or to participate in many provincial and federal income-tested programs, such as the monthly Child Tax Benefit, Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors, the Goods and Services/Harmonized Sales Tax Credit, access to public housing, assisted living for seniors, Medical Services Plan Premium Assistance, Fair Pharmacare, ESL programs at community colleges, Canada Student Loans, Registered Disability Savings Plans. Clients may have a debt to the Crown, due to an ambulance ride, family maintenance order, unpaid fine, Canada Student loan or other government overpayment, and having their income tax prepared helps to satisfy this debt as the Crown may have a claim on their income tax refund. TAPS volunteers may complete up to 10 years of income tax returns for a client.

TAPS Community Volunteer Income Tax Program Program prepared 948 Income Tax Returns.

2011 Board of Directors

MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE

Dr. Joan McHardy – President

Past Chair: BC Chapter of the Canadian Evaluation Society

Robin Bassett – Vice-President

Retired Lawyer

Barb Amberstone – Secretary

Writer, Community Volunteer

Patti Stockton – Treasurer

Former Assistant Deputy Minister

MEMBERS AT LARGE

Melanie Hudson

Lawyer

Rose Henry

Human Rights Activist

Noreen Marshall

Retired Public Servant

Zoe MacMillan

Lawyer

Tria Donaldson

Community Organizer

TOGETHER AGAINST POVERTY SOCIETY
GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES OUR FINANCIAL PARTNERS:



... and our many generous individual donors. *Thank you!*